



The Guardians of Br'thn New Horizons

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proofread

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Magenta

"Kewk, any sign of them yet?"

@No Captain. We will keep looking. Nines can hide if they want to.@

"I just hope they were not on Alexandria when it blew. I am sure it was the 'thn. We need to be on the lookout for them."

@Magenta is not a place they like either. Without TK we are annoyed. For a 'thn without TK means death.@

"Actually I think it just puts them asleep. But it probably feels like death for a creature who never had to sleep in its life."

@Sounds logical. Captain, we have a reading. There are two high TKs below us now. They were not there a moment ago.@

Captain: *Rooi, Snap, can you hear me?*

Rooi: *We hear you.*

Captain: *Alexandria has been destroyed. Everyone is dead. There are bodies all over. Probably not a surprise, those slug creatures appear intact, just floating in space.*

Rooi: *The high TKs are at Control. We just got back from there. They will not be returning. Too dangerous for the norms. Apparently an ultimatum was issued, either Alexandria was to be destroyed or all earth froth worlds would be. They evacuated who they could. Not all made it. They left fake bodies as well to make it look convincing.*

Captain: *Understood.*

Snap: *We are staying here and will work with this ecology to see what we can make of it. I actually liked my time here before. We will not ever return to our own home worlds. Nor should any of you.*

Captain: *What do we do then?*

Rooi: *The remnant at Control said to do whatever you want, just never go near an earth froth world. As I said, we will remain here. Please come visit us when you can.*

Captain: *Do you know if this edict affects Mars as well.*

Rooi: *Unknown.*

Captain: *We may go there to warn them. Though they were never seen as a threat to the 'thn.*

Snap: *Mars is very close to earth. Be exceedingly careful. You do not want to put them in danger. Send them a Catbox instead with a return address. Snap always was the cautious one. Actually so is Rooi. Great pair. It will be fun to see what they make of Magenta.*

Captain: *Good idea. Thanks you two. We will come back when we*

know more.

"Tewk, take us out of orbit. We need to get near Earth One, but at least a light year away. I will then send a Catbox to Mars that I will prepare now. Let me know when you have a stable position. Take your time. Stealth mode."

The Mothership could do the jump very quickly, but with power comes attention. Tewk understood why we need to be in stealth mode. I let s/he hear the exchange with Magenta. I would trust Tewk with all our lives. There are so few of us now. The core may not be dead, but effectively they are in that none of us will see them again. Nor benefit from their work. I look around me. This ship could not have been designed without Cat and Myra. Making a duplicate will be easier, but I am not advanced enough to design one from scratch. They used mass from an asteroid field and in less than two eight days we launched. Completely different from the Farout ships too. They were too dependent on 'thn metal in their designs.

I prepare the Catboxes. I agree with Rooi and Snap that it would be ill advised to visit at this time, probably ever. They will also be on their own. No backup available. I am not sure if the 'thn could intercept a Catbox, but I am taking no chances and not giving away any information. I am saying that Alexandria was destroyed. I will not say a remnant survived. They are effectively gone, so it makes no difference to withhold that information and if the 'thn see this message they would destroy earth froth thinking they had failed. I also say we are leaving earth froth forever and will not be returning either. Good luck and good fortune in your quest to answer The Question. How can the 'thn fault that desire?

@Course laid in Captain. Eta nine days.@

"Thank you Tewk." Plenty of time to rewrite my message a hundred times, though I am not sure what the point would be. I admit, this is the first time I have been truly scared since the days onboard the Black Wind II during a typhoon. I knew nothing of TKs, much less that our Co-Captains were TKs. They need to be warned too. A second Catbox to Di Eden. Similar message. I think that was understood when they insisted on going to Di Eden when all of the rest of the earths were being abandoned by the TKs. No effective difference then, except for that existential thought that it is forever now.

We have time and it is not my decision alone. Best to get it started.

I reach for the com, "All hands. Please meet me in the conference room in two eighths. We have some big decisions to make about our future. All ideas will be openly discussed. Time to be creative."

I am sure word of our situation will have already reached everyone. No ship can survive on secrets. Only breeds suspicion and later mutiny in the extreme case. More than ever we need everyone to be on our one goal of survival and shared purpose.

Of course we really have a series of decisions. First, where should we go to hide from the 'thn. The originals were sent to Farout because of their extensive star ship abilities. They would do worse to us, destruction, not banishment. Second, what do we do with the rest of our existence? I for one do want to give up, roll over and wait till the end of the multi-verse.

I check in on the bridge when Tewk is coming out.

@Captain, shall we go to the conference room?@ I nod and turn around.

"Tewk, what is the state of Yesan and the companion worlds we visited?"

@I would not recommend them Captain. The Tafa are a pain in the orifices. They are like a scale insect. They never let go of their single minded purpose. Whereas it would be 'fun' to disrupt their plans, it would only be temporary, unless you wanted to commit genocide.@

"No, we will never do that. It is their space. They are welcome to it. But wouldn't you want to visit your home world? We don't have to stay, just a visit."

@Unnecessary Captain. I am here because I do not belong there. That will not change. I am a mutant as you say. It would have been better if I had never hatched.@

"Not for us it wouldn't have been. And that is why you are here with the rest of us misfits." I laugh. S/he understands. We tease each other all the time. Mutant One to Mutant Two, come in Mutant Two.

Everyone is present when we enter and they come to attention. I hate that, but Drup and Rand insisted it was a sign of respect and to be worried when they stopped doing it.

"At ease. Please be comfortable. This is only our first meeting. It will not be the last. For the moment we are getting close enough to ensure a safe delivery of a Catbox detailing the situation to Ron on Mars. After that we are on our own. We will not be part of any TK community other than one of our making from here on out. We also need to avoid the 'thn, certainly any near our former worlds."

+Does this mean we can never go home? I know we have been removed from our worlds, but I still held the hope that some day we could return, even if thousands of years from now.+

@You can safely assume we can never go back. At least work from this as a first principle for purposes of our discussion.@

^What about Farout. It is a large space we could explore and should be safe from the 'thn.^

"They found Alexandria and it was newly in Farout. They sent the first TKs to Farout, so they certainly know of the space. It is a large space, but essentially flat and from a single froth event. The rest of the multiverse is three dimensional in each froth instance, essentially infinitely larger."

Another Hu suggests, "The best place to hide is in plain sight. As you say the froth is near infinite. Assuming we got as far enough away from earth froth both dimensionally and on the froth line, we should be safe right?"

@The 'thn have a way of communicating that would allow ALL 'thn to be on the lookout for our kind.@

~You mean we are the ONLY TKs who developed star ships in the entire multiverse? That is not rational.~

@And we already know of two instances where the 'thn did not take kindly to that ability. It is likely their defenses were designed just for the purpose of keeping the star ship capability low. They allow it for a time, as most tech culture ultimately self destruct. But, they are ready to do the dead if they do not kill themselves.@

+Kill us now and be done with it. What alternatives do we have?+

I sigh, "Need I remind you that our purpose is to answer The Question. We need not be making a galactic empire to further that research. I am guessing the exact opposite. We need to think smaller."

"To search our new civilizations and go where no one has gone before!" Sam sings out.

"What?"

"Sorry, a story told in my time, called Star Trek. A star faring multi-species federation who used a star ship to seek out new worlds and learn from each how they solved the problems inherent in being alive."

@That is not actually a bad idea Captain. It would not be hard to set up a remote base and do small survey missions.@

Tia comes in, "They had a law called the prime directive. Basically you can observe, but do not change any culture that was pre-star ship capable. Every culture has a right and need to figure this out for the themselves."

+You can observe how?+

"Ah, we can morph to any shape and learn any com method. Observe

from afar and then come in to a culture at the edges to walk among them."

^It would be nearly impossible not to interject ideas and prejudices.^

"Never said it was easy. A lot of us were nobodies when we were recruited to be TKs. We would not be missed. Nor was our culture dependent on us. This is the same in reverse. Be a servant, a slave, a nobody. Keep quiet."

"Don't rock the boat. That rules out most of us until we learn again what it was like to be at the bottom." That gets a laugh, or equivalent. I wish we had more of the core TKs with us. A lot of them were from the low perch as the Ku say.

"I think we have enough to start thinking about this. We are staying together. There are not enough of us, at least not yet, to be spreading out. Probably a good idea to set up some experiments, etc."

@Dismissed!@

Dio Eden

!Whoa, this place is a lot different from Di Eden White.! I say.

!This is where I was born a very long time ago. I don't recognize it either. I just could not take the stupidity of Di Eden any longer. When the Catbox arrived telling us the core TKs were gone, that was the last bone to crunch.!

!We need to change our form and learn the local language. I am not recognizing a single word.!

!Our cultures split with the froth of course and that was nearly a million years ago. No language survives that long, not even with old dinosaurs like me.!

!Hu languages changed on a whim. Not an improvement believe me.!

!Di Eden lost its Raps recently of course. What happened here? I am not scanning anything like them.!

!Ah, they diverged at the froth point, only they changed more than we did. The Di Eden Raps became the Dia here, who were also persecuted, escaped to Ba Eden, I don't know which one. They were used there as low level servants and then were exterminated. No Raps or anything like them here. There is one other sentient, called the Diu, that lives on what you would call Australia Rand. We leave them alone.!

!Shit, guess a million years was not enough to breed out the stupidity. Of course we killed our related species as well. I think there were as many as five distinct species at one time and that was only a few hundred thou ago. Oh, and then we killed our own kind because of cultural differences. Earth Two was apparently even worse.!

Both White and I both look at Rand. Yeah, I guess no species has it together.

!We could join the Cats.!

!I would be bored to death there. I still need a challenge more than what to catch for dinner.! White and I laugh at Rand, but agree.

!Geologically this world has not changed that much. There are caves in the hills north of here. I propose we make that a base of operations for the time being. Neither Di nor Dio particularly like caves.!

!Yet, you both build structures out of stone. What's the difference?!

!The other occupants. You will see. The first thing we will need to do is clear it out.!

!That does not seem fair. How about we make our own cave nearby, something that looks like it belongs.!

!These Hu are so sensitive. Something to occupy our time, so okay with me.! White says. I shrug. Does not matter that much. White knows the place better than we do.

We pop into the hills. There are no roads anywhere near us. He was right about this place being isolated.

!Now, just so you know I was not making it up, here is a typical cave. Please scan it if you will.!

There are plants at the nearly hidden entrance. We hear a growl, then a corresponding response and a moment later two mammals I am guessing, come running out chasing and attacking each other. There is blood, which smaller creatures rush to lick up.

!Caves always have a bad furry infestation. Nasty, smelly things.!

Rand laughs, !Yeah, well we are no flower gardens ourselves, but you are right, these are rank.!

!They use a lot of pheromones to mark territory. We usually burn them out if we need to use the space.!

!I thought you said the local would not live in a cave White.!

!Oh, not to live in, but to store things. A lot of food stuffs just like on the Hu worlds tastes better with age. Alcohol works the same on us as you.!

!Ah, of course. I am guessing cheese is out, being a furry thing.!

White gives Rand a look, like he is going to vomit, and we don't do that on either Di world.

!Kimchee?!

!Lots of fermented vegies. Your hot peppers were a welcome addition we did not have before the Hu arrived. Now it is everywhere. It is like it was always part of our culture.! White looks kind of surprised at that.

!Mouse taught us about a lot of local foods on Madscar we never thought about eating before. I assume they eat furies here too?!

!They did when I was here. We say they taste like rat.! Rand used to say everything tasted like a bird called a chicken. We had those at Crab Cove. Not impressed. Now, the crabs themselves were good. Never ate seafood of the exoskeleton kind when I was growing up. The fact that we did not live that close to the ocean was a factor. Fresh water fish only occasionally.

On our walk, the hillside suddenly switched from limestone to granite. We are below the sedimentary layer here. We set to work. White makes a door that looks like the rock itself, but swings easily. At some point we will need to recruit locals to learn from and use as sort of cultural spies. They will always be able to blend in better than we do.

We each carve out space for ourselves. I set up a few glow balls. If a norm does make it this far I want it to appear as normal as possible. Of course they don't have glow balls, but do have primitive electric ones. Not to the LED or other variations yet. The Dia were the intelligent ones. Going backwards ever since. So stupid.

Several eight days later we are still here and still goofing off. After so many years of being world watchdogs if not leaders it is really nice to be able to sit back with no responsibilities. We have planted a garden and done some landscaping. It looks like a small paradise. We are still in Di form, being more comfortable in such.

!So mates, what are we to do? As nice as this is, it will become boring very quickly.!

!That is because you were trying to run an entire world at a much higher tech than Earth Two. We had it pretty easy until they all started to rebel and started killing each other willy nilly. I want nothing more than to be on a good ship with the wind at my back.!

!Here, here. Rum too?!

!I admit it tastes good.!

!Yuck, disgusting stuff. Now mead, I do love a good mug of mead.!

!Stop it all of you. What are we going to do? I will admit I am not too crazy about doing the same thing here we did on Di and E2. Are there any other alternatives? What about the Diu? White, you said they were very different? Might be fun to see a different culture.!

!Di did not have Diu. It was a welcome relief. I have not seen one in oh, ten thousand years. Like all cultures I am sure they have changed.!

!How did the Diu come to be? Are they related to the Di, Rap and Dia in any way?!

!We are all related if you go back far enough Rand. But to answer your question, the Di, Dio, Rap and Dia are all from the same lineage, albeit some thirty million years apart the Rap/Dia split off from us and then diverged from each other. Being on separate froth worlds does that. What did the Hu look like that long ago?!

I look at Rand and he answers, !Rat like creatures call lemurs. More like raccoons actually, though not related. Very clever, but no where near the same reasoning abilities.!

!That is debatable Rand.!

!Ha-ha!!

!Drup has a point though. Can't hurt to look.!

!I think we need to be clear from the start what our intentions are. Are we just looking out of curiosity or do we intend to try and mold their cul-

ture and correct the defects?!

White laughs, !Given our track records that would be comedic at best and diabolical at the worst. Everything we touch falls apart eventually.!

!Had to ask, with three nines, they would have no chance, if we intended to take over.!

!To what extent do we 'save' them? Disease, famine, war, stupidity?!

I shake my head, !Observe only. The Question was set up to try many possibilities. To gather information on differences. Let's just watch.!

!Agreed! We are not rogue TK2s, we don't need power.!

Mars

^MRon, a Catbox just came in. First one in some time. None of us can open it, so it is not of general interest. Personal?^M

^MThat's fine. Leave it on my desk and I will get to it. Looks like it is from Cat herself. Wonder what trouble they have gotten into now.^M Not a question, high probability of being a fact.

She smiles and raises an eyebrow ridge. Their stories are legendary. We use them in our classes on how not to behave.

It has been over four thousand years since we came to Mars, genetically engineered ourselves to live here and collectively come up with our own culture. Of course it failed during the Temple period. Thanks to Silver and Turtle we have risen again, but I am under no illusion. It is only a matter of time before it happens again. Odds favor extinction this time however. We are loosing air, we are getting colder. I can make machines to help with both, but for how long? Expansion has stopped. Soon we will need to contract to survive.

I tap the box and it opens as expected. I remove the piece of wood pulp paper from inside. How quaint. It is written in Standard. Usually Cat is not that rude. She must have been in a hurry.

"Ron, this is Pilot, the Captain of the Mothership. I regret to inform you that Alexandria has been destroyed by the 'thn. It was either destroy Alexandria or all of the Earth Froth worlds that we had 'contaminated'. As we had already brought home to Alexandria the TKs on most of the worlds it seemed safer I guess to let Alexandria go. Just like New Hope, they ejected the core towards it's star. The crust then collapsed killing everyone and everything. This is to inform you that you and I are now on our own. We will not be keeping in touch. Even this message may have put you in danger. Do not try and contact us. Destroy all evidence of this message.

Oh, you will find a map enclosed as well. I was instructed to give it to you if anything happened to Cat. This seemed like the time. No idea what it means. Good luck and stay safe."

I dissolve the note and the box after removing the map. I memorize the map and then dissolve it as well.

The map was cryptic as expected from Cat, but it was easy for me to decipher. I doubt anyone else would have been able to as it referenced details from my time on Earth Two.

The map points to a location on Mars were no one could live. The soil

there is very poisonous. I scan the location but sense nothing. This is not a surprise to me.

I leave my office and tell the others I need to go on a short field trip to investigate an idea I have. This is not a rare thing and I am sure they think nothing of it.

I walk out of the outpost and into the desert. It will be winter soon. We will in a sense cocoon in a sort of hibernated state to conserve resources. This is for the benefit of the norms among us of course, but we participate so as not to appear to have a large advantage over them. For the TKs this is a time of individual meditation and thought. Most of our best ideas come from this yearly experience. Most in fact look forward to this time. The rest of the year can be very hectic from all the activities.

As soon as I am out of sight of the outpost I DS to a closer location and scan again. Again nothing. Again, not surprising. I continue my walk until I am over the spot indicated. It is unknown when Cat set this up, but of course the sands have shifted many times since then. scanning shows bedrock very close to the surface. The winds likely removed most of the sand. I make a simple shovel and remove the layer of sand. I make a broom and like a Zen monk begin to carefully remove the last of it.

There is a symbol embedded in the rock that is barely visible, made of the same material as the rock. Only the grain is in an opposing direction. Good work actually. I place my hand on it to see if I can physically feel it. I still can not scan anything other than the rock here, but as soon as I touch it, the symbol rises from the rock, twists and then disappears entirely. Ingenious. There is a small AuC box inside the shallow depression at the center. I remove it and place it in a pocket of my robe. I dupe the rock to fill in the symbol space, grain in the right direction this time. I then use the shovel to fill in the sand again. Time will eventually remove all traces of this location.

The box is solid, but resists scanning. Likely has embedded limiters to hide it.

I make my way back to my office just in time for evening meditation.

No one asks me about the contents of the Catbox nor my trip to the field. If it's important, they trust me to share with everyone.

Back in my office and room after meditation I remove the box from my robe and set it on my desk. Everyone else will have gone to their own spaces by now. I am studying the box when my two Companions come in. I never got used to them the way others have and normally do not think much about them. They seem to be curious about the box though.

Where did you get the memory box? One asks. I am surprised. Never

heard of such a thing.

What is a memory box?

Our size is a limitation even for being quantum creatures. We make these to download memories we want to preserve but have no immediate use for. They are quantum encrypted to each of us for security reasons.

Of course. Can you read this one?

It is not one of mine.

Nor mine.

That means no then.

If you have this box, it is likely encrypted so that only you can use it.

Show me how then please.

They do and yes, I can read it. Very interesting. A gift from Cat. When did she place this on Mars? Now what do we do with it? If we are not careful we will draw unwanted attention from the 'thn. If we don't we may not be able to save ourselves. A clear need for extreme caution. Cat knows this is my normal response to such knowledge. Likely why she entrusted me to it.

I ask my two Companions, Do you know how to put a 'thn to sleep?

We are able to sleep any 'thn within this solar system. The Protectors however can destroy a 'thn entirely if needed. That was why they were made.

Given that Alexandria was surrounded by Protectors, how did they get close enough to remove the planet's core then?

They are only effective against 'thn metal based 'thn. The newer AuC multidimensional 'thn would be safe from them.

I can't believe Qr'thn would kill Alexandria except in a very extreme situation.

Part of the information contained in the box is how to make a Protector that can kill a AuC 'thn. I am not sure I want to know this and am wondering if it would be best to destroy the box, even though only I can read it. Fortunately there is too much information for me to absorb its entire contents. I wish I could unlearn what I now know. I do not want this responsibility at all.

My normal day of peace and quiet is gone now. Likely forever. A gift or a curse. Perhaps the same thing. How did they live with this knowledge and not act? Because they are not gone. It is the only explanation. One I dare not share or the 'thn could use that knowledge as an excuse to kill us all. I serve The Question. I cannot do that if Mars is destroyed. Also explains why I now have this information.

There is more in the cube than this and I will need to carefully explore

its contents.

Earth One

There is no possible way that Silver and his sidekick Turtle did not leave any 'surprises' for me. Why would they turn over this world just like that. No explanation. I am sure they know I am here. The Tridons are all gone. It must have been them. But they have not touched me. Why not?

Maybe he will send those mangy Cats to do the job? That would at least be fun. Who is predator and who is prey? I used to love hunting the early humans, weeding them out if too many smiggles arose. I hate smiggles, but without them the tech never arises. Took me a very long time to figure that out and I was still very reluctant to keep them. They are self limiting actually. They have such poor social skills, very few fem will mate with them. Of course there are fem smiggles that any male will rape and produce kids with. Those are the ones I have to be careful to limit. Worse of course are when both are smiggles.

Anyway, I am a long way from worrying about that yet. Besides, I did learn a few things from the Tridons, like how to make something called a Terror. Most interesting. Apparently a race called the Yesan, who reproduce prolifically, tried to invade them. Wrong move. They have had no more problems with the Yesan. They learned from the Yesan and added that to the Terrors so when needed the Terror can also reproduce rapidly. Yes, I will remember how to make those. Sort of a last resort of course as they do tend to eat everything.

Another thing the Tridons taught me was how to mess with genetics, as was obvious from their work on the Terrors. It looked like there were very few lifeforms to work with on Tridon, but they could still do amazing things with them. Each was adapted to the circumstances to where they were found. And they did not have to wait millions of years for this to happen on its own.

I can use that. I have free reign to make what I will with the genetic material before me and there is a lot of it. Predator of course, but one with cunning and ability to craft objects. Lots of dangerous possibilities from tooth, claw, stealth, poison, and most especially fear. Yes, fear.

Time to get to work.

Alexandria Asteroid Field

+I thought it was another drill, we have had so many.+

+The point was to make it so routine you did not have to think about it. Definitely not a drill. I hate being weightless.+ Going weightless was very sudden too. Without TK I would still be bouncing off things.

+According to the telltales the limiter fields are holding. We should be invisible to what ever 'thn did this to us. I want to know how they got through all the Protectors out there. We were supposed to have been protected right?+

+The only 'thn who could have were the Three.+ I shudder to think what exactly that means. Why not finish the job?

+How long do we have to remain quiet? I want to know if there are any more survivors. None of us are high enough level to get home.+

+We were never going home. You know that. This just forces the issue of making this our home. Each sen has a different TK scale. Even if we have no one above a five, joining together we should be able to make it work.+

+Wonder where the high TKs ended up? I would have thought they would have told us what was going on.+

+Think about it. If the 'thn did do this, they sure as hell took out the high TKs too. You don't knock a hornet's nest and then try and walk away. No, you make damn sure they are all dead. That is why we have to be quiet too.+

+For how long?+

+I have no idea. We can use the buddies as sensors. No 'thn ever cared about them. Even with the core gone and the crust collapsed they should have expected a few of those to survive. Mine did. I see yours did as well. We send them out on scouting missions and see what they find.+

+It has already been a few days. The core is likely in the star by now if they followed the New Hope scenario.+

+And the crust is already spread out a quarter orbit from the centripetal force. Guano, what if the core brought us with it and we are headed for the star!+ We both send out our buddies. A few moments later they report in one at a time.

We are still in a nominal orbit, though slightly lower. They report back to us. Guess it depended on where you were when the core went. If the core was moved a large enough distance then the disturbance to our orbit would be smaller. Not likely to be in one piece of course, even the crust

has some pull. Guano, what if we collapse together.

Our section leader comes in.

+We are gathering in the main bubble. We need to blow the crust off us and we need anyone with TK push ability to help out.+

+I would certainly feel better if we were not near the rocks going in all directions.+

+Do you think what is left will collapse back into a small planet?+

Our leaders thinks about it, +That would be a good idea actually. Even a small gravitational field would be preferable to this. We could settle down on the surface again once it stabilized. It will likely take years though. The spin we had has scattered most of the crust. Some further out and some are following the core in.+

+Below the surface please. Rather not make it obvious some of us survived.+

+Good point. Let's go to the others.+

When the three of us make it to the main bubble, using TK and those grab rings I always thought were annoying before I was weightless. I kept bumping into them. Ow! The others are already present. Last again. Story of my life. Several others have buddies with them as well. My two are in the satchel waving about my middle.

Our leaders appear to be a couple of fives. Nothing higher that I can see.

+Are any of the other sentients alive?+ Someone asks.

+There appear to be representatives from each world. TK6 and above are all gone, including the 'thants. Some are scrambling for their lives because of the direction they were going at loss of gravity. Our guess is that the 'thants were warned by the destroyers and got out through a portal. Too bad they did not include us.+ That gets a nervous laugh. Not that I would like living in a 'thant nest. Definitely prefer being above ground in the fresh air. No more of that of course.

+Attention everyone, we are going to do the push to get away from the debris field. Please go to the area highlighted and once you reach the wall, scan and push against anything you can sense. Easy right? Okay, let's go.+ There are near a hundred of us in this bubble. Of course the Ku were spread out among a dozen bubbles to be safe. Something about the structure of a sphere being stronger if it is smaller.

It is crowded against the wall, but we don't need to do anything physically. I close my eyes, reach out with my TK to find rock and then push against it. With all of us working together it starts to move.

+Don't relax, keep pushing everyone. We will let you know when you

can stop.+

We don't stop for at least an eighth. Hard to keep track of time here.

+We have momentum away from the debris. Those TK2 and 3 can take a break and relax. TK4 and 5 will move us from here. There are other bubbles doing the same thing. Looks like most of the Ku made it. At least the ones who headed the call and made it to a bubble enclosure in time.+

Another TK comes up forward, +We will need to organize food, rest and waste locations. These should all be against the wall. You can use TK to move yourselves around without the grab hooks.+

+Excuse me. Won't the ones who destroyed Alexandria notice this activity? Not normal for a bubble to separate from the rest of the debris.+

+Our companions have not found any activity locally. The Protectors who were not destroyed are back on patrol, but have yet to report anything either. It is thought that the Mothership was here at one point, but left when they did not find anything alive. The bodies of the high TKs have been found in the debris field with a nearly intact library structure and have been left where they are in case any more 'thn come to investigate. This is not very respectful but may save our lives.+

+One side effect of all the bubbles spaced over the world is that by pushing off from our nearby debris, we are causing it to come together. Once gravity takes over, more debris will naturally be drawn to it, including us. We are taking our bubble further out to avoid this for the time. Laser communications have been set up and we are now in contact with other bubbles. A com network is being set up.+

I turn to my friend, +This is our life for the time being. Will take awhile to pull all of this together.+

A five hears me and comes up, +Herm right?+ I nod.

+Come with me please.+ I shrug to my friend who clearly has no idea either. I follow her.

I am introduced to a pair of fives. I normally avoid them trying to stay out of trouble.

+Herm, tell us how you see it going from here?+

+I am nobody. Just a recent recruit. Not even through all my training yet.+

+Precisely why we want to hear what you have to say. Proceed please.

+

Guano. I hate being put on the spot. Not like they will eject me at this point. I hope. What if they run low on air or food?

I clear my throat.

+You have already started what Fif and I were thinking before we came to this larger bubble. Pushing off the debris to get clear of it for safety reasons. Pushing the debris together to form a small planet or large asteroid more likely. Crust does not have much mass to it being mostly lighter elements. Once the asteroid has stabilized the TK5s can go in and help tie everything together more securely as they can transmute elements. AuC fibers would secure and provide a network at the same time. Orbit is not stable at the moment depending on which way the core went, I am assuming towards the sun so we can't use it even if we had an eight present.

Bring the smaller bubbles back to the new asteroid and bury them just below the surface to provide some protection from observation and radiation exposure.

In the meantime. Make a spaceship of some sort to explore the rest of this solar system. It may be there is a more suitable planet we can settle on or more asteroids we can bring together to make a larger planet.

As I understand it, we are on our own now at the very edge of the multiverse. No one is going to rescue us. We are on our own.

Mixing sentients should get us all the different abilities to help our survival. It is risky, but in the early journals it mentioned a method of raising TKs to a higher level using one surrounded by eight at the same level in an array. Having some higher TKs again would be useful.+

+I had completely forgotten about that. Last thing we need is a rogue eight of course. If I remember eight is the highest that can be achieved by this method. Even with just a few in each sentient group it would go a long way to insuring our survival. Good idea Alak to bring this one to us.
+

+Herm, you can go back to your group now. Thanks for your thoughts. We may call on you again.+ Not likely. They would have remembered sooner or later I am sure. I sigh relieved at being away from them and back with my own level.

Even at TK2 I can sense it is chaos out there. Going to take some time to pull everything together. At least some of the pieces can be DSd into place.

Mothership

A research scientist comes to my office and waits to be noticed.

Now if I can remember my Ba.

^Enter.^ Keep it short and I will be less likely to mess it up.

He does an elaborate bow. Shit, I forgot about the formalities.

^I not try that. Sorry.^

"Is not problem. I speak Standard." Relief.

"What's up?" He looks up trying to see what I am referring to.

I try again, "Why are you here?"

"Ah, study scans Alexandria. Most interesting." He hands me his tablet. I am not sure what I am seeing at first then it registers.

"There are holes in the crust with nothing in them. Not a vacuum, nothing."

"Yes Captain."

"Thank you Esi. I am now curious. Very curious."

I get on the com. "Tewk, set a course back to Alexandria. Esi has found something very interesting we need to investigate."

@Very good. Setting course now. Slow again?@

"Fast this time would be good. Thanks for asking."

@Course engaged. ETA two days. Faster is possible.@

"That won't be necessary. Gives me time to think."

@Yes Captain. Anything else?@

"No Tewk. Thank you. I think I will visit the research section. Out."

You never realize how big the ship is until you try to navigate to an area you seldom venture. I find I am actually enjoying the tour. I give greetings to sens I rarely see. They ask me if I need help. No, just curious.

I now know where many interesting parts of the ship are that I had never paid any attention to before. Not a good feeling for a Captain who is supposed to know their ship better than any crew member. A failing I will remedy. I sigh when I finally find research. Turns out there are sections in research. It is actually quite large. At least twenty percent of the available living space. The engines and such take up most of the space of course. We were intended to be lean and mean, yet still able to be independent if necessary. Like now.

When I come in, everyone ignores me. I smile. This does not happen in other sections. Everyone is intent on their work. A Yesan smaller than Tewk comes up to me.

@May I be of assistance Captain?@

Well might as well try, @Yes. I am Esi find?@ God I hate Yesan grammar. I never get it right. After some confusion S/he answers me.

@Follow please.@ It is hard to read Yesan emotions, but I think I am seen as an idiot. It would appear I need to do some research and training there as well. I need to be able to speak to the crew in their preferred language, at least.

@The Captain to see you Researcher Esi.@ The Yesan leaves. I watch s/he and see s/he is a researcher also.

^I have been expecting you Captain.^

^Please apologize to the young Yesan for me. I did not realize s/he was also a researcher.^

^There are no slackers, as you Hu say, here. Tyjh is a most excellent materials scientist.^

^Am I correct in assuming Tyjh is one of Tewk's offspring.^

^Very good Captain. We will make a mortal out of you yet.^ Clearly teasing me. I do an exaggerated bow.

^We are going back to Alexandria system.^

^I know. Word spreads fast.^ Ah, I was going to be spooked if a TK4 could sense that. The engines are silent. I usually takes a Hu TK5 to sense the change in the psiotic field. Ba are similar. No one has figured out why the Cats were so different. Most of the mammals seem to follow the same path.

^Is two days enough time to prepare what you need? I want you on the survey team.^

^May I recommend some others for the team as well?^

I smile, ^Actually I was hoping you would lead it. Chose whomever you want. Tell me Esi, what could cause the observation you brought to me.^

He thinks for a moment, ^A hole in the space time continuum.^

I laugh, ^I don't think even Cat has managed that one yet. Though I would not put it past Myra.^

He hesitates, "We found their bodies."

Okay, Standard now.

"Any one above TK5 can make a new body. Of course they would leave bodies for the 'thn to find."

"A normal 'thn would not have gotten past the Protectors."

"All I can say is that we don't have the entire story. Which is why we are going there again. What else could cause this sensor reading. Try and be more in our own area of understanding."

"That takes all the fun out of it. We scientists like the theoretical."

"Captains have to be more practical unfortunately."

He sighs, which sounds funny in a Ba, more of a high pitched hiss.

"A strong limiter shield. It was only luck that I was on board the Mothership for this mission. Otherwise I would have been in my lab on Alexandria. I am well aware of the features built into the survival pods. This is precisely what I would expect if someone scanned one."

"But being so tiny in relation to the entire planet and needing to get out of there in a hurry . . ."

"Yes."

"There are likely survivors is what you are saying. How many?"

"Depends on how much time they had. A low TK on the surface is dead. Anyone below, the doors would have sealed shut automatically when the atmosphere blew. From there they could have easily gotten to an escape pod. Even without gravity a TK2 could maneuver about well enough. Some sens added physical means as well in case they were hit with a limiter field as well."

"We have them here for the same reason. What about the planet's spin? That would have sent debris in all directions. Some not very nice directions."

"Except for the core itself, which appears to have been thrown some distance fortunately, there would be time if there were still some TK5s present to reorient and plot a course back into a safe orbit."

"And if you can figure this out, what are the odds the 'thn did as well. They are likely to come back soon to be sure."

"We will know more when we talk with the survivors. This sounds like a script more than an emergency." How does he know this?

"Explain."

"The only bodies we found were TK6 and above. As you said, those who could easily make a new body to be found. That means even those on the surface had time to get below."

"Luck that a drill was run at precisely the right time?"

"You don't believe that any more than I do Captain." Ouch.

"How many on the former Alexandria were TK5 and below. An estimate."

"Close to one hundred thousand."

"We need a bigger ship."

"Or make more. Lots of mass to work from."

"Do we have enough time."

"Let's hope the RNC 'thn accepted the evidence they were shown and do not get suspicious before we evac them."

"In stasis they are only volume and mass. Might be easier. Still I will alert construction and bio to prepare. Gather what you need. You will have command of the Flyer. I will need to remain with the ship."

"Captain, a TK4 is not allowed to command the flyer."

"Did I miss something Ba TK5 Esi?"

Shock, "No Captain. Thank you Captain."

"Thank you TK5 Esi. You may have saved a lot of lives. That has to be worth something. From this point on, you have direct access to me if you have any more ideas that need this kind of attention."

"All of us have always felt that Captain." I did one thing right then.

"If there are survivors they will need a place to live and protection. If there are none, then we will need the same. Either way we will be ready Captain. Construction is on board."

"Bio has a nice collection of beginning eco system life forms. Bacteria, fungi, algae, plankton. Land forms will come later. We can give them a selection in stasis to use when they are ready. All of the tanks are full making more for them or us. We were already preparing for our eventual settlement, if that is what is decided."

"It has not been decided, but we will want a home base to operate from and it would be nice if we could live their part of our time planet side. I like breathing air not all bunged up by everyone's farts. So, don't dump anything please." That gets a laugh. And my farts are some of the worst, so I was really pointing at myself and everyone knows it. Being the Captain has its privileges.

I make my way to the bridge. All is quiet. Night shift, not that that matters to any of us, but we try to keep up a 24 hour cycle. We do really hope to be planet side again. It is also good for everyone to continue to use norm and TK skills interchangeably to the extent possible. We all know what limiters can do. Don't let that be a handicap.

I hang for an eighth. I hate waiting. You would think I would be used to it. On the Black Wind II most of your time was spent waiting. Some of the mates learned how to carve wood and bone. Some really beautiful work. I could carve diamonds. Something opaque would be better. Ceramic might work. Porcelain? Yeah, white porcelain. I will check with our library to see if they have a sample I can dupe. Matte, not glossy though. I remember seeing the blue pattern porcelain in the Fragrant Harbor markets. Blue, means cobalt oxide.

@Captain, we are coming up on the Alexandria system. How close do you want to get?@

"Keep us near the Hermes gas giant. I want to be ready to bust out of

here ASAP. No surprises. The Flyer with Ba Esi will be the ones to get close. They know the score. Hopefully it won't come to that. Sensor readings?"

@Something is out there. We are seeing thousands of points showing psiotic activity.@

"And if we are so will any 'thn wandering in. The Alexandria system is not a safe place right now."

@Captain, this is weird, but a TK8, eight 7s and sixty 6s are showing up. There should not be anyone here higher than a five. Protectors are active as well. Normally they stay hidden. Hard to be precise as we are still a ways out even for the hypersensors.@

"Another mystery. Did some of the high TKs return?"

Esi, you are free to launch when ready. Have you heard the bridge chatter?

Yes Captain. We have been standing by. Launching now. Pilot Fug take us out please.

I can sense the Flyer leaving the Mothership and accelerating towards the new asteroid ring. Well, really a partial one. More of a cloud than any kind of ring.

Safe journey Flyer, I think to myself.

Earth Two

"We are home. At last we are home. May our ancestors forgive our absence."

"Grandmother is going all mushy on us again. How can she tell? This part of the coast looks the same as the rest for the last several solars."

"Rumor says huge Cats lived here and ate anything that moved. Not so anxious to go ashore. Fish sounds just fine for dinner."

I see a creature off the left side of our canoe. It is looking right at me. I make a face at it and it ducks under the water.

"I want to get out of shit range of all these birds. You would think we were their private toilet."

"Do you even remember what a toilet is Saul? Hanging over the side while trying to staying on the boat is annoying. Much better the few times we are on shore."

Grandmother yells at us, "Pull the boat further in. Don't want the tide taking it out. Tie it to this small tree here." Yes Grandmother. Will I be that bossy when I am her age?

The sun is hot now, but I see dark clouds to the west.

"Let's take the boat well above the shore line. A storm is coming and I don't want to lose it."

She looks to the west and nods, "Might need it for shelter too. That last one nearly froze me to death. Whoa, is the ground moving?"

I laugh, "Have not gotten your land legs yet. We have been at sea for so long you have forgotten how to walk on land." I feel it too though. Two drunken sailors.

I can see the rest of our clan slowly coming towards us. I wave them in. They can see we are taking our canoe inland. I make an arrow out of the seaweed pointing in the direction we are going. I will leave stone piles at intervals too. We needed to spread out to survive. Now we will need to gather to survive. My parents talked about raiders in the time of their childhood. Spread out it is harder to attack. We came all this way to get away from them. I hope we were right. We are totally dependent on Grandmother for learning how to do things on land. In Frica apparently we spent most of our time running. Hope Merica is different. I was born here, so this is my entire life. Mostly of my time in a canoe of course.

When everyone is ashore, and the canoes are made safe, we gather for the first time in probably solars. Others have made a fire, even though it is a nice day. Very foggy when we first came into this bay, but that has

cleared now. It was like we came through another portal like Grandmother came through to get most of the way here. That was some fifty years ago though. We have been traveling ever since. Grandmother kept saying this was not the place and after gathering food, mostly fish and shore life, we moved on.

We begin by doing a low slow chant of thankfulness. We normally do this each day at sunrise as we face the sun, or where the sun should be when it is not foggy or stormy. This time it goes on for sometime until we are all kind of light headed. It stops and we open our eyes to a new world.

Grandmother is gone and in her place is a huge bird. The bird walks slowly around the circle pretending to eat offerings from outstretched hands. I have nothing until I remember some shiny shells that I particularly like. The bird whispers into the ears of each person who offers something. She does this only for the adults or near adults. The little ones are patted on the head to say thank you.

When she comes up to me I bow and offer my best shell. It is gone from my hand and she bends down to whisper in my ear. I am shocked that I am being accepted as an adult now. I have no idea how old I am.

"You are dead to your former name. You gave that up with your sacrifice and offering. You are now called Grey Owl. Answer to no other." As if on cue, an owl sounds above us in the trees somewhere. I shudder and fall to the ground in thanks. The bird moves on.

After this ceremony we are instructed to be quiet until we are told to talk again sometime tomorrow. We share food and then each go off a ways to be alone and become our new name. I find a large oak tree and wedge myself into a nice crook with my cloak wrapped around me. Someone is tending the fire which I can see from my vantage point. I must have fallen asleep at some point, but wake up when I hear an owl. It is a full moon tonight, so I can see somewhat. I have the best night vision of the group. It comes down and sits on a branch near me and watches me watch it.

It is like I can hear her tell me, Welcome brother. Be kind to all of the others around you. She flies off. I know this is her hunting time and she needs to eat. Likely she has owlets to care for. I fall asleep again. When I wake it is near dawn. The fog has returned, but now as a friend. It drips off the branches and the lichens hanging from them. It drips on the ground giving life giving water to the life below. As the sun rises higher and fog goes, steam starts to rise from the ground. It is a cycle!

The owl flies in and sits next to me on my branch. I reach out and she lets me give her head a gentle scratch. She bumps her head against my

arm gives a soft hoot and flies off again to her home. This is her quiet time. She has left behind a few feathers which I gather.

I climb down and walk towards the fire circle, my feathers clutched tightly in my hand. Others are starting to gather too. We remain silent.

The sun rises high enough to be seen in the sky and we begin our morning chant of thanks. It feels right. We are home.

Grandmother starts, "Please go around the circle and tell us your true name. The younger ones have child names, but everyone has a new name. We are home. Our past is over. Our new life begins now. This is our home, our mother, our father. We are the Ohlone People. It has been many thousands of years since that name has been heard, but we remember though a very long line of Seers and Readers from generation to generation."

They start with the older adults. My parents are dead and I have been adopted by everyone here. I help where I can. I never run out of work to do. I am standing next to Grandmother at her request and will be the last to state my name. It is interesting to hear what each one has been given. Most actually fit really well. I am surprised about this. Some use names I am not aware of, creatures I have never seen. Hopefully now that we are home I will learn about the life around me. Our survival depends on it.

When it comes to be my turn I am ready to speak, but Grandmother holds a finger to my lips. I close my mouth and wait.

"You may call me Grandmother Seer. Beside me is Gray Owl. Gray Owl is to be my successor and will be trained in the ways of the Seer. As Seer we have no authority. We will not ever tell you what to do. We are here to give advice and share wisdom. To that end Gray Owl is forbidden to speak until he has achieved full Seer status. The training will be long and strenuous.

Each of you will be either Teachers or Students. There are many tasks we need. You all will be working hard. There is much that needs to be done before winter comes. We are unlikely to get snow here, but it does rain, plants and animals have seasons where they can be shared with us. We all need to relearn the ways of Great Spirit and Mother Nature.

Our training began when we left Frica many years ago and will continue for generations. Already you know to give thanks for the life you take. Already you know to not take more than you need. Already you know not to take when there is little. All life has a right to serve. We serve all life.

Already you have learned how to work together to make decisions together. As all decisions affect everyone, everyone has a right to contribute

to any decisions. Still, it will be important to select a leader and a council of leaders, not to rule, but to help manage. Everyone will do tasks they do not want to do, no exceptions. I will help clean the toilets and scrub bowls after meals. Gray Owl will be beside me. No favorites. No one is above or below anyone else.

Gray Owl and I will leave now to begin his training. You should choose your leaders carefully. Leaders you are only in your position because the People have chosen you. Be good, do no harm. You are the servant of everyone and everything you see around you." She waves her arms around in a circle.

"Come to us if you need help, but we will not make decisions for you, only offer wisdom to help you make your decision." She stands to leave and I follow her.

Once we have left the circle, she tells me, "Do not return to your former self. Remove all of your clothing and leave it here. We begin anew."

I am naked before her. Nothing unusual. Apparently this was a concern in Frica, but not among us. On a canoe privacy is not possible.

"Drop the feathers." I am reluctant, but sigh and do so.

We hear an owl screech in the trees and then very quietly the owl friend flies down to where I have dropped the feathers, picks them up in her beak and flies up to my bare shoulder. Blood is drawn, but I remain quiet. She nuzzles my neck trying to get me to take the feathers back.

"It would appear you are meant to have those feathers of hers."

When I accept the feathers for the second time, she leaves.

"Interesting. It would appear I have chosen well, One who talks with Owls. I feel good about our beginning. I am under no illusions. There will be much pain and sacrifice, but this is a good beginning."

Diu

!So what's the setup here? It looks like chaos down there.!

!Actually just the opposite. It is extreme order. Nothing out of place. Being out of place here is a major source of pain. Personal pain.!

!Unless you are the Royal Class.! White nods.

!Explain the setup for this poor Hu not raised in dino society.!

White sighs of course, !They are all the same species, but it would really be hard to tell. You Hu used to have a creature called the dog I believe. Very hard to believe they were all the same species. Same here. There have been separate classes for so long each has taken on different physical characteristics.

At the bottom are the Dip. They are the grunt laborers, basically slaves. Highest percentage of population of course. The problem with that is you never want to be outnumbered by potential enemies, especially ones you have made over millennial. !

!So beat the shit out of them constantly and randomly until they don't know which end is up.!

!And breed out the trouble makers.! White snarls at the interruptions.

!Next up, the Dib, the merchant class. Basically in charge of transport of goods, not capitalist in the Hu sense. Remember, they are second from the bottom and know their place.

Then comes the Dit, the warrior class. Also think of them as the police and enforcers, but their primary role is to be the military.!

!Wait, as in invasions or just defense?!

!Both. Forth class are the Dim, or priest/scientist class. This culture is highly dependent of being the best in the world. They have an inferiority complex in regards to the Dio and are determined to be better at everything. Though they are afforded many benefits. No one is beaten or starved.!

!But if you fail, you disappear.! I add.

White looks at me, !This is not new to the Hu of course.! I smile.

!Last are the ruling class, the Dio. I know, they are a different species, but they think for some reason if they call themselves Dio they will become them. The smallest class, heavily inbreed.!

!And insane.!

!Precisely. The Diu are a culture that could collapse at any moment.!

!If they don't destroy the planet first.!

!There is that. They are close to fission bombs, using what you would

classify as 19th century tech.!

!Not bad. Guess those disappearances did motivate.!

!They are also experimenting with biologics. They are close to deployment of a version that will attack the mainland Dio without killing themselves. They are vaccinating their population as we speak.! I add. White nods.

Drup asks, !And of course the Dio have spies and know all this and are preparing themselves. I thought we were not in the save the world business any longer.!

!Glad to see everyone has been busy and not just sitting on your tails.! We smile. It was boring. I had to do something. Apparently true of everyone else.

!Is there any need to actually go in. I was so looking forward to doing the ghost rider trick on some unfortunates.!

!The problem with being nines is we really do not need to do that level seven stuff any longer. Pitty.!

I smile, !Sorry, I sent the Dio the formula to the vaccine.!

Drup says, !I neutralized the bomb and removed all fissionable material from the continent.!

!And just how is anyone going to be able to explain how this happened? Granted a black world is so boring. What's next?!

!Something totally different. This was too easy, too close to what we already known. This whole setup could just as easily have been Hu, Ba or Ku. We have that much in common.! I shrug.

!The only way to get different is to do a deep earth froth run or find a new populated planetary system.!

!Have they found the Pinks this incarnation? What? It would be different at least.!

!Life began some two billion years ago. Yeah, I know some put it earlier. Even that is roughly 2^{60} froth worlds. Gotta be something in that many worlds.!

!Beats building space ships. Let's go.!

!The Pinks split before two billion years, so we would be safe from them at least. I agree, let's go already!!

Earth Two

Beijing Monastery

"Nuer, we need to accept it. The Mothers are getting old. We need to plan for our survival, our future, you daughter's future."

"Everyone knows our line only produces daughters. No one wants to wed with us. Besides, this is the only home we have known. I don't want to leave. And the men are worthless. They stink and drink, worthless. Why would I want a parasite to take care of."

"They are clueless in erotic arts too."

"You let them get that close to you? Yuck."

"I tried once, it was gross. Any sister can do better, no matter how inexperienced."

"We know our own bodies. Of course we are better."

"We could adopt, but we would be found out instantly. We all look alike no matter who we get to father our daughters. There must be a way of eliminating even that need."

"We can tell each other apart. That is enough."

"We have no choice. When a Mother dies, one of us must replace them on the ruling council."

"Who?"

"Does it matter? Make it a lottery. I certainly would not want the position."

"Do you believe the old stories of flying monks and nuns who could see through walls and change stone to gold?"

"Fairy tales that don't help us with the harvest. We best be going. We are needed and I still have field eighths to fill."

"Yeah, so do I. It would be pleasurable if it weren't so cold right now."

"Soon it will be too hot and you can complain about that too."

We laugh, put down our cups and head outside. It is cold today, but she is right, winter will be over soon and the fields need to be readied for planting. I wonder if we would be better off moving south, but the stone walls of the monastery have saved us countless times. The locals have stopped trying. We are seen as Ba Gui, white ghosts. Most fear us fortunately. For those who don't, we are well armed and we punish communities for individuals who do us harm, their fault or not.

I warm up once I am moving, pulling weeds and helping with the plow. There are six of us who provide the labor to pull the plow. Not fun, but I am warm.

When we get back I towel myself off. Water is too precious to actually take a bath. I go to the dining room for midday. Others are just leaving. Too many to eat all at once. Root vegetables and bean soup. Some bread crusts we can dip into it. It is warm and filling. I drink several cups of tea, having sweat out a lot of fluid pulling the plow, but it is enough for me.

I reach my space and sit for meditation. I am just nodding off to sleep when someone calls my name. More tired than I thought.

I am called, "Lo'an, you are wanted in council chambers immediately." A face pokes in to be sure I heard her. I nod and slowly get up. What kind of trouble am I in now? Did I not pull the plow well enough? Did I cross someone's path I should not have? You would think with all of us being so similar that there would be less squabbles, but no, if anything they are worse, not that I have anything to compare too.

When I get to the council chamber I am greeted at the door by the ceremonial guard with a bow. The young ones are assigned this duty to discipline them for talking too much in class. They are forbidden to speak here, nor ever reveal what they have seen. Not that we don't try to get them too at times. I am not young any more. I have been blessed with two daughters. My time is done.

The door is opened and I enter an empty room. I stand in the center as I have countless times.

Slowly the council members file in, no doubt having been told I am here. They each take their seats. One is empty. That can happen. We can get sick, though rare, or some other pressing duty. That suggests this is a minor detail for which a full council is not needed.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Lo'an."

"Your full name please." That is strange. They all know me already. Never had to do that since my being accepted as an adult.

"May I ask what trouble I am in?"

"Your full name please." Shit.

"Lo'an first daughter of Tai'an of the Council." Yes, my own mother is on the council. I was her only daughter so the first sounds redundant. This caused no end of teasing and beatings. Not something I am proud of. I am second gen. I can't imagine what it will be like when there are ten gen. My eldest is Fa'an first daughter of Lo'an first daughter of Tai'an of the Council. Way to remember your roots I guess.

"Name your successor." To what? Plow puller. I am confused and must have looked such. I am old, but I did not think that old. Do they know something? My last checkup was fine. They do not look like they

are going to let this question pass. Okay, who is most like me, who could step into what I do without hesitation. Successor probably mean younger too. No point in naming someone who dies a few solars after I do. I think back to the students I have worked with. There is one who stands out.

"I name Yin Gui, second daughter of Jin Gui first daughter of Tong Gui of the Council." None of the Council Mothers had more than one child.

"Please remove your clothing." Huh? We are not shy, but here in the chambers? Still we are taught to obey. I remove everything.

"Tai'an has passed, please assume your position on the Council Mother Lo'an." Shit!

The two Mothers at each end come forward and dress me in Council robes and lead me to the empty chair. I recognize the robes as those of my mother. There are tears in my eyes. I do not know if they are for my mother's passing, or because I have gotten myself into even worse trouble.

Mother Ro'li next to me tells me, "You will attend all Council functions as well as go through training to get caught up on how things are done. You are not the first new Mother nor the last. There are at least three more of us close to our time. It is interesting that you did not choose your own daughter."

"Am I allowed to speak?"

"You are our equal now. Of course. I am sure you have many questions."

"I had no idea what successor you were referring to, so I chose the person most like myself who could carry on all of my duties without further training."

"And this she will do. At some point you will also be asked to chose a successor for your position here." I visibly relax. I would not want to subject poor Yin Gui to being a Mother. Bad enough I am here.

"You will not return to your quarters. You live here in the Temple now. You will have an attendant assigned to you for your needs."

"I would prefer to do things myself."

"As you will, once you learn where everything is and what the new procedures are. We are not royalty. Our community is close to three hundred now. There are a lot of decisions that need to be made."

"Aren't most made at lower levels? I certainly did not consult a Mother for everything I did."

She smiles, "Everyone has a right to consult a Mother for whatever reason. While it is true you never sought us out, it was usually the other

way around, many are not so sure of themselves." Shit. All those times I talked back to them and argued with them have come back to bite me.

Alexandria System

I am a high TK but it still fascinates me as much now as then to watch it happening, a Mothership being built. This time it is hundreds of ships, thousands if you count the smaller support ships.

We are building an evacuation fleet as fast as we can. Some of the detail work will occur once we are underway. We all feel the sense of urgency. Sooner or later a 'thn will come back to investigate to be sure the task was done.

More Protectors are being made too of course. This time they will attack any foe, not just those made from 'thn metal. We have made a crypt of the high TK bodies left behind and reverently placed the bodies in it. Of course this will be a dead, pun intended, giveaway that we are still alive and out here. Farout is an exceedingly large space, even for them. We are counting on it being a waste of time to come look for us.

Ba Esi has been elevated to TK7 now and is in charge of the Sci-Research division and a captain of her own ship. Though they were able to raise some of their own by the exceedingly dangerous method of eight by one matrix, they were very lucky not to produce a rogue. That is why we don't let low TKs know of this method, nor do we teach it. How they found out is interesting. Someone was a book worm and got into the forbidden early texts. I have to smile at their ingenuity though. Now I am here and we have over a hundred TK7s. Being TP capable has meant we are essentially the communication network. The last thing we need is to be sending out a loud EM wave announcing where we are.

I laugh at myself. I have to remember the scale out here. EM signals can only go at the speed of light. It will be twenty billion years before an EM signal gets back to the multiverse. Still, we know we are not staying here. Eventually we will be back in the normal part of existence and there EM will be a problem. Catboxes are a better means over distances of that scale. They know where here is, so we need to be gone before they return.

Tewk comes in, @We are on schedule to complete everything in two eights.@

"Any possibility of making that one eight? We need to be moving with enough mass to finish the job on the run. I can't believe they are not already here or at least have noticed us and are watching."

@It is the watching that scares me more. If they are watching, they can follow and nowhere will be safe. They are very patient. They can hassle us from the rear and wear us down as your Hu war stories illustrat-

ed.@

"I know. Propulsion and life support systems should be the priority."

@They are. Everyone knows. Everyone is working full time.@

"How are the decoys coming? They need to find bodies and structures."

@Simple, we are not using mass except from the insides of rocks, on the core side. All of the structures and bodies are where they were. The bubbles have had replacement forms placed in them with reasonable explanations as to why they failed. In most cases a simple air leak from a crack or implosion. Expected from what happened at least and did happen in a few cases.@

"Bring up the big screen. I want to see where we are. I am sure there is a que of requests waiting for me. Might as well start on them." Being the highest TK I get all the heavy lifting tasks. Distance is getting worse too. Everything is spreading out. The lower TKs can chew the rocks I move for their needs. Only a few have remained TK2s for reasons of their own stability. A TK4 can push whatever I chew off and then push it the rest of the way. They will break it down into smaller pieces and lesser TKs will push from there. It works.

Esi pops in, ^Sorry Captain, Tewk. We have a problem.^

"Go ahead." I don't mind postponing my tasks, even as I know they are needed.

^We are loosing TK strength. Not ability, just distance and mass. We are down ten percent and falling. If this keeps up we will be dead in space come launch date.^

"Some of my training warned me about this. It has likely been going on for some time, but only now because of all our activity, it has accelerated."

@How so?@

^We are using up the available psiotic energy.^

"Precisely."

@Wait the entire world of Alexandria full of TKs, with a lot of high TKs, did not cause this, but a handful of survivors has?@

"Think Twek. How often did you use your TK on Alexandria. I am guessing rarely. Now, we are all going full out at maximum abilities to get ready. Millions of tons of rock being move. A hundred thousand TKs, most of whom have been upgraded two or even three levels, all going at once."

^It is likely the core removal and the death of the OM had some impact as well.^ There is a theory that all psiotics come from OMs origi-

nally.

"Suggestions?"

^We ran out a few scout ships, which also satisfied their test runs, a few tens of light years in random directions. All found stronger psiotic fields the further they went out. Thus confirming the hypothesis, it is centered on us.^

@We need to launch as soon as possible then.@

"But not all at once. Space everyone out so the maximum amount of psiotic energy is available. This also means no unnecessary TK use until further notice. Get the ships space worthy and ship them out. Tweek, do you have the coordinates the council decided?" S/he affirms.

^We will have the same problem anywhere we go will we not?^

"It turns out that Farout drains faster than any other location. I think this was part of the reason they were sent out here in the first place. Magenta may be the extreme, but there are likely to be a lot of locations out here like that."

^We need to go inward.^ I nod.

@That will be less safe. There is also a star desert between Farout and the rest of the multiverse. It will take more psiotics to maintain us in the desert.@

^And if we get too close to the multiverse we are likely to enter some 'thn's territory and attract notice.^

"I wish Edwin was here. He knows the histories. Silver would know too. In the first incarnation he was TK, they were able to span the entire galaxy without the 'thn banning them. What was different back then?"

^That would not be easy to test without drawing attention.^

@And we don't have The Five to save us this time either.@ We all affirm. Who would have thought that I would miss the Meeps, pesky things.

^One theory is that the early incarnation taught the later 'thn to watch out for such occurrences.^

"'thn can learn? Who would have thought that?" That raises amusement from all of us.

^The heavy lifting you have been doing has probably had the biggest impact on the psiotic levels. Once the drives work, they can move the ships closer to the mass needed.^

"Make it so. Spread the word. No more easy. This might get everyone to push to get their ships moving too. Hopefully the large work is done by now. Details don't take as much mass. And once we get somewhere, we can use local mass to finish up or add to what we have."

We were very lucky when the core went. Given the centripetal forces involved, depending on where you were when it happened, you could be thrown out into space or sent towards the star. Most were in the northern hemisphere and closer to the pole. That helped. Anyone at the equator would be in much more trouble. Low TKs could not have corrected their velocity before we arrived. I am sure we lost some this way. I can't imagine the horror of burning up in the star. As it was, we were able to rescue some who were tossed further out. Adventurers on a trip to the equator for research.

Another fascinating thing was the original lichens largely survived. They did not care about being exposed to full vacuum. Only those who spent too much time in the full sun light suffered. We were able to collect a representative sample of the available species. Of course all the plants and animals we brought from earth froths are gone. We have some seeds that were in storage, but that's it. I am going to miss eating fish. When on the Black Wind II, we ate fish daily, three times a day. That is past. Best to forget it. The Ceph are the most upset of course. No crabs for awhile. They have some larvae in a tank in their bubble. Ceph sap chow for now.

Finally moving day has arrived. We will be the last to leave. The Mothership is designed to work without TK for a time. There was always the possibility of being hit by limiters from whomever. It was designed for exploration and as such you cannot know in advance what you might encounter.

Of course a few ships fail to launch. Ba Esi pops over and quickly fixes the problems. Her ship will leave just before we do.

"Go ahead Esi. We will meet you on the other side." We have decided to move to another location on Farout to begin with. None of us feel we are up to a full on assault by the 'thn. With most of the heavy TK work done, we should not run down our new location so quickly.

We wait for a full day for the psiotics to build up again enough for a safe exit. Just our luck they would attack right now. I am sweating and unfortunately the crew is also on edge. It has taken two eighths to get everyone moved.

I do a final scan to be sure there is enough debris around to convince a cursory inspection. If someone added up the mass they would notice some was missing, but even a hundred star ships and support ships is a tiny fraction of the mass of even the crust of Alexandria. I did my training here. I will miss her.

"Take us out Tewk."

Mars

Are we safe now everyone asks. I doubt it. Can we ever be safe? I look around me. It was a good time. A time of peace. Free from worry. Slow but steady progress. Sure we had problems. What culture does not? I blame The Five as does everyone else. They could not leave well enough alone. They had to play with the fires, the fires of existence itself.

All I ever wanted was a simple quiet life to ponder The Question. Was that too much to ask? What is the point of all this if we are not quiet enough to do our work?

We are ready for you. Will this work? For how long? So many unknowns. I would rather be in my room or walking the ways. I love walking the garden paths when no one else is around.

I make my way to the council room. A beautiful dome worked over as each generation adds its marks. If you could only see it at the quantum level. How can art not be seen as our greatest accomplishment? Some Hu would say music surpasses art, but on Mars, sound is not as bright due to the low air pressure, even with our enhanced hearing.

The others are already there. I am the last as is unfortunately normal. No one complains as I take my place. Being the oldest has its advantages.

We are all high TK. No need for speaking. If I am here, it means everyone else is in place, in air tight shelters underground. Safe if anything goes wrong.

I nod and we link. Eight nines linked make a ten. Granted Mars is much smaller than an Earth froth world, so this should work, but we have never tried it before. And it is one thing to do this with an uninhabited world. To do this with an inhabited world, the only world we can live on, is entirely different. Unlike the earth froth worlds, we cannot simply pop over to another and expect to get on with little adjustment.

Anyone of us could do this alone, but it was thought to be safer if we all participated. Spread the blame really. It was one of the reasons I endeavored to get seven others to my level. We are backups for each other if nothing else. I will admit we tend to be more paranoid than the Hu we are descended from. We can't afford mistakes.

We concentrate and effect the switch. It appears to have all gone smoothly.

Scouts have been sent out. We should know in a moment.

There is a knock at the door.

Enter.

A scout comes in and bows, but remains quiet.

I nod to her.

^MWe are in the earth two solar system and their Mars is in what was ours. All parameters appear to be optimum.^M

^MNo orbital fluctuations?^M One of the council asks.

^MAs you know, we were not exactly in the same orbit. By trading places we are essentially in their orbit and their Mars is in ours. Which means we are further out than we should be.^M

The scout is thanked and is dismissed. We had tried to move our orbit slowly closer to see if we could get more heat. Not enough to risk our precious atmosphere, but enough to measure the difference.

We will remain here for as many eight days as it takes to convince us there were no problems with what we did. I am not convinced this will prevent our being found. The first thing I would think of would be to check nearby froths.

It does tell us we are achieving a direct swap, one Mars for another. We had hoped it would work this way, but this was our first attempt. Anything could have gone wrong. It was day in our former orbit. It is near sunset here. There were some rotational differences then as well. Not unexpected given the number of experiments we had done. Froth for this system was some six thousand or so earth years ago. The whole point of doing a froth was to induce differences and see what happens.

At least we are out of Sauron's reach.

He is a TK8 and could get here in an eighth if he really wanted to.

Fortunately he seems to be concentrating on his own problems.

Let's hope he stays that way. At least until after we attempt a far swap.

It took nearly a Martian year to get up the courage to do this swap. The BIG ONE will likely take longer. More scout missions will be run to assess the two Mars worlds. The last thing we would want is if the new orbit for the Mars we placed in the Earth One system were to become unstable and crash into the sun or worse into Earth One.

Or worse we crash into Earth Two. Granted we could save ourselves, but there are millions of Hu still on Earth Two and we would have been the cause of their deaths, the death of the Earth Two OM and all the other living things present. I doubt any of us would want to be saved under those circumstances.

Is this what Cat felt like when she found Alexandria and then moved it?

Alexandria was a Farout planet with no sentient life and no froth worlds linked to it. Really minimal risk.

It was a good choice though. No 'thn would have thought to look for them there.

It was discussed moving Mars to a Farout position, but our understanding of thirteen dimensional Meep tech is still at the beginning stages. Not even The Five attempted moving an entire forth world to Farout. Might have been the reason New Hope was easier to find and destroy. A warning they were willing to take that step to punish The Five for crossing the 'thn authority.

We do get visits from Br'thn and Pr'thn occasionally. What happens when they do not find us were we are supposed to be.

It is likely they were the ones who destroyed Alexandria. Do you want to take that chance?

What about Earth Two? Who protects them?

We can't assume responsibility for the entire multiverse. We do what we can. Besides, if we are not safe, we cannot help anyone else.

We file out of the council chamber and the rest of Mars is released from lock down. Of course the plants and everyone else will have to adapt to the time shift. Should not take too long judging from the old texts about something called jet lag on Earth Two. A few eight days at the most.

Sunset is a beautiful time for a walk in the garden and that is where I go, while the others seek out food in the communal area for what should have been a mid day meal and now will be supper. Not that any of the nines worry about that. They are going to reassure everyone that it went well and we can relax for the moment.

In a lot of ways we were lucky. Only a half day change. One jump over was minimal. Could be an entire season for a forth world much further out. Does not hurt to be careful though. Next jump will be bigger now that we know it works. Hopefully there will be no surprises there.

Rap Eden

^RAny idea when Squeak will be back?^R

^RShe did not say. She left as soon as that Catbox came in.^R

^RWhat did it say?^R

^RSomething about Alexandria in trouble.^R

^RPuu and Cat are there.^R I nod. If I was not her second I would not even know that much. She dissolved the note as soon as she read it. I only heard or rather saw her hand Alexandria and trouble.

^RWe could sure use her now. Has everyone gone insane?^R

^RSo it would appear. But, there have or at least used to always be rivalries among us. This is not entirely unexpected. It will sort itself out.^R

^RWith half the population dead and the other half permanently injured? That is not a solution. If we don't learn to work together we are lost.^R

^RAgreed. Time to knock heads as the Hu say.^R

^RStinky monkeys. Glad I don't have to be nice to them any more.^R

^RSmall juicy rats.^R

^RYou are making me hungry.^R

^RHeads first. Where is the biggest problem?^R

He sighs, ^ROrange Hills Collective. They are in competition with the Oak Hills Collective over water rights.^R

^RWhere are those places? It would certainly help if they would stop changing the names every eight day.^R

^RI have a map here.^R He shows me. I don't even remember what they were called when we first arrived. Each collective was allowed to set things up for themselves as long as they filled in the regular reports to keep us informed.

^RTwo hops then. Let's go armed. Full gear. It is impressive at least.^R

^RBut slows us down because of the weight.^R

^RI would prefer something that a claw can't penetrate. Not as fast as I was.^R He smiles. I am still a good fighter, but you accumulate enough injuries over time you don't look forward to more. I am not immortal any longer, even as one of the few TK. There are no sevens around to heal me.

The first hop brings us to a burned out village. Guano. No one alive. No one to help. Ali shrugs. Nothing we can do.

The second hop brings us to the edge of a pitched battle.

I scan. There is a lake nearby. I make a portal from the bottom of the

lake to fifty meters above them. The huge rush of water stops everything immediately of course. But as soon as I stop they start fighting again.

^RThey are playing stupid Commander.^R

^RApparently. How about we pop them individually to locations a few kilometers apart.^R

Ali can't move them as far so I take out the most violent ones. The fem. Of course they are not so far away that they won't know where they are and I can already see them moving back here.

^RThey are coming back! Are they that stupid? I hate to kill, but I will to stop this if I have to.^R

^RSort of defeats the point Commander.^R

^RLet's declaw them. Remove the weapons and be prepared to remove their actual claws. Those will grow back with time at least.^R

^RGot it.^R

Does not take long and now they seem to notice. A few look around and see us standing on the hill. We are pointed at by both sides and reps advance toward us, trading insults and punches towards each other. We declaw them, but it does not seem to help.

They come up to us. Both have wounds which they ignore. Their adrenaline levels are off the scale.

^RShe started it.^R

^RShe did by stealing our water.^R

^RIt is a shared resource. That means we get half.^R

^RNot half, our community is larger, we get a larger share.^R

^RSTOP!^R Ali says.

^RWho are you, her baby brother?^R They both hiss laughter. First agreement we have seen between the two of them. I roll my eyes and signal Ali he is free to show them. I turn my back on them and walk away, so they know he is the one doing this. He raises both of them thirty meters into the air. Near the limit of his strength, so I am watchful.

I pop them to the ground, well a few meters above the ground and let them fall. Not a problem for a Rap in good shape.

^RIs there any possibility of an agreement between you two?^R

They both indicate there is not.

^RYou two are hereby banished to a location where you will be totally dependent on each other for survival. If you kill each other, so be it, not a loss to our kind.^R I pop them out. I don't send them that far, but there are a few choice spots we set aside for this purpose. We are not good swimmers and islands are numerous here, effectively isolating them.

Ali calls up the seconds in command. They yell insults at each other,

but no hitting. Better at least. Calmer.

Ali states, ^RWe give you the same choice as your commanders. Come to an agreement here and now or suffer a fate similar to them.^R

^RWhat did you do to them?^R I only smile.

^RWe have been fighting for three eight days. It is unlikely we can come to an agreement. There has been too much blood spilled.^R

Ali looks to the other, ^RDo you agree with this assessment?^R He nods.

^RAnd this started because of access to the stream. The same stream which will nearly dry up in the summer correct?^R They nod, but they are beginning to see how silly this looks to an outsider.

^RThere is only enough water for one community in the summer. We were here first.^R

^RAnd you agreed to share when we came in, as we were taught to do by Queen Squeak.^R I wince at the term Queen, but we all agreed it was easier to use the term for the time being. I know she hates it.

^RYou understand how we are required to rule under these conditions?^R

They look at each other, one turns to us, ^RIt was part of our training, yes.^R

^RI think we were each hoping for an exception.^R Their heads are lowered. Good, they understand how stupid this looks.

I look around at the trampled crops on each side of the stream. The rats in pens have been released and are running and hiding of course. No one wants to be eaten.

They watch me looking around.

^RIt would appear that your ONLY chance of survival at the moment is if you work together. Or I can pass the required judgment and banish both of you from this area. If that happens, both communities will fail, many, if not most, will starve. Is this what you want then? Banishment?^R

^ROf course not.^R

^RWe will find a way to work together. With so many dead at least we will not have to feed as many.^R Sick humor. Rap humor.

^RYour weapons have been confiscated and destroyed. If you do any more fighting there will be no recourse but to banish you both to separate locations, locations no other Rap would chose. Understand?^R

They nod with heads down.

^RGo back together and explain this. We will be watching and will not hesitate. There will be no further warnings. This is your only warning.^R

They leave.

Ali nudges me, ^RWe are rapidly running out of less desirable locations to push them to.^R

^RI know Ali, I know. I guess we will have to start making some.^R He laughs at the thought, then I do as well. The two hear us and look back at us, then speed up.

^RIt really is silly. We have settled less than one percent of desirable locations.^R

^RYet, they still insist on fighting each other. It was not like this in the prisons. You cooperated or died.^R

^RYou were in the prisons?^R Meaning you are that old.

^RMaybe we should set them up again. Call it a history lesson.^R

^RBeyond our authority I am afraid. What was it like?^R

^RCome on, you have heard the stories. This is a thousand times better even on the worst day. So stupid. I thought we were better than the Hu.^R

His head feathers rise, ^RYou have met Hu? They aren't just myths to scare hatchlings?^R

I look at him sideways, ^RReally Ali? There are still a few first gen around and most second gen know the stories by heart. How did you ever pass the TK exams to get raised.^R

He shows amusement, ^RJust pulling your tail. But I get the feeling with all these enforcement actions no one else remembers.^R

^RYou must have driven your clan crazy growing up.^R

^RIsn't that one of the requirements for a TK?^R

I pause, ^RI think you are right.^R

^RWhat did you do to gain their attention?^R

^RI was in the prison Ali.^R

^RYeah, right. Sorry.^R

When we get back there is a surprise waiting for me. A Catbox is in my space. Ali makes to leave and I motion for him to stay.

^RI have never seen one of these before. Do you know how to make one?^R I shake my head no.

^RThe only one of us who can is Squeak.^R

^RShe is alive then.^R

^ROr one of the other TK Council sent it telling us of her death.^R

^RNeither sounds good.^R

^RNo it doesn't. Why didn't Squeak come herself?^R

I tap the top of the box and it opens. So it was meant for me at least. I reach inside and remove a piece of wood paper.

I open it, read it and then hand it to Ali.

^RThis is in Hu right? You can read this?^R I nod.

^RCan you tell me what it says?^R

^RThe planet of Alexandria is gone. Destroyed. Nothing but rock and

rubble left. Core is gone. Bodies have been found too. Nothing left alive.^R

^RIs Squeak okay?^R I nod yes.

^RShe is on Magenta at the moment seeing if Rooi or Snap know anything more. She will be home soon. We should assume we are alone with no possible backup. If the 'thn show up, do not antagonize them for any reason. Best if there is no more enforcement actions either. Apparently the 'thn do not approve though we know they allowed it in the past.^R

^RThe argument that we are just trying to get things going on a new world is not enough any longer?^R

^RApparently not.^R

Magenta

It smells horrible here. I can't believe the three of them survived for so long here. Not that they had a chance. Nothing more than a giant stinky swamp. At least I am not affected by the TK shutdown. Thanks Myra for figuring that one out.

I went to Alexandria first. Nothing much left but a few rocks. A new asteroid field. I searched for survivors but found none. Found the lab and pushed it towards the sun. Would not be good for the 'thn to get a hold of that. There was undoubtedly a lot of illegal tech there.

When I looked more closely I found evidence that some must have survived. A crust breaking up would not leave perfect spherical holes in the rock. All difference sizes. Strange. Nothing natural. Most of the crust either went directly into the sun or was tossed outward and then later fell inward from its distorted orbit. Not much left actually. Two masses, one in line with the orbit that was and one trailing it and slowly falling inward. What is left will be tiny compared to the original world.

I made and sent a Catbox to Lor to tell her what has happened here.

Now I am in this stinky swamp. The bugs here attack, but once they taste me they leave. Not one of theirs. I give up and TK above the mud and weeds. It was easy enough to scan for the wreck. No longer visible of course, long ago covered by natives, but it is the only concentrated 'thn metal present. I know they made a base came under the sea close by and head in the direction of the nearest bay. The world seems to be covered by a shallow sea that covers nearly eighty percent of it. The rest is mostly swamp and only a tiny portion could be called anything like dry.

Lot of exoskeleton life forms from bugs to crabs and things I can't even begin to describe. The plants are all shades of magenta and purple. I think some may be plantimals even. I swear I have seen movement. Could just be a very well disguised arthropod.

Floating over the sea I scan. If they do not want to be found I will never find them.

Rooi, Snap, please come in. This is Squeak, adopted daughter of Cat and Puu. Please let me know where you are. I need to talk.

I hope none of the life here is sentient, in the way of having a long term memory of my being here. I am sure seeing a dinosaur floating in a transparent bubble a few meters above the surface would be noticed. I am the odd one out here. I sense no vertebrates at all. No birds, mammals, or di of any kind. Again, how did Drup and Rand survive. Snap would have

felt right at home of course and might explain why s/he came back here after the banishment from sen worlds. It was a well kept secret that Snap survived the destruction of New Hope. Which is why I searched Alexandria as much as I did. Just like Snap, my guess is that they left. I would have. Too dangerous to stick around and be seen by the nasties.

Rooi, Snap, please come in. This is Squeak, adopted daughter of Cat and Puu. Please let me know where you are. I need to talk.

I am a nine so that TP should have been heard world wide unless there is something more to the dampening field here than I was told about.

Or they are not here at the moment. Given that, how long do I wait. I have a world waiting for me.

I take up a position half in the water and half out and just watch. Once everything sees I am not moving I am no longer of interest. They begin to go about their daily lives or eating and being eaten. The trap crabs are interesting and appear to be together in patches. Not clear this is anything other than a good spot to feed though. Ah, some of the plants are clearly capable of purposeful movement. Rotting bits are fertilizer and worth seeking out I suspect.

Something is moving towards me or something near me. It wraps an arm around my bubble. The arm has suckers on it. Not an unheard of adaptation. Another arm wraps around my bubble. I scan. Eight arms. The only one on this world that I can tell.

Rooi, is that you? Suddenly she is inside the bubble with her wrapped around my leg.

She hands me, ~It is not safe here. You should go.~

You are here, and I assume Snap is nearby. Why is it not safe for me?

~They are hunting us.~

They think we are all dead. There is nothing left at Alexandria. I searched for days. They somehow got away. Oh, there were lots of manufactured body parts and such, just did not have the right feel about them.

~If you can see this, so can they.~

If they even care. Besides, this is Magenta. Can't get more lost in Farout than here.

~This is one of their trap worlds meant to catch TKs. They visit their traps at random intervals.~

I am going back anyway. Are you staying?

~I can't go back to Ceph Eden and Snap cannot go back to Earth One. We are banned from our worlds. We know how to hide here.~

You are always welcome on Rap Eden.

~They will find you soon enough even there. Our mod 'thn know of

this place and they are the ones who destroyed Alexandria. They have banned all TKs from their sentient worlds. Those that survived are somewhere in Farout.~

Guano. I was never that close to them, but I know Silver and Turtle were. A very big place. Guess we are on our own.

This is strange. The Ceph attached to my bubble cannot be Rooi. I know she can change her shape and colors of course. But something is not right. I scan and can find no crab matching Snap either. There are a lot of crabs, but none big enough by a factor of a hundred. Of course s/he could have assumed another form. Whoa, there are lots of ceph here. They were not part of the normal fauna were they? Who am I talking with then?

We can see you were trained well.

The Ceph attached to my bubble slides off and jets further away. The crabs start to walk away also.

Two AuC spheres rise from the water. I rise to meet them. They are hard to focus on. I shift into DS space and they become much sharper. Not 3D then. More like 6D. Just like the new Qr'thn, Br'thn and Pr'thn.

Are you now 'thn? Why?

It was necessary to visit Control. Life forms are not allowed.

I am assuming the others are there in this new form. The 'bodies' left in the lab and library were their former forms.

Have you not assumed other forms?

Nearly everyone of them that we know. But not this new form. Are you still you, or is this some copy and the original is dead.

What is live and what is dead? What is consciousness even?

We were allowed to try it out, return to our normal forms and then make a final decision. There are many advantages. You have been high TK for some time now. Do you really like dealing with the needs of a fluidic form?

I don't know anyone who does. Aren't there limitations to the solidic form though? There is always a side effect.

It is quiet. No one is thinking out loud.

It is possible that we do not feel empathy as acutely. As a TK9 you saw yourself as essentially immortal. In this form this effect is stronger.

How so?

We think faster. There are no time or space limitations.

Or TK limits?

We have not found them yet, but it is also not a concern. We are learning and growing in this form, same as you would in any form you try

anew.

Can you return to a fluidic form if you want?

Yes, we did so when we first tried these forms. We still remember our base form, same as you did when you were Hu or some other form.

What are your intentions then? Where will you go, what will you do?

We will remain here for the time being. The crab form was missing a real predator. I supplied that when I brought the Ceph form here. We are in com with the planet's OM and have approval to help.

Does she know where this world is? In Farout? There is little point in spawning out this far. Extremely unlikely to be able to seed another world.

That was the bargain we made with her. There are worlds out here, just very far apart, and very few. You are correct, too far apart for a normal spawning. That is why so far Magenta and Alexandria were the only two found. And Alexandria was played with by Cat. We don't know where it originally came from.

And the place the original Farout TKs were placed?

That world has no OM. They terraformed the world and did the best they could, but it is an abomination. I smile inside. I imagine Susan and Roger alone on a world without an OM.

You cannot return to Rap Eden in your current form. They are looking for high TKs and will remove sentient from the world if you are found.

If I want to help our new Eden I must try this form. May I leave my current form here in stasis?

Of course. We would be honored. You may leave it with our own forms.

You want to be able to back out as well. What of my companions?

They will still be your companions. Ours are here as well.

Okay, let's make this happen. I am scared of course, but no one becomes high TK without taking risks and trying new things. I don't really need to keep my current form here. I can make a new one any time I want, as well as a half dozen other forms.

It is strange. I know I am smaller than I was, but I feel so much freer.

We felt the same. A few things you should now. We are not indestructible. We are not immortal, though with luck we should be good for a few billion years.

We would advise not going back of course, but if you do, keep it subtle. No overt actions that draw attention. It is vital that your kind learn on their own how to make it work.

We are not their parents, there to save them every time.

Puu and Cat taught me since I was a hatchling to fight for the lowest ranking members. It will hard to resist.

Part of what a culture needs to learn, is the value of its 'low ranking' members. The smiggles, as Sauron would call them. They are the ones, maybe even because they are abused, who come up with most of the new ideas.

Baptism by fire as the Hu would say.

Magenta is a place of quiet. A place of contemplation, of gaining understanding. Come back when you see this too. It is not the prison the 'thn thought, but a paradise.

Star Fleet

A rumble goes through the combined fleet. What the flight school is that? I scan, but I am limited as a three. I finally find it just as the alarm sounds and the lights flash.

Anyone with DS 4 capability we need you in sector 5C immediately.

That leaves me out, but I am close enough that I decide to see if I can help at all. When I get there it is total chaos. Sens running in all directions. Some popping in with the injured and then popping out again. I am part of the infirmary cleanup, so jump in and help sort sens out and get them to the waiting doctors. Most seem to be suffering from decompression sickness. Beyond my TK grade.

+Jfi, see if you can find more rooms to place them in.+ I nod and quickly find offices not in use and direct them to that location. I gather supplies of towels, water, sheets, etc. and place some in each room.

"We need disinfectant in each of these rooms too. Most have some kind of physical injury from flying debris as well."

I want to ask what happened, but am waved off as everyone is in a rush. Once the chaos slows down, I scan as far as I can. An entire section of the fleet structure is missing. Just gone.

^We got him. All hands, we are secure. Attend to the wounded and construction crews can begin repairs.^

I act as a grunt for construction as well. I am a large Ku fem. I often get lifting tasks. I go as far as I can before I reach a sealed tunnel. Vacuum on the other side, even though there are rooms and engines in that section. The engines don't care of course. I finally see the section that is a perfect circle carved out of the hull of the ship where it was joined to the superstructure. Perfect. The apparent diameter matches a DS2. Someone went rogue while they were outside. Third one since we left Alexandria system. If they had been inside it would have been worse. If they had been near an engine it would have been way worse.

We are similar to the Hu in our progression. Scan, telekinetics, molecular, atomic, life processes, then we get telepathic where they get dimension shift, then the reverse. We both gain phase shifting at TK8 and all nines are pretty much the same of course. So I can scan, move and see what a material is made of and do simple molecular rearrangements. I can't transmute the material into something new. I can see it happening, just can't do it myself.

Of course anyone above a two can carve out a two sized chunk, but

going rogue usually causes someone to go their limit in a sort of madness. A Rap can DS at level two. They hate being on the outside too. Definitely grounders. Not that my Ku love it, but hey, it is flight school without the hit at the bottom. Liberating knowing you can no longer die falling off a cliff. A Rap, not having TK itself at level two would still be afraid of falling.

Casualty report. We have lost another two sens and the rogue will be limited and kept in isolation until we can help her. Return to your normal tasks unless otherwise requested.

I am approached, "You are Jfi?" I nod.

"Thanks for your help with the injured. We really have all the help we need here as most of it will be TK6 stuff until the major repairs are affected. You can go back to your normal duties."

+Who was it? A Rap I assume.+

An eyebrow goes up, "Very good. We have a lot of low level Raps at present. Whoever the hell sent them outside is in trouble."

+They could have done it themselves out of curiosity right?+

"Had not thought of that. We Hu tend to blame others for our mistakes. I will pass your insight on. You normally work in the infirmary right?" I nod.

"Check in with them. Are you comfortable around Raps?" I nod.

"Great. Do check in with them. Tell them John sent you."

+Got it.+ He has already turned around to pursue another task.

It only takes me a few minutes in spite of the confusion and increased numbers of sens moving about.

^Hi Jfi. Welcome back. You missed all the fun. They brought in the Rap. Extensive vacuum damage, but she will be fine. The TKs really did a good job.

+John asked me to check in.+

"Did John say why?" Another asks.

+I have a theory that the Rap who went rogue did not really go rogue, but was simply curious about 'outside' and then freaked out trying to save herself.+

"Wait, you got that all from just thinking about it?" I nod in the Hu fashion.

"Come this way." I am brought to the room where the Rap is being secluded. No guards, but lots of physical locks that she undoes.

"Hope you are not upset by a limiter field."

+I have not been TK so long that I don't remember. I am fine.+

"All we need you to do is talk with her."

+Happy to help.+ I enter the room and it is shut and locked behind me.

Never mind that in an empty world I would be food for a Rap without question.

+My name is Jfi. May I ask your name?+

^RI don't speak Ku. Do you know Ceph hand?^R

I hand back, ~Yes. A most interesting way to com.~

~And one they cannot hear or see. I did not do it.~

~I am Jfi. May I know your name?~

~Does not translate well into Ceph hand. I will say it in Rap.~

^RHek^R

~It is the short version for a much longer name. In Ceph I spell it out, H.E.K.~

~Do you know who did do it?~

~Wait, you believe me?~

~I am likely the only one. Don't get too excited.~

~One is better than none.~

~I thought at first you were curious about what a vacuum was like, but at TK2, it would have been hard to survive in a total vacuum without a bubble of some kind. Freaked out you took out a section unintentionally.~

~Sounds more believable than the truth. Maybe I should go with that. On Rap Eden we would have been fitted with a limiter and let go. Here, there is no use for anyone without TK. I would have ended up outside anyway.~

~Your badge says you are a TK3, same as me. Yet the chunk was clearly a TK2 sized. Someone freaking out would not have had that much control. At best it would be an in between size.~

~They found me ten kilometers away. I was thrown out from the air blast same as everyone else. I was probably furthest out because of where I was when it went. I tried to DS back, but passed out before I could get back inside. And, no, I would never remove a 'chunk' to get inside. Why would I when it would be easier to just DS in? Besides taking a chunk would have just propelled me out again.~

~I overheard that two died.~

~Who?~

~I was not told. I could survive a vacuum because of my particular TK abilities, scan, TK and molecular. At least until I starved or froze to death. It would be hard to shield and keep myself warm and convert CO2 in my blood back to O2 all at the same time.~

~That leaves Rap or Ceph basically. Both were in the area when it

went.~

~Why you?~

~I, ah, have been having some issues with my boss. I did not always agree with his decisions.~

~How bad did it get?~

~I have been disciplined before for starting a fight. It is easier to blame this one on me than to look for the real reason.~

~Do you think it was intentional or a rogue?~

~I don't think it was rogue. That usually happens soon after an upgrade. It has been three solars since I was last upgraded. There were some recent upgrades, but they all went through the three lunar waiting period before being brought close to the fleet again.~

~I heard they take them all out on a flyer and do rigorous training to try and get them to pop.~

~I have heard the same. They come back changed, but really fast and very good control of their TK. Just can't believe it was one of them.~

~The Hu have problems telling us Ku apart. Is it the same with Raps? Could this be simply mistaken identity?~

~Yes they do. That means there is a rogue Rap running loose they are not aware of! We are not the nicest sen when cornered.~

~Or Ceph. They seem sweet, but have you seen them attack their food? And they can escape any capture.~

~Probably why they put us together. The other sens do not like to watch us eat, and Raps don't mind the humidity the Ceph's like.~

~Among the Hu it is common for some personal conflict to rise to the level of destructive behavior. Known to happen with Ku also.~

~Raps hunt in packs and one pack may attack another if provoked enough. But fights within a pack are not tolerated. I have not seen that behavior once since we all came on board. It was scary being in the weightless bubble rock for months though.~

~I agree. Artificial gravity is better than no gravity. I'm sorry, but there is no way I can believe you were the cause of the event. You are not acting like a rogue sen at all. Your logic is good too. A sure sign of a rogue is lack of logic. Or so I have been taught. Never met one myself.~

~Neither have I. From the old journals it was not that uncommon. Wonder why it does not happen now? What is the total population of the fleet?~

~I think it is over fifty thousand. We lost a lot when Alexandria flew apart. Some were still being rescued so I heard.~

~It has been over a solar since the 'thn attack. I would look to a recent

retrieval. I would go nuts locked in a small space for a year, weightless and no idea what was going on. Maybe even knowing you were going to ultimately freeze to death from lack of psiotic strength, or plunging into the star.~

~I agree, we should be looking at recent survivors. We had a bunch come into the Ku sector. They did seem very twitchy.~

~But Ku do not get DS until level 7 and one of those could take out the entire fleet if determined at that level.~

~Rogues usually happen upon upgrade to two or three. That means Rap or Ceph, as we don't have any Cats present.~

~All ambush predators. So did someone go rogue and try to take out prey or competitor?~

~Or predator. If they thought the high TKs were looking for them. Stalking them . . .~

~I like that idea. I could see a Rap breaking under those circumstances. Especially anyone who suffered under the Di before coming here.~

~A recent Rap arrival, probably just before we lost Alexandria. Then stuck in a bubble for nearly a year. Most elected to move to Rap Eden of course.~

~But another way out was to be selected to attend the University here.~

~And if that was their sole motivation they may have felt inferior to what looked like much better candidates among Raps as well as other sens. They were beat down on Di Eden for being inferior only to end up at Uni where everyone newly arrived feels like the lowest of the low.~

~Then when they did not advance like others in their class it was only reinforced.~

~Wait, that could include us now. All of my classmates are higher than three now. I am the last. Even after we left the system when higher TKs were needed most, we remained where we were.~

~That is depressing. I think I would have noticed if I had done it though. I actually like being a three. Less responsibility. Have you seen the way the high TKs push themselves? Insane.~

~I guess they could test that theory by popping you into a vacuum now and see how you behaved.~

~You did not see me and the others when they brought us here. My eyes were gone and lungs inverted. I was bleeding out of every orifice. I am happy they put me back together so fast. That was like being eaten alive by an invisible foe.~

~Could you make a portal, not just the standard DS?~

~Of course, that was how I got close enough to DS back into the ships before I passed out. I could not see a thing and had to depend on scanning to even know where I was. I followed the trail of debris back.~

~A mistake?~

~Anything is possible, but I worked in that section for three years. Even when they put us all together into the combined fleet structure, my section was largely the same.~

~You mean most of your stay on Alexandria was in the underground sections? The emergency bubbles?~

~Sure, wasn't it the same for you? I think they purposely kept us low TKs underground, so if a limiter field was applied it would not be that much trouble for us to still function.~

~It was the same for me. I think that is one of the reasons I am here with you now. Have you ever noticed how out of shape a lot of the fours and fives have gotten?~

~It would be good to have limiter drills. Think about it. The 'thn certainly know how to do that to us. Do you remember the class about Droopy and Randy on Magenta? They had a period of time each day when they had no TK. Yet they not only survived but made a pretty good life for themselves.~

~If you like stinky swamps. Think about it, we have already had a problem with low psiotics. How many of our air, water and food systems are dependent on them? Very dangerous, especially if the sens are all freaking out at the same time. Are you ready to leave? I am. My feet are killing me for standing so long without a perch.~

~We are stuck until they let us out Jfi. Or hadn't you noticed?~

~Simple mechanical locks. I picked them some time ago.~ I hold up various metal implements.

~How did you learn that?~

~I grew up with some nasty relatives. It was a survival skill. Actually kind of surprised they did not scan me and remove them.~

~They knew of your skill and are waiting outside for us as we hand.~

~Oh likely. Let's see. What is the worst they can do, throw us back in right.~

~That is the worst you can imagine? I can think of a lot worse, especially if they still think I was the one.~

~Do you really think they have not been 'listening' in on our entire conversation?~

Hek shows amusement, ~I was under no such illusion.~

I push open the door slowly. No one around. We both step outside.
There is a table with a box on it. In the box is a note. I look to Hek and she looks back. I reach for it and open it. Written in Ba. Why Ba?
I look at Hek and say in Rap, ^RWouldn't it have made more sense to write this in Rap or Ku? Why Ba?^R
^ROh, you know Rap. That makes it easier.^R
^RI don't know battle Rap if that makes you feel any better.^R
^RYou should never need it I hope. It says we are to report to this location. There is a map.^R
^RI don't think we are going back to our old tasks. Too bad, it was good while it lasted.^R
^RIndeed. Beats wasting away in a stinky cell. Never realized Ku farts were so potent.^R
^RI thought those were Rap farts.^R
We both show amusement and take off towards our destiny.
^RDoes it say when we need to be there?^R
I look at the note again, ^RNo, it does not.^R
^RAh, then we can eat first. We are threes, can't expect us to make the food ourselves.^R
^RYou have a favorite?^R
^RIndeed I do my new friend. Just don't let the other Raps know. I will be the pun of jokes forever.^R
^RThe Ku will only expect it to be a matter of time before you eat me.^R
^RHere we are. I was headed here before the incident. Good to see they were not affected or managed to clean up.^R
Strange looking place. Strange symbols, maybe some kind of writing. Not Ceph, but looks similar. Smells good.
There are Hu behind the counter. Strange. Most Hu food is horrible.
Oh, there are perches and stumps for Ku and Raps. Why would Hu be serving us?
We are handed a board with a menu. Mine is in Ku and Hek's is in Rap. I have no idea what I am looking at. There are pictures next to the items, but that really does not help.
Hek must be noticing my confusion.
^RI will order a number of items to try. Eat more of what you like. You may have saved me from execution. I owe you at least this much.^R
Eight bowls of good smelling food are placed before us.
^RMay I ask what this is?^R
^RNope, just try it.^R In other words better if I don't know. I did it at different sen food shops while I was at Uni. Surprised I never saw this one.

I tentatively reach in to sample something and Hek hits me gently with a pair of sticks. She then shows me how to use them to select what I want and hands me a pair of the sticks. I am horrible at first, but finally get something into my beak.

^ROh, this is good.^R Salt, sour, heat, good mouth feel. I try some more from a different bowl. Each is different and each is good. Of course I have preferences, but I would be happy to eat this any time. There is a crunchy one I particularly like. Hek notices and pushes the bowl towards me.

^RThought you would like that one. We are both omnivores, but Rap do tend more towards meat.^R

^RLand animals or water creatures too?^R

^RI am actually partial to fish. Of course, none of this is real. It is all duped before preparing. That is important, it is not duped as is, but just as raw ingredients. The art is in the prep.^R

^RWhat is this one? I like it but cannot place the taste.^R

^RThat is a Rap favorite. Took forever to get it on the menu. It is raw rat flesh.^R

^RThe insects covered in batter I recognize. We have something similar. They are good though. You said you like fish. Which one is that?^R

She points to the dish. A pink rectangle on grain with a green paste. I take some and smell it first. I try it. It nearly takes my head off. I can breathe again.

^ROh, we definitely need more of this one!^R

Hek shows surprise, ^RThis is a favorite of the Hu as well. Too strong for me. I prefer the rat.^R

I am not surprised there. ^RSo what fish dish do you like?^R She points to a bowl of broth and noodles. Interesting. She signals for another bowl and gives me the rest of the one she was eating from.

^RI love the noodles, but where are the fish?^R

^RIt is in the broth and those flakes are actually fish as well. Good huh?^R

I nod and continue eating. I happen to notice a clock on the wall.

^RGuano! We are already late!^R

^RNot late yet.^R She pays the bill. We are allowed limited free funds for just this purpose. We would all go ratty if we had to eat food hall food all the time. Fifty thousand plus sens would not be pretty.

As soon as her tablet is recorded we are suddenly in a new location.

Ah Hek, double check where we are. This is not an office area. Isn't that a star ship just to the right?

A Hu male comes up to us, "You two are late."
We look at each other, Hek states, "We are actually right on time."
"And clearly ignored the rules about using DS in this area without authorization."

"We have never been here before. How would we know the rules?"

He grumbles, "Orders please?"

We look at each other again having no idea what he means.

^RHand him the piece of paper left for us I guess.^R

Hek pulls it out of her bag and hands it to him.

He sighs, clearly disappointed.

"Please state your name and TK level."

I go first, +Ku Jfi, TK3.+

^RRap Hek, TK3.^R

He rolls his eyes. I know this a Hu expression of thinking we are idiots.

"That much is on your badges. What is your ID number?" True.

I am getting annoyed, "We don't have ID numbers, we are low level refugees not military. We do cleaning and grunt work. We are nobodies. Neither of us has any idea why we are here and will be happy to leave."

We both turn to leave when a nicely dressed Ba walks up. The Hu immediately gets really stiff and raises a hand to his head.

"Attention!" Two others behind the desk rise and do the same.

^At ease.^ Hard for me to determine gender in Ba. I was told it was the same for sens trying to read Ku. Raps and Hu are obvious. They let their reproductive bits hang out when not wearing clothing.

^You understand Ba?^ We both nod.

^Good, my Rap is embarrassing and my Ku is not much better. Come with me please.^

I do a pulse scan and she immediately turns around to stare at me. Clearly indicating I am never to do that again. Her badge says she is a seven. She can TP then. She could have understood us even if she had never met our kind before. The others remain at attention until we are through the door.

^Before you even think about it. No talking or handing.^ She knows about that too. We did not sign up for military service. I could not kill another sen if my life depended on it. Why are we here?

We go down a narrow tube like hallway and enter though another door. The doors are fleet standard air tight, so nothing suspicious there. On the other side of this last door it changes, a lot. There are decorations on all the walls and the passage is very narrow. A Di would definitely not

fit here. I am large for a Ku and barely do.

There are guards standing before the next door in sort of side niches. Heavily armed. Why would a high TK need weapons? They snap to attention when we are noticed as well. Okay, she is someone important. A guess all sevens get this attention? Not met many except from a distance.

Past this door is a command center of sorts. There are large view screens all around us and smaller ones at the stations of sens standing or sitting next to them. No one moves when we enter.

@Captain on board. Take us out Ensign if you please.@ I had not even noticed the Yesan until s/he spoke. A melodic language. I was only just learning it when all this happened. I look at some badges. None below a five. Guano, what are we doing here? Bait for some exercise?

The view on the screens changes. We are leaving the fleet slowly. Then suddenly we have jumped who knows how far. I turn to Hek and she is equally confused and nervous.

@We are on course to the Jelky system Captain.@ Our guide nods. She is the Captain of this vessel then. The name on the first officer's tag says 'Tewk' and the one on the Captain's tag says 'Esi'. I feel I should know those names. Then it comes to me. Are we on the Mothership? No, too small. It had a smaller ship associated with it. I remember being so happy to see it when they rescued us from our bubble. We really thought we were dead.

^Please welcome our two new shipmates, Rap Hek and Ku Jfi. They are answerable only to me and have free run of the ship except for the restricted areas.^ *Meaning the engine room and life support.*

She continues, ^Do not be deceived by their low TK status. They were able to solve the blowout we had recently while being locked together in a high security cell, which they opened and left when they were ready. By high security, I mean maximum limiters present. You could feel its affect several levels around it. I doubt anyone on board could do what they did.^ Guano, so that is how we got into this mess. We were just being ourselves.

She turns to me, ^Do you have any questions Ku Jji?^

I turn to her, ^Captain Esi, formerly head of the biosci department on-board the Mothership.^ @First Officer Tewk of the Mothership.@ "I assume we are on board the Flyer and are . . ." Hek taps me on the shoulder.

She takes over, "We are en-route to the Jelky system for the purpose of discerning whether or not it will be suitable as a new home for the fleet. We two are specifically on board because as low TKs we will be better able to interact with any local lifeforms without raising suspicion.

Especially as we will be fitted with limiters at the time."

"And hopefully be monitored from here in case we get into trouble, which we usually do." I show amusement and the crew relaxes.

The Captain takes over, ^These two can understand any language spoken or handed on board this ship, without TP. How many here can say the same? Even I can't do that. A failing I will rectify. All of you should as well, in your free time.^ That gets a rumble of amusement. So, no free time.

A Di stands up, !Captain, how did they get out of the cell.! Other crew show amusement. I thought all the Di had left. A small male, not much bigger than a large Rap.

The Captain turns to me.

+I picked the lock.+ Was not that hard.

!Surely you were scanned for metal tools.!

+Metal, why would I need metal.+ I pull out my tools, well, some of them.

+These are hardened keratin.+

^Feathers Di Grry. And don't get any ideas. The next time you end up in the brig, we will be scanning for such now as well.^ Ah, the one who gets into trouble all the time. I suspect we will be spending some time together. Hek is not at all happy about this. The Captain notices.

^If Di Grry gives you any trouble, let me know. We will shove him out an airlock.^ No one shows amusement, especially not Di Grry. Guano. I hate making enemies on my first day out. I'm a good birdie I am. I see the Captain talking with someone using TP. I hate not knowing. It is easy to tell when they are doing it though they have had training to hide it. We sens can still really only concentrate on one thing at a time though.

A Ceph comes up to us and hands us, ~I will take you to your quarters, such as they are. We are crowded on the flier. You will be sharing quarters with me and one other.~

Hek responds, ~We expected that.~

~I am being rude. My name is Qstz. As you can guess it is not pronounceable in speech com.~ She shows amusement.

~I have noticed most of the crew is fem. Don't they usually end up half?~

~Males are annoying. We choose whom we like for these missions.~

~Why were we chosen? We are both nobodies.~

~We are about to set up on a new world. One that has different life, different rules. TKs, especially the high TKs, have gotten soft. They miss

things we low TKs can see easily.~

~And we are more expendable.~

~There is that of course.~ She shows amusement. Her badge says TK4. Similar scale to the Raps and Cats. Is she our protector, or our guard? Is she considered low or high TK in this existence?

She leaves us in her room. There is a perch and a sleeping area for Hek. Only we do not sleep. She curls up in it anyway, but does not close her eyes.

Wish we had TP. There is a monitor on the wall. I activate it. There is a menu and I select present course. We are already well away from the Alexandria system. Probably a good idea not to select something too close. We can't make it easy for the 'thn to find us. On the other hand systems are really spaced out in Farout. As long as we do not draw attention to ourselves we should be fine right?

I turn around and Hek is watching the monitor too.

!Did you learn Di as well?! I nod yes.

!Let's hope they have forgotten it.! I say. She nods.

!The TPs could still hear us of course. Only provides some privacy form the lower TKs. Can you read when we will be there?!

!In a few eighths. I can already feel the psiotics improving. They needed to get far enough away at least for that reason.!

!Hungry?! I look at her in shock. We ate a weeks worth of food at the food stand.

!It would be good to know the layout of the ship at least. Nothing will taste as good after our last meal though.!

!There is that. I am sure they have trackers on us. We will not have to sneak out and the Captain said we can go everywhere non-dangerous.!

I operate the monitor and find a ship's schematic. A dot indicates our current location.

!When did you learn how to do all this? They never taught me.!

!They did not teach me. I learned by watching and experimenting. They tend to ignore the low TKs as of little value.!

!That much I did learn. Where to first?!

I point to the map, !The food area is here. Only a short walk from here. Seems there is a special area for sens to pop in. We will want to avoid that. Hate it when they shove you out of the way.!

I have an idea and query the system.

!Come on, I want to go someplace else.! I leave the room. Hek showed surprise, but follows.

The ship layout is pretty logical. There are four main corridors, left,

right, top and bottom. And of course cross paths as well. I plot a course in my head.

!I would love to run, but I suspect that is not allowed except when we are under attack.! I look at Hek and show amusement. Hopefully that will not happen.

I find the room I am interested in and open the air tight door. It lets us in anyway. When Hek comes in I motion for her to close the door. Where did she live anyway? We always close an airtight door behind us. Fastest way to get spaced. To be fair she has been through a lot today.

There are enclosures throughout the room with life forms I have never seen before in them. Most are a blue-green color.

^The fourth planet out from the star is in the habitable zone.^ The Captain stands up from her desk, holding a plant when she places back into one of the enclosures.

^Did not take long for you to come here. Good. I need your curiosity most of all. Something about being high TK seems to suck that out of most of us. For me, being a biologist was the best time of my life. I would have gladly been demoted to be on this mission. Fortunately Commander Pilot agreed I needed to be here.^

+Tewk seems to have the same wonder lust.+

^It gets really boring on a Mothership tethered to the fleet.^

Hek is looking at the life in the enclosures, ^RI assume these are samples collected earlier from the Jelky system.^R

^We call the world Cyan on account of the color of the life there.^ She waves her hand to indicate the enclosures.

+Just like Magenta was named after it's dominant color.+ She nods.

Hek asks, ^RDoes Cyan suffer from the TK blackout as well?^R

^Very good Hek. We have found other worlds that are fine. The original Farout sens never experienced this until they stumbled on Magenta.^

+The other worlds were low green or brown no doubt.+

^I knew you two needed to be on this mission.^

Hek looks at me confused.

+A protective barrier against a Farout inmate from taking over the world. I am guessing these are special worlds set up for some reason. I hope the 'thn don't come and check on their experiments too often.+

^We don't think it was the 'thn. They do not like coming out this far. Or so I understand.^

^RThere is something worse than the 'thn out here? Guano!^R

^Well said Hek.^

+So, is there a yellow world too? It would complete the set.+

The Captain smiles, ^We will see. Given how large Farout is, we would not have expected for find either world so close to Magenta.^

^RUnless there are a lot of them spaced out in some sort of pattern. We need to find at least one more to make some sense of it.^R

^Let me show you what has been found already. I would not recommend touching anything without a shield raised. I know Hek you can't do this, yet. If you succeed on this mission you will be given the opportunity for higher TK status, if you wish.^

^RI would have to think about it.^R She looks at me then continues,
^RThere are some advantages to being on the low side. Less responsibility for one.^R

^Ah, you do understand. I almost envy your position.^

She reaches in and pulls out an animal that clasps to her hand.

^I call her Cici and she has adapted to me handling her. Anyone else would be bit and her bite is poisonous.^

+Good defense for someone so small. Is she on the bird scale or mammal scale of intelligence?+

The Captain smiles, ^Above both. About as intelligent as a lazy Cat actually. Some even have limited TK ability. Mostly scanning so far.^

^RBut they could potentially be raised to a higher level.^R

+Or there are higher level ones already there but were not caught by the survey probe.+

^Very good, we suspect the latter. You two will be the first ones down, along with your Ceph roommates. We do not want to appear too threatening.^

+Let's hope we are poisonous to them as well.+ The Captain smiles and places the creature back into the enclosure. Hek nudges me and we bow and leave.

!She needs to get back to work. Good call. We know a lot more than we did an eighth ago. Now take me to the food area please.!

!You are really hungry?!

!No, of course not. Just curious what we will be eating the next few lunars.!

!You think it will take that long?!

!We passed cargo bays loaded with survival gear. Oh, yeah, they intend to set up a base there. Even noticed the parts to a small portal.!

!A large portal would deplete the psiotics there too if used too much. I wonder if they intend to leave the fleet where it is and just send the sens through.!

!Collapse the portal behind you and anyone finding the fleet would

have no idea where we went to.!

!I suspect the Mothership and this flier would not be left behind though.!

!I agree. Nothing else looked even remotely space worthy. Good enough to house everyone for now, but no way could it go interstellar with the psiotics so low. Now all we have to do is survive long enough for the others to arrive.!

!Don't take all the fun out of it Jfi.! I do not smile as she says this and neither does she.

Cat Eden?

!It feels good to get back into the form I am most familiar with at least.!

"Sorry, but we spent most of our current lives as Hu. This is our preferred form. Or at least mine." He must be speaking for Rand as well, who was born Hu.

"That's because in Hu form you are nearly as large as a Di. Next to you I look downright scrawny." *Rand, you can take on any size you want, stop complaining.* I guess I should be used to it. There are some advantages to our being different sizes though. I am not pleased with their choices though. Too bad. We are all nines. I am not their boss as much as they think I am.

Rand pokes at some critter, "Seems like a pleasant enough place. Nice tropical breeze, lots of life forms. I can see making an island home here."

!Don't get too attached. I have a strange feeling about this place. Like it is not what it appears to be. Stay on guard.!

"Chill White, the entire multiverse is not out to get us."

!Since when?! Guano, Rand has made a glass filled with some alcoholic beverage. Oh, now a lounge chair with an umbrella. Drup sees this and does the same. They clink glasses and look at me while taking a sip.

!There are predators near by watching.!

"I don't sense anything that can hurt us. Relax."

A large cat like creature jumps out of the bushes, but stops when we do not react. Clearly confused we have not run. Cats do like to give chase.

"Well hello kitty. Nice place you have here." It just stares at us like we are mad.

I give it an evil look and it jumps back into the bushes only to peer out at us.

"You are so mean White. It was not hurting anything." Drup DSs a fish from the ocean and places it between us and the bushes where the cat is hiding. It sniffs the air and can't resist the flopping fish. It pounces on it and starts eating with a heavy purr.

!You idiots. What do you think the odds of finding a world inhabited with cats that look just like the Cats from Earth One?!

"I sense no TK. It did not DS when it pounced. Why not a world where cats are the dominate species? Just as crazy as the worlds we came from."

!Grrr, there is another waiting. Are you going to feed them all Rand?!

"There are a lot of fish in the sea." He pops another one out and two pounce on it and growl and spit at each other as each tries to take the entire fish.

"Interesting, the fish could easily feed both of them. Whomever gets it will let the rest rot once they are full. What is the point of that? Guess their social skills are still missing."

I answer Drup, !They never had social skills.!

"This is an island. Isn't that where Owa and Sylvy sent the bad cats to live? Is this their world we have stumbled on?"

"I thought it was too much of a coincidence that the exact same Cat appeared here."

!We are leaving now! I have no intention of getting into a confrontation with those two. They probably already know we are here.!

I pop us over one. The island we were on looks very similar. No cats at least.

!Please scan this world. I want to be sure it is Cat free.!

We all concentrate.

"Got some White." "Me too, they are on the mainland. None on the island."

!I got em too. How many worlds have they taken over?!

I pop us over ten, given a 13D multiverse, this really has no meaning.

"No Cats. This place is weird though."

No kidding. I have to think how many jumps Di Eden is from Hu Eden. Guess it depends on how you get there. Could take ten. Our worlds are very different. I don't recognize any of the plants. Those are not trees in any world I have seen.

!How far are we from our earths?! I ask out loud

They both look at me confused.

!Where are we?! They both shrug. Drup has spent too much time with the Hu. I would have thought better of him.

"Does it matter? Where ever the wind blows is good enough."

"Or DS portals as the case may be." Drup adds.

!Let's get on with it. I want full scans this time. No more surprises.!

"Like possibly that thing?" Rand points behind me. I turn and see a huge salamander like creature staring at me like I am dinner. My shield was already up. Standard procedure even before popping.

!Guys, what have you gotten us into this time.!

"I believe you were in control of the destination." Drup says smiling in that monkey like way that drives me into a rage.

Rand walks up to the creature, does a nice bow.

Forgive the intrusion. We mean no harm. We seem to have gotten lost.

It expels air, *Tourists. Come with me please. I'll get you registered.*

The four of us are suddenly in a pavilion of some kind. Marble stone work and water features are everywhere. Others go about their business ignoring us. Obviously they have DS capability. We have stumbled into a TK world. I do a quick pulse scan and only sense TK from our host.

I ask our host, *Would it be better if we assumed your form?*

Please don't. That would only embarrass both of us.

We are taken to a large building and go through a set of doors. Everything is rounded here. The doors, the outsides of the buildings. Even the water ponds and sculptures. There are no sculptures of themselves.

Our host goes up to one standing near a cylinder.

They exchange words I am guessing. Very low pitch and a lot of air. A balloon like organ in their throat expands when they talk. Would not be easy to make those sounds in our current form.

Our host bows to us and leaves us with the new one.

In heavily accented speech she asks us, "Are both your types capable of understanding Hu Standard?" I nod being the only non-Hu.

"Good, saves time translating. Two Hu and a Di. May I ask the purpose of your visit? Tourists or scholars?"

I answer before the other two can, "Scholars please." Rand closes his mouth. I am sure he would have said tourists. I am not interested in the sights, but in how it works here. I suspect there is much to learn.

She hands us each a badge of some kind, "Have these on your person at all times. Anyone without one can be hunted for sport or food."

Guano. I make a necklace and wear mine around my neck so it is visible at all times.

"TK levels please." She looks at Rand first.

"Nine."

"Nine."

"Nine."

"I assume I do not need to tell you not to mess with anything here you do not find acceptable. We have our own ways and you need to respect that or leave now."

I nod, "Understood and not a problem. We have been with many sentient species, just never yours."

"We are in the catalog along with yourselves. Are you really scholars? Scholars know better." I ignore her.

"Here is the standard literature we hand the Hu tourists. Do not go out

of the bounds shown. Eat only in the approved locations. Do not attempt to interact with anyone not in these locations."

"A library would be good. Something on your history and culture is all we need. We are not here to sight-see."

"Very good. Follow me then."

Have you noticed something. Except for our greeter and this one, everyone is moving really, really slow.

I noticed. Different time frame. Not that unusual. Also tells us our two are high TK and know how to get to a faster time frame.

Rand offers, "We would be happy to adjust to your normal time frame if that would make things easier."

She turns to face us, "You are not in a hurry? Your kind are always in a hurry." She really has an attitude problem.

Shit White, these 'badges' are not just for identification. They are remote controlled limiters. That must be one of the ways they keep us in line.

Already noticed. Easy to defeat, but don't let them know that.

"May I ask which university you studied at?"

Drup answers, "Alexandria at Farout." I would not have exposed that information so soon.

"I can expect trouble from the three of you." Not a question. She did not face us when she said it either.

I sigh and say, "We are old, very old friends with Silver Owl and Turtle."

"I assumed that." We reach a door.

"This is the Hu entrance. Once inside you should go to what for you would be a slow time frame."

That would put us at a severe disadvantage. Someone in fast time could run circles around us before we even knew what happened.

That is what our companions are for. They stay in fast time. I pat the two in my pouch.

Drup grins, *Understood.*

Once through the door, we slow down. The lamps lit by some kind of fuel oil stop flickering and assume an even glow. Has a kind of medieval feel to it.

"This is quite nice. Just like the Crab Cove library."

"Welcome to the Hu library. How may I help you." A male Sal.

"We are new to your world, but have studied many others. We would like introductory texts first."

Rand comments, "It is very dry in here. We do not mind humidity if

that would be more comfortable for you."

He nods, "Much appreciated. I will get the texts requested. Feel free to ask for more when you are ready."

Good call on the humidity. I hate coming off as ugly guests.

I doubt we can avoid that. Apparently the reputation of our group proceeds us. I just hope it was not all bad.

Well, there is a Hu library and obvious effort shown to accommodate us.

Or isolate us. Yeah, that is what I am thinking too.

What are they trying to hide? Or is this just xenophobia?

The librarian returns with a book. Strange. It is circular and tied up with string.

"This is the Hu form of our standard introduction. It is made from an organic polymer that does not rot in the humid conditions that our kind prefers. I suspect you are more familiar with crude wood pulp versions?"

"And Ceph, Di, Rap, 'thant, Hu, Ku and Ba."

"Yesan, Tafa and related species also."

"You have indeed been many places. I was hatched here and have never left. I enjoy my service." Strange comment.

"Our writing is similar to Ceph in the round shape and circular way of writing on a waterproof substrate. Otherwise very different of course."

"Do you have something with the same phrases written in Hu and Sal?"

"Who told you we are the Sal?" He looks upset or angry, if I am reading the emotions correctly.

"Sorry, we meant no offense. Each of us has assumed many forms. We do not prejudice ourselves into thinking one is better than another." I assume a Hu form. Less intimidating at least. A large predator is probably not the best form to use here. I hate the Hu form, too restrictive, but I know it.

"That is the Hu designation for our kind. Not one we approved of. Our official term cannot be said by other sentients."

Rand hands, ~Is there a Ceph form you would prefer?~

Good thinking that a non-verbal language would be better.

"They are equally insulting. Just don't say anything. I will get the documents you requested. They are of limited value however." I bet they are.

We really are not wanted here. I wonder why? Drup asks.

You mean, what did Silver and Turtle do to them anyway? Rand smiles.

The Librarian brings two disks to us and sets them on the column we

are gathered around. One is in very, very tiny Hu and the other in a more fluid form I do not recognize. Is one really a translation of the other or is this a game. The 'Sal' disk is written on only one side.

"Clearly a better language. More compact Could you read some of it to us?" Drup hold the Sal disk to him.

"I cannot read or speak Sal. It is forbidden of me."

"So you really have no idea if this is the proper disk or not?"

"It is what I was told to hand to a Hu who asked for a translation of the Hu disk."

Rand has placed the Hu disk on a depression on top of the column. It enables one to turn the disk slowly while reading. A small stone, also present allows one to keep place. There is only one column present in the library section we are in. Of course.

He takes that disk out and puts the Sal disk in. He stares at it for some time. He holds up the stone marker examining it carefully. He then sets the stone precisely on a place on the disk, then while holding the stone in place, he turns the disk. His eyes open wide. Even the Librarian is watching intently.

"It is like an old fashioned Hu record that was made of plastic. I remember them from the archives. If this is any indication they do not have a written language as such."

"And a record may be played slow or fast depending on the time frame one is in."

I have memorized the Hu disks he first brought out. It might be time to do some sightseeing.

I bow to the Librarian, "Thank you for your time and help. We reserve the right to return more information after we have discussed what you have already presented us."

As we turn to go a guard comes in and chops off the head of the librarian.

Do not respond. They are looking for an excuse. We will TP outside. Not in here.

When we get out, we go back to our normal time frame. It is dark. Slow really meant slow then. There is no one else about.

"Is their entire world like this or did we just get lucky?"

"I know a place amphibians are not comfortable." Drup grins.

"Set the companions out to gather information in stealth mode. They did not ask to see the contents of our bags, yet they have TK."

"They might have just see a couple of spheres with no understanding what they really were."

"Here we go," he pops us to the south pole. It is winter here, but no glaciers to speak of. The stars are beautiful of course. No light pollution at least. The ocean is three hundred meters higher than on most of our worlds. They like it hot and humid or at least humid. I am guessing that their time frame adjusts with temperature. Even if they could survive here, they would be so slow as to be helpless. No other vertebrate life either. Nothing to eat unless they were willing to dive in very cold water.

A quick structure is made and we go inside. A couple of glow spheres are set up. We each make something to sit on.

I make a globe and suspend it in the air and set it to slowly turn.

"You will note that besides the much higher sea level, the continents are not the same. More like our Gondwanaland. We really are far off our time line. We stumbled on this place. How did Silver and Turtle find it and when?"

Drup adds, "Their tech is very low, first century Hu level. Yes, the sound disk was ingenious, but not high tech. I am guessing it was not an actual recording, but made. Understanding, yes, but not high tech. The material is actually a soft glass or ceramic. Easily etched with a diamond scribe."

"For all we know, that may be their only recording and Silver or Turtle could have made it."

"Why did they kill the Librarian though?"

"Simple enough. He admitted he had never heard Sal speech. If he had played the recording he would have. They are trying very hard to keep knowledge out of the wrong hands. Very hard."

"The files they did let us see emphasized the fact that there are over a thousand Sal languages. Rare than anyone knows more than one or two."

"Chinese syndrome. China had hundreds of dialects so the enemy could be easily spotted and could not understand what was being said."

"Could be. They are certainly paranoid as hell. As you Hu say."

"I am sensing no prisons or slave labor camps."

"There is only one punishment apparently."

"I have found their breeding ponds. They are like the Ceph, a huge number of eggs that are then culled upon hatching. They are used to death from the earliest age apparently."

"From their perspective, it is we who are barbaric, letting imperfect beings to continue to exist."

"Yet they know of and hate the Ceph too."

"They hate anything different is my guess. I suspect their culture has not changed in millions of years and then only minimally to changing cli-

mate."

"Besides, given their time frame handicap, a sentient carnivorous octopus with eight independently controlled arms would be their idea of the ultimate demon."

"But they are so cute!" Rand says.

"All babies are cute Rand, even Sal babies I am sure." Drup adds with a sigh.

"I wish we could question Silver and Turtle about them."

"They may have never been here. All a ruse to avoid admitting they had never met them. It would be a sign of weakness."

"What level TK were they really? TP and DS, but what else?"

"The distance from the shore to their library complex would indicate at least a three. No idea what the third gift would be though."

I smile, "And having three nines around . . ."

"No wonder they wanted us gone. On the other hand they do not know we weren't lying either." I nod.

"I really think we can find somewhere more interesting though. I hate totalitarian cultures." We all nod.

Mars

All of this is very scary for me. I chose to stay here, on Mars, where ever here is now, instead of joining the Hu and others. Their worlds seemed so chaotic. The constant pursuit of fame, fortune and power makes no sense to me. Each of their worlds is now in trouble of their own sen's making. It is possible that the TKs were partly responsible, but I believe it was inevitable. We may eventually suffer a similar fate. We were originally of Hu stock. We are hoping to forestall that fate by following the monastery model. Even evidence in Hu history supports this idea. Our entire Mars species depends on our getting it right.

I guess in the end, you do your best and accept the outcome. I don't like it however. It may be one of the reasons I do not like being the leader here, why I let others make decisions. I am so afraid of making a mistake. It is crippling me. My biggest fear of course is of going rogue. Not likely for a nine, but are Martians the same in this regard? It would be so easy to destroy all of this in a fit of panic. This is one of the reasons I spend so much time alone. Being alone gives me peace. It might be best if I left. I could join the others at Farout or set out on my own. Alone would be good.

^MWe are ready for the next move.^M

^MHas the Council agreed unanimously?^M

^MYes.^M I sigh, it would have been easier to stay here. But is here safe?

When I enter the chamber where we will link, Persi asks me, ^MRon, how do you stay so calm? The rest of us are scared to death.^M

^MGood muscle control I guess.^M If they only knew.

We gather together in the silent chamber. Concentration is key for this to work.

Everyone is in lock down deep underground. Chambers are sealed.

Buoys are in place and the two sisters are above us.

This will be just like the first time, only a farther distance in D space. It will take longer, but otherwise should feel the same. Empty your minds and let's begin.

We have no real sense of time when linked and traveling. Was it a moment or years.

We emerge out the other side. To where? We have the TK maps, but we are purposely trying for someplace not on the maps. We don't want to be found. We know now from the first trail jump that each multiverse is at least slightly different. We expect this location to be a lot different.

We were not disappointed. It would have been better if we were.

System checks. Everyone check in.

All sectors reporting. No problems. That's good at least. No one went rogue. I worry about the threes during these moves. If anyone is unsure, we limit them until we emerge. Some just go right to sleep rather than experience the disorientation of D space.

^MThe Sisters are missing.^M

^MNot surprising they would be in a different location.^M

^MNo, they are missing. Not anywhere above us.^M

There is a pause. All of us in the room scan above us. An eight can easily scan for them.

^MDefinitely missing. How far did we go?^M

^MThe buoys are missing too, if anyone is curious.^M

^MOkay, everyone has their assignments. Let's find out what's here and where we are in this system.^M

I remain to watch over Mars while the others zip around the system to see if the other planets are where they are expected. Most importantly, one, are we in a good orbit that can sustain our life. And second, what is on the earth in this system? We don't want surprises. Earth is the most likely to spawn a sentient that could harm us. I discount the magmotics of course. They have no interest in us. Or they have not in the past.

I pop to the surface. The air outside is breathable. The temperature seems okay, but it would take awhile for that to change. Even a subtle change in orbit can have implications in the long run. We are prepared to make fixes in our orbit, but at least for now we are okay. The two sisters missing means that they likely never achieved orbit on the Mars we replaced or they crashed into it. Fortunately, unlike earth, they have no real influence on us. More aesthetic. Still I will miss them. The Big Sister was a nice place to be alone. It was simple to make a small space inside for quiet time.

I am sitting in the garden when Persi returns.

^MAsteroid belt is missing. There is a large stone planet there now. It is close enough to likely have an influence on our orbit. Jupiter is where we expect it to be at least.^M

^MAt least a wobble for us then. The Two Sisters might have been captured remnants of that planet broken up.^M

^MMakes sense. Am I the first back?^M I nod. She takes a seat and we contemplate the garden.

Two more come in, ^MWe are too far out. We need to move closer or we will freeze.^M

^MWe will wait until everyone returns. We have some time. Persi found a large rock world where the asteroid belt should be. It likely moved us further out. We will solve two problems by moving closer to the star.^M I can't call it the sun. Not our sun.

The others come back.

^MMercury is gone. Likely got too close to the star. Venus is a little further out. There is life there. Hotter than our earth. Only the poles are really livable. The equator is a desert.^M

^MEarth looks nothing like anything we know. The continents are all wrong. There is life, but nothing we have ever seen or imagined. We weren't there long enough to determine sentience. There seems to be social groupings, but we have seen that in flocks of birds. No tech to speak of and no TK sensed.^M

^MSo, with a few minor fixes this can work right?^M Ha-ha Persi. The others show amusement too.

^MLook, we were looking for a new home system where we were unlikely to be found. We have a choice of two new worlds we can explore and possibly colonize. I think we have found it. Looks good to me.^M

^MLet us never loose sight of our purpose.^M I add to the discussion.

^MThe Question. We can't work on The Question if we are not safe.^M

The others agree. The question is, can they resist the temptation? In the Earth One system, we had no choices. We had changed so much we could not survive anywhere but Mars. But here . . .

The question for me, is do I stay and help or do I take my leave and let them work with their choice. The other high TKs left their worlds to figure it out themselves. The general consensus was TKs were not a positive. We stifle change more than allow it. I wanted us to be safe. But safety does not answer The Question. It prevents it.

I could leave for a time, then check in? Or not. They still have eight TK8s. You don't become a nine without a 'thn mating or by figuring it out yourself like I did, as did most of the other high TKs in the High Council, where ever they are now. They will need to adjust the orbit of Mars, but that is a short skip and the eights can take care of it. I am not needed.

Cyan

"My voice sounds really weird."

"These bodies are really weird. I thought Hu were weird, but you should see yourself now."

"I suspect that I look something like you. Ha-ha."

Hek and I try to examine our new forms. Apparently we do not have gender any longer. Nothing there if those things are even legs. We have extra arms. Water and food go in separate locations and come out in separate locations. We have eyes at the end of each of our seven arms, just above the walking/grasping pads. At the end of each arm is seven 'fingers' that are all equal. It is easy to grasp things and climb. Organs seem to extend into the arms, so the main body is not that large relatively. Our voices come out ports between the arms. Yeah, we can sing in harmony if we can learn how that works.

"I think our brains, if you can call them that, are distributed into the arms as well. I can suck water from any arm, but food only goes in the port at the top. Poo leaves from the underside of the main body, by squatting."

"Any idea what we are supposed to eat? Are we carnivores, vegetarians or omnivores? Are some things poisonous to us? Dangerous?"

"We need to find others of our kind and watch them I think."

"Have you noticed how well we blend into the surroundings? How the rotted rat are we supposed to find them?"

"You have a valid point. Remind me why we volunteered for this and why us?"

"I think I missed that meeting. All I know is we are disposable. The Hu used to have a term called a 'red shirt' to indicate in a story ahead of time the ones likely to die."

"Well, we are not red. I think. Who knows how color works with these eyes."

"Oh, that is a nice smell. Ah, where is my nose exactly?"

Pay attention you two. You have not been abandoned. Stop speaking. We will find a local to learn the language. Be patient please.

Where is the one who Tpd us? Guano, they could be anywhere on the planet.

I am right next to you. Be quiet please. I need to think.

I thought that was Hek. Captain Esi?

Shhh!

How do I keep my mind quiet? Suddenly I fall asleep. No dreams which is weird.

When I come to there are three of us together.

"What happened?"

"Shhh!" Not again.

A fourth creature comes up to us.

When it sounds, it sounds like a Ku chorus all singing different things at once.

It says welcome. How may it be of assistance?

I will now give you the same language ability.

Ow, that hurts! I can't say I have a headache as I don't have a head now. The pain fades quickly though.

Can you understand me now?

"Yes!"

Speak Cyan Jfi.

Ah, yes, I can understand you.

I can as well. Thank you.

Sorry Hek. Forgot about you.

Jfi, it is so beautiful to speak this way. Rap are not known for their aesthetic sense, but never having been a Rap of course, I cannot know.

Ah hum, we should be paying attention to our instructor and guide. There is a lot more to a culture besides communication by sound.

My tone name is Tahahi, you may sound me Ta until you become more proficient.

Hello Ta! I jump in. I am so excited.

Shhh! That is going to become annoying Captain. We did not choose this assignment. We are not high TKs like you.

Shhh!

Aaaaaaaaaah!

*My understanding is you call this world Cyan. That will do for now. We do not call this place anything other than home. Our kind have been here for millions of turns around this star. We are fully integrated into the local ecology. This is a requirement should you decide to stay. Not negotiable.

Yes, our kind were sent here by the 'thn, same as you. Yes, we did something they did not approve of, which we have long ago forgotten. No, they have not threatened to destroy our world since our arrival. We have been well behaved since coming here.

Having learned briefly of your own history from Esi please know we will be strict and will ban you and your kind if your presence here be-

comes a problem. With new sentients come new ideas. Not all ideas will be accepted. Most won't in fact. This is not a judgment on your thoughts and ways, but a reflection on how we have come to understand our existence and choose to live it. You are of course free to leave if this does not work for you.*

Captain, then why did you choose the two of us? We are horrible at following rules.

*It is unlikely we will be allowed to stay, or even want to, but their knowledge base is extensive and we can learn much from the Cyan.

Even out here we still have one primary goal.

*To serve The Question.**Ta does a kind of bow when this last was sounded.

We also serve The Question. It is good to understand you do as well. We may have more in common than would be obvious from first impressions.

Esi adds, *Diversity is one of the tools in The Quest.*

Ta, you do not seem upset by our presence. You have had other visitors? Have any of them staid? Do you have TK?

Jfi is the curious one Ta. I apologize for her impertinence.

Better to be curious and learn a truth than not and commit a sin.
Guano, I will never survive here.

Others have tried, none have succeeded. Yes, we know of TK, but it is of little use to us. Because of how we live, we are immortal. Fear of death, a common starting point for sentients, is meaningless here.

Hek comes in, *Surely accidents happen. Beings die.*

Of course, but we live. It is of no consequence. Huh?

Esi comes in with, *This will become clear as our studies progress.*
But you already know.

Captain, we are the test subjects to see how the rest might react. I do not phrase it as a question and she does not answer it.

Ta asks, *How many are you?*

Esi answers, *With this group we are about 300000 base 7, which I believe is how you number items.*

This would mean that one million years base 7 is really about 118K in base 10. Significantly less, but still a lot. Just barely evolutionary time if that happens here at the same rate. Let's say 300K to be safe.

First you need to learn how to find food. All creatures must feed unless they are plants of course. Our food is the mema gourd. It is all we need. In return we help it grow and do well.

*May I ask how you maintain your numbers? All life seeks to increase

its kind after their own fashion.*

We are in total control of our numbers. We gain more when needed and prevent more when not.

How does an immortal species do that?

Is not your own species sensitive about issues surrounding reproduction? We are the same. If you decide to become one of us, you will be given the necessary information. Now to the mema gourds. Follow me. I know where there is a patch nearing ripeness.

There are no paths. It would seem our primary means of locomotion is grabbing trees and vines and using them to move towards an objective. Not unlike the ancestors of the Hu apparently. The ground itself is usually avoided. We are not the only species that produces waste that gravity sends to the forest floor. Ba, Rap and Ku did the same before civilization took hold. Rap and Ku would never eat with their hind feet of course. The Ba lived in trees and cliffs where this was not a concern.

Something smells wonderful! Hek exclaims, but I can smell it too.

Ta, your kind did not evolve on this world, so how did you come to be so closely aligned with it?

And that is why she is the Captain. Although technically she is not a she in the form. This is confusing.

We worked with a local form that had potential and like you three, we moved into this form and took up permanent residence. And the beings that originally held the form?

Do not ask this question Jfi. All species have their dark sides.

I have been around TPs for years now. Still creepy when they do that. But we did not kill a resident, we made copies.

Shhh!

This is a mema tree as you understand the term. Three fruits are picked. *This is a ripe one, this one is unripe and this one is rotting. Each of you now needs to find another one of each to present to me for inspection. A warning, eating either an unripe one or a rotten one will cause much pain.*

A good incentive to learn then. Guano.

They all look the same. They are passed around. It is only when I have one in a hand that I start to notice the differences. Our 'hands' have taste receptors in the pads! We smell through our hands! I carefully inspect each fruit in turn, but it becomes obvious. There is almost no smell from the unripe one and the rotting one smells horrible.

Each of us climbs over the tree searching for the three we need. The lower ones are more likely to be unripe and the ones on the ground or way up at the top, nearly out of reach, dangerously so, are more likely to

be rotten.

Hek and I pass the test easily. Esi seems to be having trouble.

You are too dependent on your special gifts. Let go of these and use your Cyan given gifts. Only they will save you from pain. Please try again Esi.

This is why you two are here. I knew I would have this problem and this is proof. You are adapting much faster than I am.

While Esi is looking, I will show you two how to eat a mema and our responsibility after we have eaten one.

We have three fingers with claw like projections at the end of each arm. Ta examines her gourd then carefully scores the fruit in three places at once with one arm. It unfolds and reveals a multitude of kernels of almost transparent jelly like fruit. She holds the open gourd with one hand and carefully scoops out the jelly kernels with another and brings them up to her mouth at the top of her form. I am sorry I am calling her a she, but our writing does not allow for a non-gender form. Maybe it is because all of us were formerly fem too.

Do not eat all of the kernels and do not drop the remaining gourd. Please attempt this yourselves.

I do not trust her. I suspect it is some kind of trick. Hek immediately scores her fruit without examining it and it refuses to open. She tries again, making more and more of a mess of it. She does manage to get some kernels out of it, but wastes most of them.

I examine my carefully and notice a pattern of very fine ridges in three locations. Do I score on the ridges or between them. I cheat and scan Hek's and Ta's fruit. Between the ridges, as close to the center as you can get.

I get it right the first time and Hek taps me on my carapace to tease me.

Jfi is the smart one here. I am better in a fight.

Both can be useful in the correct circumstance. We are both predator on this fruit, but also prey, which you will learn about later. We are safe for the time being. Go ahead and eat your fruit Jfi.

I place some in my mouth. I get no taste sensation at all. I can feel the texture and I can certainly feel it entering my form, but no other sensation.

Taste is only on our hand pads. Interesting. This tells me never place something in the mouth I have not examined first with my hand pads. I cannot find the Cyan word for gloves. I now understand why. Could be lethal. Painful at least.

Esi comes up with her three newly chosen fruits and offers them to Ta who refuses to accept them.

Open them and taste them, remember which you thought was which.

This is the unripe one I think. She attempts to open it. There is much difficulty. She finally succeeds and immediately drops it.

Horribly bitter. For our species, bitter usually means poisonous. My hand is going numb in fact.

Using another arm, she opens the overripe one.

This one just tastes horrible, oh guano, it is full of hallucinogens.

She wobbles for a moment. I scan her and can see the molecules in this hand start to attach to receptors. She immediately removes them using her own TK and recovers.

Very fast acting. That was close.

She opens her last one and drops it.

Guano. Jfi, let me taste yours so I know what to search for.

I hand her my partially consumed one. She hands it back and searched the tree again. She decides, picks one and opens it correctly.

Got it this time. Very nice. I will certainly never pick one of the others ever again.

Ta, it would seem that both the unripe and rotten fruits could be of use against a predator. Do you make use of this information.

Very good Jfi. That will be left for the advanced class however.

Hek pays very close attention and examines hers more closely.

I can scan and see the molecules in question. She cannot. Score another one for the Ku. Her ability to DS will be a huge help against a predator however. My talents do not make me better, just different.

Now hold your remnant ripe fruit gourd and follow me.

This means we are navigating with only six arms instead of seven, but does not seem to slow us down any. I am starting to get the knack.

Esi drops hers, but then DSs it back to her hand, hoping no one notices. I never thought of TK as a handicap. Come to think of it most of the chores I was given were not TK chores. It was too confusing for the bosses to remember which sentient had which gifts I guess.

We reach the edge of the forest. There is open pasture and meadows in the distance. Our eyes do not focus well that far out. We are designed for more close work. Not a good defense against a predator, but in the dense forest maybe this is not a concern.

We each plant our remnant in a suitable location, defecate into the hole, cover it again and then reenter the forest proper.

Of course, you would not do this one gourd at a time. You will need to learn how to transport five or six gourds at a time.

We get back to our original location.

*This is your territory. No other Cyans will intrude. The gourd fruit trees that I have shown you are yours to maintain and feed from.

Predators hunt at night. They cannot climb very high in the trees here. You need to get high up to avoid them.

I am leaving you now to return to my own community. I will return when I feel you have learned what you can from this location.*

She leaves, rapidly. We were downright slugs by comparison. It is getting dark fast. All of us can scan, so I would not have thought of this as a concern before. I was wrong.

We are definitely prey and the size range of predators is huge.

I was never so happy to see a sunrise in my life, even if it is from the very top of a tree swaying in the wind in a body form that is crazy different from anything any of us have known.

Crab Cove

"Macaco, Flora, time for a story!" Those two rascals. Always off somewhere avoiding chores.

I prepare the evening meal. A simple affair of vegetables, roots, and beans. It will simmer for several eighths over a low fire. I look at the wood pile. Low again. Those kids do not have many chores, but keeping the wood pile stocked is one of them. Ah, and the root bin. That is low again too.

I go to the edge of the forest. They love playing in the forest. They fantasize about the times of old, when wizards and brutes ruled the land. First one then the other came through our land. The brutes of course destroy and the wizards attempt to make things right again. Good versus evil, a story for all time.

I suppose I should enjoy this time. They will grow up soon enough, start their own families, choose their own work. I will live out my days in a chair on the porch just as my parents would have before me. They died too young, in the last sickness to pass through our village. The older ones always seem to be the most vulnerable.

I hear voices. Out of the forest comes my husband and the two rascals, each holding one of his hands. Macaco is holding the small ax that was given to him on his last birthday. Hard to believe he is ten years old already. Flora was born a year later much to the surprise of everyone. It is normally four or five years between births among us. Flora is carrying what looks like a book. I have not seen one in ages.

Ray says, "We found a gift for you Mother." He nudges Flora who reluctantly hands it to me.

"It's mine. I found it." She says defiantly.

Ray nudges her, "What did we discuss about owning things Flora?"

"There are no owners, only users. Well, I am a user then."

I speak to her, "Really, then you can tell me what it is and how to use it then."

"It's a book. It is used to do book things." Evading the question.

Ray adds, "We were digging out the cellar for Dane and Marjorie. This popped up and I asked Flora to retrieve it for me."

"And that was the point she declared she owned it without even knowing what it was." He nods smiling. Must be the stage she is going through.

"Macaco owns an ax, why can't I own a book? It's not fair."

"Macaco, do you own the ax you are carrying?"

He looks at Flora, who sticks out her tongue at him, "No Mother. It was given into my care until someone more worthy needed it."

Ray adds, "A book is like an ax. It will outlive all of us and needs to be cared for so generations from now someone else may use it. We have a sacred duty as you know. Mother will teach you how to read it, as is the way of Mothers, as I have taught Macaco how to use an ax, and when she is ready she will give it to you to care for until you too will teach and pass it on to another. Neither the ax nor this book are items to be owned by anyone."

"Something smells good," Macaco says to distract attention away from his sister. It won't be done for eighths and I can barely smell it myself.

"And you two have chores to do. The wood pile in the kitchen is low and the root cellar needs to be restocked. Off, both of you. We will have supper and a story later if you finish your chores."

"From the book?" Flora asks of course.

"We will see. Now off."

Once they are gone, Ray looks over my shoulder, "Looks very old. Not paper either. At least not like anything we make."

"Our paper rarely lasts more than a few years before the bugs or mold get to it." I feel the pages, "Not skin either." We use skins for our long term records, and even these need to be copied every generation to insure the knowledge still lives.

I have trouble recognizing the words until suddenly I understand.

"This was written in Old Standard, from the before times. This is a treasure beyond understanding. This book is worth more than ten villages, a hundred. It must be protected."

"You mean hidden, like it was before we found it."

"Maybe. First we need to know the knowledge it contains. There might be something in here than can help us now."

"And anything useful should be copied to our own records before we hide it again." I nod yes.

"Flora cannot be allow to touch or more it from now on. She is not old enough to understand its importance and likely lose it or destroy it by accident."

Ray smiles, "She is awfully good at that."

I snort, "Takes after her father in that way." Ray looks offended, but I know he is only being silly. He wraps his arm around my waist as we go inside to my desk.

There I open the book carefully. It is unlike any material I have ever seen. Experimentally I try to tear a tiny corner and cannot. I remove a knife from my pocket and try to cut it.

"Mother, what are you doing? Flora was bad enough, not you too!"

"Relax Ray, it will not tear nor will it cut. This is likely thousands of years old."

"You mean from the before times . . ." I nod.

"Can you read it?"

"Barely. I will have to write it down as I figure it out. So far all I know is that is a journal or diary of experiences by at least one individual."

"Journal, like in wizards and brutes type of journal?" I nod.

"Shit, I thought that was all myths and stories to get kids to behave."

"And learn. There is always a lesson to be learned from each story."

"Of course. I meant that too. I will get you some paper and soot ink so you can begin. I can take care of the two monsters so you can work."

"Don't tell anyone else in the village for now. There are a few who might want to take it for the attention it would bring them."

"I understand and agree. They will see the translated pages soon enough. We each have our duties and this one is yours. No one should question that." This is the reason he brought it home instead of taking it to someone else. He takes off to help the kids with the chores while he does his own. We each have a role and tasks to perform.

Turns out not to be that easy. There are terms for which we do not have a modern word, or it does not exist any longer. I leave the original term in brackets for now. Maybe some librarian after me will figure it out. This is a find for generations. Just no idea if it will ever be important. I am certainly not finding anything immediately useful like I had hoped. It is not a how-to book, just someone's story. May turn out to be no more than a curiosity. There is a reason we listen to stories though. There is always something hidden in them to teach us.

It is getting late and I have chores too. I get up and stir the pot. It is ready. I set out the bowls and spoons. I can hear them washing up at the stream. There is wood at the pile and the root cellar is at least half full again. More after harvest of course. A little early for that at the moment.

We eat and everyone is dying to know what I have found so far, but are polite and wait until story time. The time we gather around the dying light when other tasks cannot be done.

I will not attempt to read my notes, that would be confusing at the moment.

"In a land far away, a very long time ago, there lived a young man

named Andi. He was not the smartest or the strongest, but he had a kind heart and helped wherever he could. A trait we could all use."

"Were there dragons?" Macaco asks of course.

"Sorry, no mention of dragons."

"Were their wizards?" Flora asks.

"Would you like me to stop right here or do you want to wait and hear the story." I remember these years when I too was the impatient one.

When all is quiet I begin again.

"He lived in a small village, very much like ours. He loved to play with gadgets and dobobs and was always taking things apart to see how they worked. Unfortunately he was not always able to put them together again. Unfortunately, he did not just take things apart that belonged to him or his family.

As a consequence, he needed to spend a lot of time doing chores of the worst kind for others to compensate for the damage he had done. This meant, along with his normal chores he worked from sunrise to sunset and only ate two meals a day, both cold by the time he got to them. He did not complain though. He knew he had done wrong, he just could not help it.

To keep him out of mischief, people started to give him things to work on that were already broken. Eventually what he took apart he was able to put back together again. He even sometimes fixed it or made it better. He became so good that he could let others do his normal chores and he became the village fixer."

"Like Aunt May?"

"Yes, like Aunt May."

"I wish I could fix anything. I don't want to be stuck with my monkey name the rest of my life."

Ray states the obvious, "There does seem to be some resemblance between you and Andi. Wonder if they called him Macaco too?"

"Ah hum." Ray makes monkey faces at our son.

Everyone quiets down again. I give Ray an evil look, he was not helping. He smiles and shrugs. We were lucky to get together. He was part of a village swap to ensure healthy offspring. I was lucky to attract his eye. It was not so much of a romance as an agreement. We came to love each other in time and neither of us has any complaints. The secret is to let each other be themselves. Couples who insist the other conform to their own ideas never work.

"Andi's village, as with most villages, had visitors from time to time. Some people do not adapt well to a structured life and prefer the freedom

of the open road, of seeing new people and new horizons.

One day an old wanderer came to the village offering rare herbs and concoctions to relieve various maladies. He was dressed in all gray and was very gray himself. He was nondescript and no one could tell from where he came.

Andi of course was attached to him. He followed him around the entire time he was there. The two spent countless hours discussing the world and the old one enjoyed seeing all the devices that Randy had worked on. He seemed to be impressed with what he had done.

Having exhausted his supply of herbs and potions the old one left to continue his adventure. He took an old path out of the village that no one used any more. He had said there were some valuable herbs up there he needed to find.

The interesting thing, is that except for food and a warm place to rest he asked nothing more of the villagers."

"What happened then? Who was he?"

"No one at the village ever knew. In time Andi grew in age and wisdom to be a fine young man. Just as in our time, people were chosen from time to time to mix up those available for forming families. He volunteered much to the dismay of the others, for they had become dependent on his abilities. However, it was his right and they let him go. They would receive someone in return, from who knows where. He had caught the wander lust from the old man it would appear."

"Is that the end? What happened then?"

"I believe it is time for all of us to rest. We have a long day tomorrow."

"Oh please!" The both chanted in unison. And old trick that would not work this time. I needed to decipher more before I could tell them more, unless I just made it up, which I would never do. Even the old stores I tell as accurately as they were told to me. A librarian is chosen as much for their memories and for their ability to read and write.

Once bedded, Ray and I make our way in the dark to our space. He begins to try and get my attention.

I whisper, "I don't think I will be able to have a third after all this time."

"Who said anything about a third. We have a large enough handful keeping these two out of trouble. After that story they will both volunteer for the exchange now."

"I know. I was worried about that, especially for Macaco. His sister is smarter, but he likes adventure not chores. I am afraid we will lose him."

"You got me. That has not been so bad was it?" I tickle him in response and so the game began. I am past my time, but practicing is still fun is it not?

Where Are We?

Bugs! We are freaking Bugs? Who made this decision again? I am grossing myself out just looking at myself.

Relax, we do not have total control over the process. This form fit the criteria.

At least we have our TK.

Okay, how do we eat?

What do we eat?

Time to get moving. The sun waits for no one.

A sliver touches my back leg. No shit. It burns. I start running. Well, more of a tripping wobble.

Use subtle TK if you have to. The sun will kill you.

Turtle, how come you are so much bigger than us?

Because she is the queen and we serve her you idiot.

One fem and a hundred males. Weird.

More specifically, you are an egg tender. I will explain your roles as we go along. Most of you are protectors and foragers. Puu and Cat are advance scouts.

Are we really going to reproduce?

Of course not, but we have to blend with the locals. We will make some fake eggs and larvae if we have to. Now move it!

We run until I think we are going to die.

I eat bugs, why am I one then? And a male! I hate males. George is now beside me and is clearly not liking it either.

Welcome to my world. Well not my world. Welcome to my gender. At least you do not need to lay eggs like the queen.

Anything to stop running. I need a nap. Now!

Keep it down back there and do catch up please.

Yes captain!

If you would prefer to be feed stock for the larvae that can be arranged. Better luck on your next incarnation.

And miss all the fun?

I hope he does not mean that. Being eaten alive is not my idea of fun either. Do we have pain receptors inside us like the Hu?

So, what job did you get George?

A protector of course.

Of course.

We are the last ones into camp. We are directed to a feeding area.

Most are nearly done.

No bowls or utensils.

Welcome to my world monkey. George of course. She, I guess he now, digs right in, wolfing it down like it is chocolate.

I taste it with whatever it is in the place of my mouth. How do I work these things. I scan a few around me and figure it out. Not bad. Would make sense that we would have evolved to like our food at least.

You will want water too. I am led to a nearby stream. The water is ice cold, but feels good after the running.

Training. Pay attention. We will split you into groups. And before anyone asks, we do not sleep, ever. We will be running, eating or training. Period. Get used to it. George is going to have a hissy fit. I try to smile, but the mouth parts don't work that way.

Brooders, with me. Myra yells. How can I understand that? I move towards her ah, him. This is confusing.

I hear other groups being called out and as protectors are called I see George move reluctantly towards Silver. Good luck my friend.

Listen up Mouse. You need to learn this well enough for others to believe you have been doing this your entire life. Any slip up will encourage other group to attack us as weak. We won't be, but we want to minimize our impact here.

What are we waiting for? When do we leave?

First, that has not been determined. And second, this is your form for the rest of this incarnation. You will eat, breathe and live Bug for the rest of your time. Embrace it. Be it. That gets some chittering.

She pulls out a very large egg sphere. I am guessing it is an egg. Whoa, the inside even has an embryo in it. It moves!

We have enough for each of you to practice with one. Please come up and receive one from me. Once you have your egg, you are totally responsible for it. You will only receive an egg from me and no one else. NO ONE goes near the queen except me. Any one who tries will be killed instantly, no questions asked. We protect the queen at all costs and your life is a trivial cost. Any deviation will make us appear weak. Shit.

Myra demonstrates how to hold the egg on our backs. I am not proud, I step forward.

Hold up your middle legs and I will pass it to you. I do so and she moves the egg quickly to my outstretched legs. I nearly drop it, but manage a save.

Drop an egg and you die. You are not worth feeding. Shit. I grasp the egg as hard as I can, even fearing breaking it.

You need to rotate the egg as we travel so the embryo does not get stuck to the shell. She grabs another egg and demonstrates.

While in camp, I will collect the eggs from you and place them into what is called a nest. You are responsible for your egg and only your egg unless I tell you otherwise. You will guard the nest with your life.

I practice rolling my egg. It actually comes instinctively if I forget to pay attention. Thank goodness.

We are not protectors, how do we guard the nest?

I am starting to understand Bug expressions and Myra looks pissed.

With your life. In the event of an attack, you will cover your egg with your body, even if it is being eaten. Understand, this is a last ditch effort. It will mean all of the protectors are dead already. A bug eat bug world.

Each is handed an egg in turn. Immediately it is announced we are moving again. No rest to speak of. If I thought running with six legs was hard, running with four and an awkward egg on top is worse.

A few do drop their eggs and Myra is all over them of course. No one is eaten, for now. We are still in the practice stages.

There is a rumor that we are at the back of the continuous pilgrimage. This is the safest place in terms of being preyed upon by other bug troops, but puts us forever at the risk of being burned by the sun. Food is pretty well picked over as well. Our troop of a hundred is small fortunately and we can survive, barely, on the remnants. Anyone who finds a dead bug, egg or larvae raises the call and we all feast on it. Nothing is wasted. Even the smaller critters who usually get there first are caught and consumed. Enough get away to reproduce.

The plants are going dormant and many have already seeded. We can eat the seeds too, but are careful not to eat them all in any one location or there will be no food next time we pass here. Most of the critters have already borrowed deep underground to pass through the sun time. Though the sun is intense and burns any life on the surface, this is a frozen world with a solid core. Get far enough down in the well established borrow systems and you can survive. I scan and even find pools of water below us, frozen now, but will likely thaw during the warming.

This is a harsh world, but it works. I will admit I skimmed the chapters pertaining to the last time Silver and Turtle were here. This is not the same incarnation. That means changes. Not everything will be predictable or routine. But it is our life for now and we need to adapt.

Myra comes up to me, *Mouse, you are adapting well.*

*Even as a Hu it was a necessary skill. I am not squeamish about eat-

ing bugs, nor in being one. If I let my form do what it was designed for, it works. Thinking is the problem. It is easier to just be.*

Good insight I will pass it on to the others. I did something right for a change.

We eventually come to a new temporary nest site. It is clear another group have been here before us. Bug poo everywhere. The sun will bake it will and then the rain, snow and cold will make it into what the plants need. The cycle will repeat.

We are circled around the nest when the protectors come up to us led by Silver. Interestingly they appear to have weapons. I knew this was a sentient species, so I should not be surprised, but everything to this point could have been handled by any colony insect.

These are the brooders. They are your responsibility. You will feed them, you will care for them, and most of all, you will protect them with your life. Form no attachments. You protect them all. Even if there is only one of you left, you protect them all. Understood?

Sir, yes sir! They shout back. I have to laugh inside. George must be in hell. Then I notice him. He has more armor than the rest. What is that about. I look around and notice several others with this outfit. Each appears to be in charge of six others. George is a Sargent! Good for him.

If you ever see a brooder mistreat their egg, you are to kill them instantly. They would endanger the entire troop otherwise. Shit. George smiles at me. He will be watching.

Silver turns to us, *Similarly, if you ever see a protector approach the eggs or embryos, you will sacrifice yourself to protect the brood. Your mandibles have a poison that will kill instantly, but you only get one chance before you will likely be killed in turn.* This just keeps getting better and better. George does not look so superior now though.

It is really simple. Survival of the colony is paramount. There are parasites that can infect anyone and cause them to turn. An egg is a high nutrient source of calories, proteins, etc. A parasite infecting anyone will cause it to consume an egg or embryo so the parasite can reproduce inside the infected one.

That will not happen to any one here. We may set up test bugs so that anyone watching will see we know how to respond to a parasitic infection. None of these scenarios will be a surprise. This is not a test for us, but for anyone watching.

Also explains why we bothered learning Bug speak.

I am not really seeing anything here that would qualify as a sentient activity. No tech, books, stories even. We can think, but what of the oth-

ers?

Lizat comes up to me, *Are we on Bug One or Two?*

Huh?

Probably does not matter. Just wondered if the Tunnel exists here. I have not been able to find it. There are partial tunnels all over, but I am not seeing connections.

Oh yeah, the Tunnel. That would be nice to find. I will search as well. Thanks for the reminder. Maybe the completed network has not happened here yet. We are in a new incarnation after all.

Could be. Maybe we are the ones intended to bring it about. We need a complete map then. Something to do while running at least.

I also want to know where on this world we are in relation to the axis. Closer to a pole means less running, but less food. Closer to the equator means lots of food, but near constant running. When I scan I find more of the troops somewhere in the middle. Probably not a surprise. We are a little closer to a pole thank goodness. This constant running is getting to me. I take after George more than I like to admit.

Move out! The sun is coming for us.

I hoist my egg, give a gentle turn and start the march.

Silver comes up to me. Isn't he in charge of the protectors. Why me?

What the hey, I ask, **I wonder why we have not encountered any others.**

The last troop on this track died. Being on an abandoned track is a good way to get used to this forms, even if resources are few.

You mean because we are too close to a pole? I suspect any troop on this track has a higher likely hood of that happening.

Another reason we do not have to worry about anyone else wanting it.

All of us can supplement as needed. Of course they do not know that and will find a very fit troop awaiting them if they try.

Are you saying we need to practice Bug war too?

Maybe. We will see. Likely we would need to be the attackers though.

Lizat asked about the Tunnel you and the others found in the other incarnation. She suspects we will be responsible for connecting the pieces to make it happen this time.

Very good observation indeed. He leaves quickly. No egg makes it way easier for him. He is talking to others. A good leader listens to his troops.

And I thought being Ba was interesting. Oh well. My friends are here and it is new and exciting for the moment. Can't ask for more than that.

Move it Brooder, you are falling behind. George of course. Sigh,
nothing changes.

Beijing Monastery

Half the Janes are pregnant now. The other half elected to be helpers, aunts as they used to be called. Even a mother needs a break and we all still need to work to grow food and maintain our home. Not to mention defend it. It would seem that some of our previous existence did transfer. We are excellent warriors, especially with sharp objects. The TKs left us a good stash of metals and the means to work it. No one messes with us.

Getting pregnant was an interesting experience. We snuck into town pretending to be pleasure girls. It did not really matter who the father was, we seem to reproduce parthogenetically. We need the male to spark the process, but they contribute nothing to the offspring. The daughter, and it is always a daughter, looks like the mother. This would suggest we need to trade off having a child so each of us passes our subtle differences down to the next generation.

I am at the training ground now. Being pregnant does not stop my work until near the birth itself. We never know when we might be attacked. Many are jealous of our wealth. No one is starving. All are healthy, which of course is because of our genetics and nothing we did to deserve it. Our monastery is comfortable enough, though not wealthy compared to some in the towns.

We wear simple robes that no one would envy. Our weapons do not look special and show wear. We all go armed at all times. We all practice daily. We are always looking to improve our methods and means. We have become experts in poisons, hallucinogens, smoke and flame. Explosives turned out to be relatively easy, if we were careful. Yes, of course, there have been some accidents. We only let someone who has given birth to work with poisons or explosives. Their replacement is assured.

I bow to my sparing partner and begin. We are fast and the spies, which we know are present, leave humbled. All part of the game. Unlike our past selves, we do not seek out trouble. We harm no one who leaves us alone. We do not hire out to do other people's harm. The latter is what annoys the rich and powerful the most. They can't handle the fact that such an excellent weapon is beyond their grasp. Of course they fear us too. What is to stop us from coming after them? They know they are guilty of doing harm to their own, they know we could stop them.

We don't though. The TKs impressed on us the need for each culture to figure it out themselves. We do not interfere. Ultimately it is hoped that the Hu will figure it out and progress to the next level of sentience. The

fact that we had not is what got the 'thn interested in our destruction in the first place. They knew the only reason Hu still existed was because the TKs kept cleaning up their errors. No more. Sink or swim. It is a hard, but necessary lesson.

All have seen someone addicted to alcohol. It is terrible. But no amount of punishment, pleading, ostracizing will turn them from this path to destruction. It is only when they decide for themselves they want to change, that healing can begin. Well, the Hu are addicts to power, to wealth, to sex and especially pleasure. Until they decide to change, no amount of effort from the outside will affect the ultimate outcome. This is of course true of most animals. Two bucks will bash each other's brains out to get to a doe. But, how can you claim to be sentient if you are the same?

We do allow some to come to us for instruction. Usually a young adult fem seeking a change from the madness they see around them everyday in the villages. It is our hope they will take this knowledge back to their village to share and eventually give the Hu an alternative to their addiction.

We are both sweaty and sore when we finish. We bow to each other and head to the baths to soak the soreness away. We are very fit and probably very scary if any male from the villages were to see us without our robes. We make sure this never happens. Never. Does not stop some from trying. They do not like the result when we are done with them. It never happens twice. So stupid really. There is nothing wrong with the body and I cannot figure out the fascination some have for it. Except for the weather and the funny villagers we would all go around without clothes. But, this is the world we have at the moment and we accept it for now.

"You are starting to show. Only a few more lunars now." I nod and sigh.

"I will certainly be happier when it is over."

"Oh, so you think feeding them and cleaning diapers is better do you?"

"No, I don't and I have done my share of diapers thank you." She laughs, we all have of course. You do not become a mother until you have already been a helper to another. After this birth I can be assigned to either task depending on the needs of the whole.

We know a hundred of us all packed in one location is not sustainable. We need to get larger and spread out to several locations. That means two or three daughters each. Any idiot knows we can be attacked and be destroyed if enough come at us at once. Or so they think. We do have the

secret to turn again to death incarnate as a Terror. No one wants to do this. Death is indiscriminate and a Terror will kill all life it encounters even each other. No one wants that, least of all us. A last resort we all promise ourselves. It is worse that we are far enough from the sea to prevent anyone from using our one weakness against us, if they even remember it. It means we will continue to kill until there is nothing and no one left to kill. But this is the reason all of our settlements will be well inland. If we have to go Terror, it should be a doomsday choice. Fortunately, inland is still seen as a lesser location for settlement. Much easier to travel on a river or the ocean.

"Snow will be here soon enough. The harvest is in at least." I nod. A lot of stoop labor to harvest, even with our metal working.

"We could solve the getting pregnant problem if we just kidnapped a male and kept one here."

"Not as much fun though."

"You like the experience? A dirty filthy male with their hands and mouth all over you. I hated it."

"That part no, but it was fun seeing the city. So many sights, sounds and smells. Their food is way more interesting too."

"That would be easy. I heard we don't need the whole male, just the seed they produce. If we could find a way to store it, we could keep it in stock for when we need it and avoid the pawing and awkwardness."

"Do you think they know it is one of us?"

"Of course they do. That is the draw. The other girls hate us, but the madams love it when we show up. As there is not enough of us at one time for everyone, more business goes to the others as well."

"I can't imagine doing that for a living."

"Cleaning the latrine is so much nicer work."

"Or the burnt pots from the kitchen."

"Or the manure from the sheep."

"Boiling the clothes to get rid of the lice and fleas."

"Yep, we definitely have the good life here. Nothing like it." We both laugh.

"Speaking of which, where are you working this afternoon?"

I sigh, "Pharmacy. This is the start of sick season. I expect a lot of losses. We will have to burn sulfur to get rid of all the pests when they leave."

"Lucky you. I have copy duty in the library. Last time I thought my eyes would fall out and my writing hand fall off."

"So much fun in paradise. Have you read our origin story?"

She nods, "The good old days."

"Fighting and being killed by Cats was fun?"

"I don't think we were totally aware in that state. I hope not. I hope we never have to go that way again. This might not be the best life, but that is definitely worse."

"Agreed. Of course we could be a village wives and have to put up with a stinky old male for a husband every night demanding his marriage rights."

"Ha, why do you think they come to the Parlor? I suspect the wives are not putting up with it at home."

"Speaking of which, aren't you in rotation for a baby again soon?"

"Don't remind me," she shudders.

I pull some roasted chestnuts out of my pocket and hand some to her.

She looks at me surprised.

"Last duty was in the kitchen, cleaning pots." She laughs.

"I will return the favor next time I have that duty. Thanks."

We walk back quietly to the dorms. We each have our own room for now. Once my daughter is born she stays with me for the first few years, then joins a communal space for training with others as well as with me. At fifteen she will be treated the same as everyone else. I have heard it is similar in the villages. Glad I can't have a male child though. I have heard they can be very annoying. Not that I was annoying or anything growing up. Those were the best times. The pranks we used to pull on our mothers and teachers. All part of our training, for both mother and child.

Low Green

This is certainly not a world or a life I would have picked for myself, but then this is his choice, not mine.

Appears to be a low green world. At night there are no stars except for a very small faint glow that moves from horizon to horizon as the night passes. A Farout world by this observation alone. I am standing at the entrance to the portal, now turned off, that is also a small cave entrance. A simple early 'thn metal construct. They last a long time, but can draw unwanted attention if closer to the rest of the multiverse. Probably does not matter out here.

The only life I have seen is lichens and algae, as in blue-greens. The algae exist as stromatolites along the shallow sea. The fungus in the lichen is the most 'advanced' life form, a simple eucharyot. All the lichens I have seen so far are crustose on rocks. There are no trees for fruticos or foliose forms to be happy on. Colors vary from grey to grey green to nearly pale blue and if I am lucky I will find a bright orange one that exists only as tiny dots in the crevices of the rock granules.

The sun rises further. Going to be hot. A low mass star with a very long life. Makes sense if it has survived out here this long. That means we are close and the year will be short. Air is breathable surprisingly, about 25% oxygen. Probably because there are no animals to remove the oxygen, though of course the fungi will to some extent. Nothing energetic enough to make much difference. Likely life here started soon after the planet cooled, near the beginning of the multiverse bubble. Could even be one of the first OMs. It must have a story to tell.

Walking towards the meeting place I am examining the rocks I pass more closely and on the underside of a large rock I find a squamulose lichen. A leg up the evolutionary tree. Good for it. Up the shadow side are a few crustose placodioid yellow forms. Glad I read up on lichens before coming here. Don't want to sound like a complete idiot.

Interestingly there is a path from the portal to the one structure I have sensed a few kilometers away. That could mean visitors or it could mean nothing changed here in a very long time. I suspect the later. A scan shows a rectangular metal box, well insulated, with substructures I am not getting. No one inside at the moment. I take my time enjoying being outside on a new world, even one as boring as this.

As I get closer I see a large 'W' on the side in orange red color with similarly colored stripes running its length. Not an Earth One concept.

Must be Earth Two. The engine is definitely not from either though. This is a much more modern psiotic engine. Better than we have at the moment even. Interesting. Wonder if he will share the tech?

I knock, but no one answers. I try the door and it is unlocked. Of course I could pop in, but that would be rude. Especially if someone was present, but shielded so I would not sense them.

I look inside and see several simple desks and chairs. Primitive optical microscope and chemical setup. What we used to classify as 19th century tech. Lots of anachronisms here. Lots of books, all apparently on lichens, but from different worlds. It is interesting lichens seem to be one of the most prolific types of life, from high browns to high greens, even on low oxygen low air pressure worlds. Is this how the OMs started? Would explain why we see them nearly everywhere.

I sit down to wait and open a book. Not Standard. I can't read a thing, only look at the pictures, of which there are plenty. It passes the time and it is cooler in here at least.

I hear something outside other than the gentle wind and stand up just in time to see the door opening. A 'thant scout enters. I definitely was not expecting that. I have not had many encounter with 'thants and freeze, not knowing what to do or how to behave. Fortunately a Hu male enters a moment later. He speaks something in that 'thant chatter language and the scout takes the pack and goes about unpacking bags and jars of specimens. A helper then.

"You must be Roger." Not a question. I nod anyway.

"Welcome to my little paradise." He then ignores me going about his business, directing the scout and helping to put things away himself. He is wearing khaki colored clothing that could blend right in with the landscape. Lots of pockets. Hand lenses, forceps, small digging tools, paper and pencils. I have not seen one of those in thousands of years.

Finally he grabs a chair and sits as well. The scout scurries off to what I am guessing is a kitchen and can be heard rattling about. We sit looking at each other and in a few minutes the scout comes back with a tray with tea cups and a pitcher under a cozy. I close my mouth when some tea is poured, a white opaque liquid and granular sugar are added. It is then handed to me. I awaken from my trance and accept the tea cup and saucer. I nod to the scout to say thank you and it prepares a second cup for the Hu male.

Nothing is said until we finish our tea. Even the scout has a special bowl it drinks some from. It collects everything, takes it in to the kitchen and then comes back out to form a meeting of three.

"You can call her Meg. She understands Standard as well as 'thant of course, but cannot speak Standard unfortunately. Not a problem for me, so there seemed to be no need." Implying she could learn to. Interesting. The air system is totally different from a vertebrate. There is a line of six small air holes on each side of her abdomen which expands and contracts slowly. When she speaks 'thant it is done with her mandibles though.

"You are late." He finally says.

"Understandable given my last encounter with those who use Cat-boxes to com long distances. Earth Farout was not my choice for a living location."

"Have you been harmed in anyway?"

"Not unless you count boredom. Susan and I are the only ones on the entire world at the moment. We have built a small star ship, but Farout is rather large and we have not found another world with life on it yet."

"Yet, the world you are on has life."

"Yes, a mid green, and not magenta at least. No danger of a true sentient, but a good variety. We have tried to make pets out of some of the more mobile creatures, but they do not appear to notice we exist and are confused when we handle them. If we do not let them go, they would kill themselves in the struggle. I could not do that to another, no matter what level they are at. We let them be and of course they get into everything not sealed tight." I smile at the thought.

He goes to a drawer and opens it to remove a 3D metal ellipse. He hands it to me. I recognize it instantly. One of the probes Susan and I sent off in hopes of finding more worlds. It is an old one, one of our first models. I assume all of those failed and were lost.

"How long ago did it arrive here?"

He shrugs, "Found it in the field. No idea how long it had been there. I recognized the tech though and knew where your world was."

"Ah, so you know Silver and Turtle." He nods.

I sigh, "What are your intentions in regards to us?"

"None. Just curious. As you have already scanned, it is just Meg and me here. Until I found this I thought my nearest neighbors were the two TKs on Magenta." I raise an eyebrow over that. I did not know there were TKs there.

"I thought Silver rescued all of them."

He shrugs, "They returned of their own will. It is much more complex than this world and very different from yours. I do not know if it was curiosity, as is my case, or the need to be alone for awhile, also the same for me."

"Even though we are bored where we are I would not wish to be there. Losing TK everyday and at the mercy of some very hungry creatures is not my idea of a good time."

He smiles, "Nor mine. I am tired of the, what you Hu call, the cat and mouse game." As Hu say? I look to him and then to Meg.

He sees this and nods.

"Why Hu? It would seem the 'thant form would offer a lot of advantages. Not many creatures can hurt a 'thant for one."

"When you studied to become a TK, did you read the old journals?"

"Of course." I am thinking. He must be watching the gears turn in me.

"Shit, this structure, a world of lichens. You have taken on the personality of that scientist in the first journals. I have forgotten his name. He was high perch, but purposely chose a simple life devoted to research."

"I am attempting to emulate him. Yes. I like it. Should have done this much sooner in fact. The only down side is a lack of others to talk with, even if only occasionally."

"Hence the invitation to visit. Would it be okay to bring Susan next time?"

"Of course, just ah, not too soon. I have work to do. There are some especially interesting ones in the arctic regions."

"You could visit us as well if you wanted. I assume Meg will not attack us?"

He looks amused, "Of course not. Completely tame, right Meg?" She chitters a response and does a bow. I laugh.

"I should get back before Susan worries I have been captured and eaten. You know how to reach us. Just send a box or hell, come right over, any time."

I look at Meg, "Is she sentient too?"

"Yes, more so than most Hu I have met in fact."

"That is not saying much. I am sure you have heard the stories about the first 4K years at Farout. Not fun. Oh, sorry, Meg is welcome too."

He shows me to the door and I walk back to the portal whistling a little tune. We are not alone any more.

It is only when I get to the portal to activate it that I realize I never learned his name. I guess Lichen Man will have to do for now. Could he have taken the name of the original one on old Earth One? Will have to look up the story again. Wait till Susan hears.

At the portal there is a particularly beautiful orange lichen. I carefully remove it and DS it inside a clear 'thn metal box I have just made. A present for Susan to prove I have been here. As I step though the portal I

do a complete decom to be sure I bring nothing back that could upset our ecology, such as it is. I can return the lichen on the next visit. Should be sturdy enough till then given where it lives normally. Lichens may be the only true immortals. Probably longer lived than most TKs anyway.

Rap Eden

I should not be here. If the 'thn found me the entire world could be lost. I am in the appearance of a transient. A wanderer. My TK is suppressed. But I have to know if our experiment worked. Are Raps destined to be slaves to the Di or can they be free? Freedom has costs, which they are learning. So many dead.

I run. It feels good to be running again with purpose. The next village is less than a day, but I am in no hurry. I like being in the wild, away from others. After all that has happened, the Rap revolution, the destruction of Alexandria, the entire TK experience. I could stay here as a norm, live out a normal Rap life, a happy life.

^RWell, what have we here? All alone and a long way from anywhere I see.^R

I turn to see three males. Not in good condition. Ribs are showing. They are carrying rusty weapons of poor condition. Lots of nicks and bends.

^RHave you taken to eating your own kind then?^R

^RFood is food. Take what you can find. Judging from your condition no one will miss you either.^R

^RIf you had wanted to eat me you would have attacked first, not waited until I turned around to face you. So, what do you really want?^R

^RWhatever is in your bag old rat.^R

^RNo problem.^R I open the bag and empty the contents onto the ground. Nothing. I throw the bag at the one who spoke.

^RWell, we might just have to eat you after all, seeing as you have nothing to pay for your life. The rats can feast on the leftovers.^R

^RWhich community are you from and why are you here?^R

He looks like he is about to answer. Someone used to being told what to do. He smiles when he catches himself.

^RCommunities have no need of extra males at the moment.^R

I smile, ^RThen no one will miss you three either.^R

Two of them back up a step and prepare their weapons.

I open my cloak, which is more a Hu thing than a Rap thing, but I have grown to like it. Helps conceal my own weapons. Unlike their rusty bent objects of cowardice, mine are bright, shiny, sharp and deadly. Of course being a black belt is all I really needed, but harder to impress on an audience at first glance.

^RThree against one does not seem fair, but I am willing to give it a go.

Shall we?^R I take a stance that shows I have done this before and know what I am doing. The two in the back decide they might have better odds running.

I let them get a few meters away and throw two stones very fast and hard at them. Both go down without a sound. No TK needed.

^RYou killed them!^R He says obviously scared and mad at the same time. Not a safe combination. He thinks he has no choice now but to try me in a fight.

We hear groans coming from the two as they begin to regain consciousness. The upright one drops his weapons indicating this is over and attends to his buddies.

I continue on my way. I should do something to prevent them from attacking others, but then I am not supposed to be here. Best if I do not interfere, for now. I will remember though. Villages are forcing excess males to this life? That is not the Rap way at all. Mating is not the only chore a male can do. Who is to blame these three for trying to stay alive, albeit in less than an honorable way, or the village that forced them out knowing this was the only choice they left them?

Lor and Ali, I left you two in charge, what has happened in the few years I was gone?

I spend the night in the woods. Even though I do not express TK, I still have no need of sleep. Given how desperate other Raps are now, that is probably a good thing. The rats are few, but I had made some sap chow to get me past the bare spots.

The next morning I make it to the village. It looks like an armed camp. Two meter stone walls. Who taught them to do this? Instead of crops and livestock they are putting their energy into defense?

I walk up to the armed gate. Thick solid wood.

^RState your business. Or better yet, just turn around, we don't want you.^R

^RI claim visitor's rights.^R

^RTough rat. Now get lost.^R

^RMay I trade for lodging and food?^R

^RHaven't got any. Stop wasting my time. You are not wanted here.^R

^RMet some of your males on the road here. They warned me about this place.^R

^RYou can join them for all we care. Unless you want a hole in your belly, get lost!^R

I sigh and open my cloak, ^RReally? You and what pack?^R

^RIf you are that rich, you don't want to be here. We have nothing and

less each day. If you have a better place to be, would you take us with you?^R They look at me with hopeful eyes.

I could gain useful information from them. I quickly fill my bag with sap chow and know it is not noticed. I motion them to follow. They gladly leave their post. A death sentence in most packs.

^RYou are not worried about anyone just walking in?^R

^REveryone else is dead. We are the last two. Not wanting to eat our dead, even you look like a better choice.^R

^RYou mean fatter than each other?^R I smile and they smile back nervously, then glance at each other.

I hand each some sap chow.

^RNot the best food in the world, but it takes the pain away at least.^R

They crunch them down as fast as they can. Not a crumb is missed. I hand them a few more and these disappear just as fast.

The smaller one, ^RGood water less than a click this way.^R We follow.

Sap chow does make you thirsty. We arrive in good order and they drink their fill and fill their water bags. I do the same. I have to appear normal for the moment.

^RWe are being rude. Tough time. I am Shit and this is Puke.^R Not their real names I am assuming.

^RHu names. Interesting. Were you two in the camps?^R They nod.

^RWe were left behind when the rest left or died. We weren't worth taking, being too old for anything useful, even as food.^R

^RLucky you. My name is Mei.^R I always liked her story. Very brave and adventurous.

^RThree tough old lizards on an adventure. Where to boss?^R

^RThere used to be a village around here, Oak Hill.^R

^RGone. Orange Hill is also gone. Killed each other from what I heard. They tried to make a go of it with the remnant from both, but it did not last either.^R

^RI am open to ideas? We can live off the land until we get there. I am a good ratter, even at my age.^R The smaller one, Puke, says.

^REveryone else went south, we should go north to have any chance at live food.^R

^RI don't understand. This is a large world that could accommodate ten times our numbers, why is everyone killing everyone?^R

Shit says, ^RMakes no sense to us. We elected to stay behind figuring the same would happen to the group that left. Or we would be the first eaten when we fell.^R

^RAge has some advantages. We will not be fooled as easy, nor worth

the trouble to many. Ah, just don't show them your hardware. They most certainly will want that.^R

^RWe eat less, need less sleep too.^R

^RNo one will take the hardware. They are not for looks. I used to hunt Di, by myself.^R

^RGuano,^R Shit says. Kinda funny that.

We make good time and find a nice cool mountain stream with lots of bird like creatures and some rodent ones too. We eat well before night fall.

^RStrange. Why didn't the locals find this spot?^R I test them.

^ROkay for the three of us for a few days, but not an entire community for years at a time. No place to plant or even house livestock.^R

Puke looks at me with suspicion, ^RYou should know that if you have been walking long and been here since the beginning.^R

^RI need to know if I am with idiots or valuable companions.^R

^RGoes both ways old lady.^R They wait for me to respond.

I sigh. I hate proving myself, but given our situation I would demand the same.

^RSee that old oak tree behind me?^R They nod.

^RSee the squirrel like thing making its way down it?^R Their eyes go wide and they nod again more slowly.

I reach for and throw a small knife in the blink of an eye. It pins the creature to the trunk.

^RBreakfast for when we wake. Now, I could use some quiet time if there are no more questions.^R There are none. Puke retrieves the food and packs it away to protect from other small ones who might want it.

I sit in meditation and do pulse scans of our surroundings. It is very quiet. No other Raps within ten kilometers. A scattering of dead settlements in a hundred kilometer radius. They really did it this time. I won't be able to say stupid Hu any more. We are just as bad. We had freedom and a new world and we revert back to pack rivalry and death for no reason.

When I come out of my meditation, also a test to be sure they would not attempt to rob me, I smell cooked food. Okay, I smelled it before then.

We eat in quite and kill the fire and scatter the ashes and cover the area so no one will know we were here.

I hand a small knife to each of them.

^RThere is a limit to how much I can carry. Maybe you two could help out?^R They are surprised, but don't complain.

^RCan you teach us how to throw them?^R Shit asks.

^RAnd take care of them?^R Puke asks. Good girl.

I nod, ^RWhere to next?^R

^RThe village where we were at was where we ended up after arrival. A few more days and we will be further out than either of us has ever been. Maybe you know a good location?^R

^RI do have an idea. Will take two lunars to reach. I want to skirt some settlements to see what happened to them on the way. Not close enough to attract attention, but I can't believe we are the only ones left either.

^RA lone Rap is a dead Rap. Safety in numbers.^R Puke says. Standard school Rap mantra.

^RThere is something wrong with you Mei. The same thing happened to those settlements as what happened to ours. How come you don't know that?^R Ah, took them long enough.

^RI have been in hiding for a few years. Nice place, but no contact with the outside. I am out again and just wondering what I missed.^R

^RLeave her alone Shit. We all did things we regret. It was simple. No rain since you left. None, not a drop. Well until two days ago. Enough water so no one died of thirst, but crops and livestock take a lot of water.^R

^RTrees look okay. I would have thought they would all die too.^R

^RYou really are ignorant. Trees have these things called roots. They can reach the water deep down, too far for us to reach.^R

^RAnd you did not think of digging a well? You could build a two meter stone wall, but not a well?^R

^RYeah, as you can guess, we were not the ones who were consulted on that project. When the alphas say jump, you jump.^R

We walk on silently for a few eighths. They are not stupid at least. The camps taught everyone to obey or suffer. Not the best trait during a crisis when the alphas are more interested in serving themselves than the pack. We have a way of disposing of an unworthy alpha. Guess they have not figured that one out again yet. The pack does not serve the alpha, the alpha serves the pack. Number one rule.

During rest periods I have been having them learn how to use their knives. First against trees and then to hunt game. A thrown knife is faster than a speeding Rap every time. We also practice hunting as a pack. The lack of larger game limits that experience however. It will be used for hunting wayward Raps in time.

I announce, ^RTime for an upgrade now that you have learned the knife.^R

They look at me confused, but I lead them to a cave where I have hid-

den a cache. I had no idea what I would find when I returned and decided to hide food and weapons in several locations, just in case. They wait outside.

When I come out I hand them some light armor and new weapons, sword for Shit and a mace for Puke. And of course more sap chow. A last resort food, but when we can't find game. It will do.

Shit accepts her sword, ^RI feel guilty the gifts are only going one way. Maybe it is time you learned our real names.^R

^RStop. I have no interest in your real names or your past. Did you really think Mei was my real name?^R

^RThat is not a Rap name. What does it mean?^R

^RIn an old Hu language it means beautiful.^R They give me a show of much amusement. I purposely have a lot of battle scars to blend in and not present as a pushover.

^RHey Shit, she might have been beautiful as a young one. Beauty comes from within anyway. Mei, you are beautiful to me. Wisdom is better anyway.^R

I give a small bow and smile.

^RWe are a short ways from a large village. Time to go see what is left.^R

Takes us less than eighth. It is well hidden in among all the rocks and crags. Steep walls on three sides and a Rap made wall in front. Easy to defend. They have water from the mountain streams that is still running and comes up under their village as a spring. Again, easy to defend. They were smart when they chose this location. We pass several hidden fields with grain ready to harvest. Looks like they are being tended at least.

There is no guard at the large wooden gate. Puke shrugs and knocks, or rather pounds on the door rather loudly.

^RI have had guard duty and a nice sunny afternoon like this . . . ^R Indicating she or he might be asleep.

A voice from above us shouts, ^RCome back tomorrow.^R Asleep it was.

^RWe seek shelter and a meal. That is all. No plans of staying.^R

^RWe are full. Go away.^R Meaning I want to get back to my nap.

I say, ^RVisitor rights. Or has Rap custom fallen too.^R

Shit adds, ^RAs you can see we are well dressed and well fed. Only seeking to not have to nest on the ground for one night. Only one night.^R

^RWait there.^R The voice leaves the wall. Clearly not amused at having to do their job.

I whisper, ^RDon't look up. Let them check us out.^R There are several above us looking down.

^RLeave your weapons on the ground twenty meters from the gate.^R

^RRemind me never to let them in at our place. Very rude don't you think?^R

^RI concur. Very rude indeed.^R

I have an idea, ^RAll that grain we passed. The stuff that is nice and dry and ready to harvest. What say you we harvest what we can sell and burn the rest of the field? If they are going to treat us as rats, we might as well act like them.^R

^RA most excellent idea.^R

I look up, ^RAs you can hear, if we meant you harm we would have done so. No one relinquishes their weapons freely. We are three and you are many. In close quarters you have the advantage on us anyway. We promise not to get drunk nor start any fights.^R

A decomposing Rap skull is thrown down to us.

^RThe last one who demanded shelter and was allowed to enter with his weapons.^R

^RWe are three old fem, not some juiced up young male.^R

Puke gets impatient, ^RThis is taking way too long. When we burn the fields, I bet a rodent or two makes a break for it. We will have dinner and revenge for their poor hospitality. I learned my manners as a hatching. Shame on them.^R

As we turn to go we hear the gate being opened, just enough to let us through one at a time and with some effort to squeeze through at that.

^RSmells like a trap to me. I bet there are ten of them on the other side waiting to put arrows into us.^R

I peak in carefully.

^RMore like twenty, but they are a few meters away. I say we risk it.^R

^RBy all means, after you your highness,^R Shit says. Little does she know.

I remind them, ^RKeep your hands visible and no weapons drawn. Space out once inside. Don't make it easy.^R

^RAnd if they attack?^R

^RThey won't until we are all inside.^R

^RHow reassuring.^R I go first, as I proposed this action.

All three of us inside a huge fem Rap comes forward fully armed.

^RI am Thor. One of you will fight me to prove your worth.^R

^RWhy do they do this? Totally unnecessary waste.^R

^RGee, what a gal has to do to get a bed to rest in around here,^R I smile and walk forward, then turn around and hand all of my weapons to Puke and Shit.

^RI will be back for these in a moment.^R

^RNow, you say you want a fight.^R Thor looks confused and starts to remove her weapons.

^RNo need, keep whatever you want.^R She stops, looking even more confused. Good start. What kind of a fool starts a fight with no weapons?

^RYou are too young to remember, but the three of us were in the Di concentration camps years ago. We fight better without weapons, even against Di twice our size. Are you ready?^R

^ROld lady won't even make a nice bag for rat slop.^R Thor comes charging.

I barely move and Thor does a face plant into the dust. Thank you Marie.

Confused but more cautious, she rises and tries again.

^RNow pay attention class, this is how you disarm an opponent larger than yourself. You use their weight against them. The larger they are the more dependent they became of their ability to bully others.^R

Sure enough she is on the ground again. I hold up two of her weapons for the crowd to see and throw them out of the circle.

A few more times including the spectacular back walk of shame and she is sitting down totally exhausted.

^RAh, all tucked out. Poor Thor.^R She is weaponless and exhausted.

^RNow, the rules were never established. Is this a duel to the death?^R I look up at the crowd.

Someone with clearly higher status comes forward.

^RThat was amazing. Why were you outside wandering in the wilderness. You could be an alpha for sure.^R

^RThat was nothing. You should see what either one of my companions can do.^R That gets a nice look of respect for all of us and yawns from Shit and Puke. I wink back to them for catching on so quickly. Bluff is as much a part of the game as actual ability.

^RI am guessing you could have scaled the walls and come in anyway, right.^R I nod, as do the other two.

^RWell then, except for the entertainment, that was a waste of time. Everyone back to your work.^R She turns to us, ^RPlease follow me.^R

^REvery other village we passed was empty. How did you manage?^R

She waves her hand, ^RThe smart ones saw it coming and left their small villages early. Leaving their possessions behind for the stupid to loot. They kept their skills and tools however. Then they came here. Now we are the center of everything for hundreds of kilometers. It is amazing what can be done when you get the right Raps together.^R

She turns to face us, ^RWe could certainly use trainers such as your-

selves, should you elect to stay. We would make a nice life for you.^R

We walk past shops with lots of activity. Lots of fine work is shown openly. Ah, the food stalls. I can hear Shit and Puke licking their lips.

^RSomething to eat, if that is not too much trouble. I have built up a slight appetite from the casual workout just now.^R

^RAnd modest too.^R Not modest, fact.

^RHere we go. Our food stalls workers have learned quite a bit on how to prepare some of the local delicacies. This is my personal favorite.^R She pays for three portions. Interestingly the 'coins' are simple wood circles, not precious metal.

She notices Puke looking at the coins.

^RAn honor system. Metal is saved for better uses than accounting. Everyone here accepts the worth of our local method. What was it with the Hu obsession with gold huh? You can't eat it and it is way too soft for any practical use Does not even make a good mirror like silver or steel.^R

^RThese are easier to carry and store at least,^R Shit starts eating from her bowl. Signals that it is good.

^RYou are not worried that someone might make them themselves?^R

She laughs, ^RThe time it takes to make one is more than they are worth. Labor would be better spent doing actual work.^R

At least until machinery is invented and they can stamp out millions in an eighth. Or TK of course. We finish our meal. It is good. Well, compared to hastily cooked rodent or sap chow anyway.

We are lead to a building with several levels. Not a Rap style. We get nervous when we get too far off the ground.

^RMore expensive rooms are on the ground floor. I will show you to the guest quarters. Get settled in and I will take you on a tour of our village.^R

We learn where our rooms are, but are not stupid enough to leave anything behind. I have been around Hu too much. They are the worst thieves in the multiverse. Just like their ancestors. I can believe it when they say they evolved from rats. They will take anything they can carry away. Come to think of it birds do the same. I guess because we are used to traveling light we don't get so attached to things.

When we come out our host is talking with others until he sees us. Everything goes quiet when we come up.

^RVillage business. Sorry for being so rude.^R

^RTour time. Follow me.^R We follow behind like a bunch of baby birds. We are shown where food comes in and stall owners pick it up. We are shown carpenters and metal workers, ceramics and glass workers. They really have done a good job of trying to maintain all of the crafts.

^RI guess it is time to visit our alpha. She has been asking after you and not a Rap you want to disappoint.^R He shows amusement, but I doubt it is really amusing.

I was not sure what to expect. The rich opulence of a Hu or Ku elite? The austerity of Mars or Yesan? We are led into a modest home with only a few rooms. No servants that I can see, even with a quick pulse scan. A single occupant. One room is an office with the unfortunate paper work that comes with the position. We are led through the home to a garden outside. I was not here long before I left and so am not familiar with all the plants, but it is an impressive array.

A sole person is sitting on a stone bench across from several more benches.

^RI will leave you to your audience and get back to my own duties. I hope you have enjoyed your stay so far.^R

^RI especially like the entertainment at the entrance. I will be sure and recommend it to all my friends.^R That gets a nervous look from him, but he quickly hides it, bows and leaves.

We sit and wait for her to raise her face to us.

She looks straight at me and says, ^RPlease introduce me to your two new friends.^R Do I know her?

I raise an arm to Shit and Puke in term and tell her their names. She laughs.

^RAnd what are you calling yourself this time?^R

^RMei your Alpha.^R

^RI am hardly alpha to you dear.^R The gets very confused looks from them.

Do they know what and who you really are?

No, and please do not spoil it yet. Lor of course. I recognize her TP signature.

^RYou have done well here your highness,^R to tease her back.

She shrugs, ^RWe tried. It was harder without the gifts of course, but we followed our instructions as best we could. Of course, there was some minor cheating, but nothing of consequence.^R

The two are about to jump out of their skins wondering what is going on.

I sigh and say quietly, ^RI am Queen Squeak.^R They immediately get on the ground bowing.

^RHey you two. Stop that! I was okay when I was just Mei. That is how I will always be to you. You are trusted advisors now. Stand tall.^R They slowly and with caution rise. Lor just smiles. She does not bow to me,

nor rise from her bench.

Shit finally says, ^RIt does explain how she beat the guano out of Thor. That was a sight to behold. A lot of bullies I would like that seen to.^R

Puke asks, ^RWe are all old fem. How does the Queen, of age, no offense, take on a Rap much larger?^R

Lor answers, ^RSkill of course.^R

I sigh, ^RWhen did you make me?^R

Lor smiles, ^RAs soon as you arrived of course.^R

^RHere, at your village?^R

^ROh no, much earlier.^R

^RHow?^R I know I look similar, so it was not by sight.

^RYou still have not gotten it. Can't believe we have out ratted the Queen herself.^R Puke says this. Puke?

^RGuano, you are both TKs.^R Huge smiles appear, especially from me. Most would wonder what I was talking about. They clearly know.

^RGood job everyone. I was completely taken in. May I ask where Ali might be?^R

^RDown south at another secure settlement similar to us, an island though,^R Shit smiles at that. We hate water. Not hate, just we are not designed for swimming as such.

^RAnd you have boats now too.^R They smile.

^RHope they made life jackets for everyone.^R They look confused. They will learn.

^RDid you use your, ah gifts, when you took down Thor?^R

^RNo need. It was very easy. The bigger they are the more confident they are. Big mistake. Never underestimate an opponent.^R

^RLike you did us?^R They are pushing my face in the rat feces now.

^RIndeed. Now I want a full report. I do not know how long I can stay and given the consequences of being found by the 'thn, it would not be good for anyone.^R

Black to Farout

How do you hide the fact that you are a TK on a black world? What have you gotten me into Ron? Small world, about double the mass of the larger of the Two Sisters, as Ron would measure it. I scan and find a cavity in the center. Not my choice, but I DS in. The lights come on.

No one home, but I already knew that. There is a note on the only table floating in the center. I TK over to it. Being weightless sucks as the Hu say. Stuck on with static electricity, a slight shock when I touch it to release the charge. It is written in Martian. Not many can read it.

In TK code. I work to decipher it. Coordinates. Good, I really did not want to call this home.

I go through three more jumps, all with different puzzles to figure out. I am jumping back and forth all over the multiverse. I am surprised Ron could set this up. Why?

I end up on a large moon above a gas giant this time. A star is visible. Nice to see light again. Even an atmosphere. Not breathable for Earth Froth creatures anyway. There is a dome on the surface. I DS closer. Shielded up the mountain peak and back. Not getting in with TK either, even at my level. How did he do that? The entire surface from here to the dome is limiter. If he did this, from where? Smells like a trap, but 'thn would not bother. They just core planets to kill one.

I pull my companions out of my bag and tell them, *Hide for now. You can't follow me in, it would kill you.* They take off. Bad air does not bother them. There is life on this world, totally different from anything I know. Wish I had time to investigate.

I make a bubble with chemical powered air purifiers, water and food. No idea how long I will be stuck in their. Waiting. Ron will want to be sure I was not followed or compromised.

Time to go in, ready or not. I activate the motors and wait for the wave of limiters to wash over me. I hate being naked like this. There is no path, but I did design this from my time with the Hu, who were good at such things. I hope Rap Eden eventually makes it to high tech, without the world wasting stage at least.

A bumpy ride, but I make it to the dome without much trouble, if you don't count the bugs, or whatever they were, splatted against it trying to get to me. Ouch, glad I am in here. Now what? No obvious entrance. I certainly do not want to go outside my bubble. I make a couple of more circuits. Guano Ron, just let me in already. I keep going around, not

knowing what to do. I should have done a more thorough visual before coming here. Think Martian. The first puzzle depended on my solving that.

Rap Eden is doing great. If TK3s can hide from me for a couple of eight days, the 'thn are unlikely to find them either. At least not for awhile. Their tech is making huge jumps. They have at least two cooperative settlements now that work the way they should. Oh, I am sure there are still some bad Raps. All cultures have them or make them.

There are ribs on the dome. Close enough together for me to reach. All I need now is a space suit or breathing apparatus, which I don't have. I look around the bubble. Well, I do have a rebreather, attached to the wall. I remove it. Seat cushions I can cut and tear. No glue, but I can cut strips and sew something together. The air is not so toxic as low oxygen and stinks. A lot of life here depends on sulfur instead. They have organs in their bodies that vaporizes solid sulfur allowing them to breathe it. Some leaks out of course. Feels like I am top of a volcano.

I am ready. I open the hatch. I was hoping for an airlock or something, but everything else about this has been a challenge, so why not this. The breather appears to be working. I am not passing out, but enough sulfur gets through so that I can easily smell it. Worse than a Hu pit toilet.

I start my climb and quickly reach to the top. Nothing here. Great. I can make it back to the TK zone if I walk. While up here I survey the surroundings. Small hills, tree like forest, stream with a small waterfall. Not exactly earth froth colors, but not unpleasant. Guano, the bugs have found me. Swatting them only seems to encourage them. I am so different, what is the attraction? I look at one attacking me on my hand. It does an interesting screwing motion to drill it's way in. Could it be that easy? It gives up eventually. Not expecting scales I would imagine.

I back off, ignoring the bugs, place my hands on the center circle. Right or left? Think Martian. I rotate left. It moves, some. I try again. A little more. It stops. Now what? I have knives of course. Don't leave Rap Eden without them. More for decoration or blending in with non TKs. I try prying it up. It moves. I work my way around to break the seal with a slight hiss of air and it finally comes up. There is a ladder inside and barely enough room for me to squeeze in if I fold my tail down. Martian dimensions, not Rap. I grab the lid and put it back in place and this side has a handle at least. I rotate it closed and climb down the latter. It goes a lot further than the dome is high. Of course.

At the bottom is a drop to the floor, for a Rap at least. I look back up. A Martian could probably reach it. I can if I jump and I am a good

jumper. Ron comes out from around the corner.

^MAt last. Nice puzzle game Ron. ^M He bows.

^MWhy? ^M I ask.

^MBoredom and fear. ^M

^MAlways good motivators. ^M He shrugs

^MI have left Mars. We moved it to what is hoped is its final location and then I left. ^M

^MYou are hoping the 'thn won't notice or care about them. ^M He nods.

^MLimited population helps. We are no threat to anyone. ^M

^MI have left Rap Eden for the second, maybe last time. It was nice to visit, but they are actually doing better without me. I am old school and they need new leaders, ones who were never in the camps, never under Di rule. They are being careful. I spent several eight days with two I never realized were TK. They knew who I was immediately. I tried, but even with a massive drought forcing them together I could not get them to do so. My students were able to very quickly when I left last time. ^M

Ron smiles, rare for him.

^MI feel the same. Not as obvious on Mars, but my time has passed. It is better if they work out their own problems. They don't need us to save them all the time. And as long as we are around they are in danger of being cored. ^M

^MAnd if they fail and go extinct? ^M

^MAll species go extinct eventually. Intelligence seems to guarantee it in fact. ^M

^MYou noticed that too. As soon as we think we can control nature we are no longer part of nature and nature gets her revenge. All this time I thought it was only the monkeys who went that way. Then I started seeing the same stupid behavior from the Raps. ^M I shake my head in disbelief and disappointment.

^MThe entire point of Mars was from the very beginning to avoid the mistakes of the earth Hu. We have done pretty well, but I think all we really have done is slow everything down, not stop it. Much more subtle. They still play games against each other, seek fame or power, immortality. I really thought we could make it work with a mixed norm / TK culture. I had to go undercover and pretend to be a norm to understand. ^M

^MAnd giving the norms TK ability would be like lighting a fuse to a bomb. ^M He nods.

^MWhat now? Stay here? Being in Farout alone should afford us some protection from the 'thn. This is where they originally wanted us anyway. ^M

^MTell that to those from Alexandria.^M

^MAh, but Alexandria was not isolated. It still had lots of portals for instant access to the rest of the earth froth. It was not the location, but this that doomed them.^M

^MLikely. Can we take a chance?^M

I laugh, ^MLife is taking chances. Let's say we stay here. Should not take too much to learn how to adapt ourselves to their physiology. We have had lots of practice being in other forms. Something based on the Yesan might work.^M

^MWe have no models from here. There are no sentients ready for TK.^M

^MIf Sauron could do it, we can too. Besides, do you have anything else to do?^M

^MAnd we might learn a lot too.^M

^MWe would be like gods, at least at first.^M

^MI am not happy about that. We need to take what we have learned from our own species and remain in the background this time.^M

^MAgreed. One way would be to never interact with individuals. Nothing personal. Try to direct and help from a distance, but nothing overt.^M

^MHmm, are you sure you are not part Martian?^M He smiles.

^MIt was knocked into me I think.^M He laughs. It is rare indeed to see Ron laugh. I can't help but laugh in return. Is this a good way to start a sentient species? We have certainly learned a lot of lessons we can call upon.

Since we never need to be seen, it really does not matter what form we take and so we elect to remain as we are for the time being. I carve out a section for my work and lab. Puu and Cat taught me I need a lab. I forgot to say, as soon as I closed the hatch I had my TK back. We live in a TK bubble. Ron was smart, no 'thn metal either. Don't need an unfriendly colony of 'thants showing up either. Not likely to ever see Edwin's colony again. Too bad. Some of my best friends were 'thant.

^RMy companions! I forgot about them.^R I scan and find them and then DS them to me. They seek out and find Ron's and have a reunion of sorts.

^MActually, companions can be our eyes on the ground. Less intrusive.^M

^MDo we want another ground species? There is an ocean here as well.^M

^MHow much do you know about aquatic species? We only have the Ceph and Cet for reference.^M

^MStick with what you know.^M I nod in agreement.

^MHow do we start?*

^MOur personalities are quite different. This is an advantage to seeing different aspects of our new world, but it also means we are likely to get on each other's nerves.^M

^MI have wasted my time building a lab so close to yours then?^M

^MNot at all. You just need to remain there except for agreed upon times when we go over our findings.^M

^MAs you are introverted and by my nature I am extroverted, well at least compared to you, unless I make friends with the locals I will be at a disadvantage.^M

^MExcellent! You do the biology and I will do the chemistry. Let us begin!^M I am going to go nuts as the Hu say.

Cyan

We have now been here an earth year, about 45 Cyan years. Thank goodness there is not much of a seasonal variation. This place is hard enough to handle. Everything preys on everything else, no exceptions. Well, almost, we apparently are one of the few vegetarians, if you can call it plant life. They eat things too, sticky bits, traps, poisons so the rotting corpse will fertilize the plant. Very fast working. Can't have your fertilizer get too far. Without TK we would all be dead. No question.

Still, it might be a great place to hide. We have been thorough in our documentation and exploration. We can set up underground TK silent cities to live in. This is an old world. Lots of underground natural caverns and spaces. It will look natural. With time we may even be able to integrate ourselves with the topside.

Many asked why such a difficult location? The easy locations would be obvious locations to search. You can't in a black world. Even a brown or low green would be hard to hide our tech, TK, etc. We needed a high green. A world where sentience is likely to occur, and it has here. But it has to be a world we would find abhorrent. A harsh world. I remember the old Hu movies I got to see as a TK student at Alexandria. They had a pre fall program that had a made up violent species who were always prepared to die. We have to be that way.

We are not going to be all here of course. A call between spreading too thin and being all in one place. Both extremes are dangerous. A third of the fleet will come here. Candidates are have already been selected from among all sentient TKs species we have and trained in what to expect. There was a debate as to what training would entail. We decided, if we are to survive, we can't be sloppy. At some point we may be called to abandon our safe bubbles and hide among the locals. That means everyone has to go through the Cyan experience. Everyone wants to be the exception. No one is so critical that we can't live without them. No exceptions. If I can survive it, so can they.

We spent that last Cyan year without TK, no cheating. All three of us survived. I need to get back to them soon. We are a team now. We will start training others as soon as they start to arrive and assume the Cyan form.

Pilot has decided on another location. I have it in an easily destroyed encrypted box. Even I do not know the contents. I am guessing the last location will be Magenta if Rooi and Snap will have us. They decide

what form we will take and how we will live. Refugees are always obliged to follow the local customs. Good luck everyone.

Bug Eden

This is not an Eden, why do we call it bug eden? This is hell.

Stop your whining George. It could be worse, we could be swimming. We have had to do that at times too, to get across a river to safety. Do you have any idea how hard it is to swim across a river with a larvae on your back? Of course George had to do it with armor and weapons. She might be right.

I am carrying my third larvae. The eggs are easier, they don't squirm. Did they have to be so realistic? This is my second body. We kill off some of us at regular intervals to make it appear there is turnover, as would be expected. The new bodies have to be worked on to become proficient. Never knew so much knowledge resided in the physical form. When I assumed different earth forms it was not that much trouble. Just adapting to how everything worked, but I did not need to train the body too. Maybe that was because we copied adult forms.

Most of our day is drudgery. There is no day or night. We only get rest when we eat and that is on no set schedule. I have ceased to even think. I move when told and stop when told. Run from the sun, run from the sun. Stragglers die a most horrible death.

Of course I have heard that freezing to death on the other side with the snow chasing you is equally frightening. First flooding rains, then snow, then ice, then death. at least the sun is quicker.

Form up, we have company. Warriors to the front. Defend and attack positions.

Shit. I head to the nest, larvae in tow. We form a tight unit, ready to fall on our charges. I place the larvae in a separate depression. They can't be next to each other. At this stage everything is food. Our backs are especially hardened to prevent being eaten alive. Our bellies are not, as we are to become the food if necessary for the larvae. Anything for the nest. Princess is next to us this time. I have no idea where George is at the moment. My attention has to be to my own duty.

We are always higher if possible. I can see out over the field of rocks and grasses that have not been eaten already. Others, meaning bugs from another group are coming towards us. Groups who are desperate will raid others for food or slaves. It seems we have a weakness. A precisely placed bite renders us impassive. As if all this grunt work has not.

There is George. I recognize her colors. She is right up front. George does like a good fight. The others outnumber us. We are not allowed to

use our TK overtly. We will win, but we have to fake some casualties to make it look real. Death hurts, even for a TK who can port to another form. I am not supposed to be watching, but guarding the young. I turn back to them just in time to see one suddenly morph into a full warrior adult and leave to join the fight. It will appear as if we are infinite in number. A new larvae forms to take its place. I am glad the enemy cannot see this happening. Our cover would be blown instantly.

Lizat tells me, *I can't help but watch. Must be a leftover Hu thing. Oh shit, five of the enemy have broken through and are coming this way.* I turn around too.

They disappear into a depression between us and them.

And don't come out again. Instead some of ours do, waving appendages in the air as proof they are gone. I hate the idea of killing. They don't know we are not really bugs. We are inedible I suspect. I hope so anyway. Being eaten alive is a nightmare scenario.

Eventually the other side is defeated. A few are allowed to escape to warn others that we are not a weak target and to avoid us if possible. On the other hand, this group must have been desperate to even try. What were they even doing on our track this close to us. Of course we know there are others ahead of us. We are so close to the sun line, I doubt very much there is anyone behind us.

George and Princess come up carrying a head and a few legs to share with us, as is proper. We cut our gifts into smaller pieces and feed the larvae. We have to use our mandibles to do this of course. We don't taste that bad actually.

Lizat teases me, *Needs salt.*

A shout goes out and we gather our young. The sun does not care we were just in a battle.

I just hope we were not slowed down too much. I don't want to add bar-b-que to my list of adventures.

I am sure Puu and Cat did their jobs. Must be the reason we have been running non-stop for what seems like forever. Gaining some necessary time. The sun is waiting for us on top of those hills though. I glance back and see it. Good incentive to move.

Any change we were the aggressors coming up on the others from behind?

Possible. It would just be like the leaders to force us into a small battle for 'practice' to see we all did our jobs.

That was small? I would rather be on a ship with a sword or cutlass.

Aye me matie. Pass me some rum!

She continues, *A large battle would have seen action here as well. They always try and breach the nursery.*

Or the Queen. With her gone we are just zombies waiting to die. She can always lay more eggs.

There is a way to raise one of the elite to Queen status.

But it takes time. She nods.

*How many times have we circumnavigated this world do you think?

*

Really? Not even a third of the way. Do you recognize anything.

All looks the same to me. Not much variation to speak of.

You have not noticed the trail markers then?

What? Where?

Poor Mouse, always the last to know. She like bettering me.

She points ahead of us to a pile of rocks.

That's it? We have passed hundreds of those. If there are ones ahead of us, why don't they just knock them over so we get lost?

We are technically the same species Mouse. Besides, they hope to make it back through here next round. There would be no point to the markers if you could not trust them.

Then why attack us?

Desperation of course. I also think they were not of our track, but an adjacent one.

Do you think they are sentient?

By which I mean us as well.
You were not watching the battle very closely. Never seen a colony of anything try so many different tactics.

Then how did we survive? I know our numbers are lower than most of our rivals.

TP. We knew their plans. Could not be overt about it, but we were likely prepared all the same.

Isn't that cheating?

Mouse, we are not here to be eaten, as much as it might look like it is.

Or fried. I bet we taste great fried actually. Or, I know, put us into a small pool and boil us. Just like lobster. Remember those?

They were tasty, but now we are them. Not such a nice thought any more.

Indeed.

Gather for a meeting. We bring our larvae with us of course. The warriors surround us as we move to one location to hold us all. We are so well drilled we don't even think about it any more. We should appear to-

tally normal as far as anyone else here can tell. I just step in someone's poo. Yep, that's normal.

I rarely see the Queen, but she is there too. She is rather large and clearly physically stronger than anyone else. I am surprised she even needs a warrior guard, but sheer numbers can overcome size if played right. Certainly noticed that with ant and termite colonies on Madscar.

Look Mouse, Puu and Cat are here too! I have not seen them since we got here.

Must be some meeting to include literally everyone. Think we are going to leave? I would love to get out of this bug shell and off this unforgiving world.

Myra leads the discussion, *We are near the cave entrance. Yes, it is here. We were not sure, this being a different incarnation. It has collapsed in many locations inside. It is likely we are later than our knowledge of the past. Time is of the essence, so we will be using TK to clear it out and make our way to our destination.

There are many entrances. We are very likely to encounter others who think their portion of the tunnel is their territory. There are side channels where others can remain hidden. We should expect attacks from all sides.

There are areas where we will have to go single file. These are the most dangerous, especially when Turtle is passing through.

Right now we need to gather provisions. If you are not carrying an egg or larvae you will be carrying food or water. No exceptions. That includes leadership. That is all.*

Not much of a discussion.

And where exactly does the tunnel lead?

In the journals it leads to a portal. To where is the real question.

I have to assume we are in this form for a reason. It certainly would have been easier to assume our more comfortable last forms.

Oh, I don't know. This is kind of fun. Mouse you are just an old man in fem bug form. We really can't smile or show amusement, so I just wave my antennae around wildly.

I think the Cats actually enjoyed their part in all this.

Killing and ripping apart other creatures. I am sure they did. We had better catch up. Last time I fell behind one nipped me on the rear.

We move and make our way the center of the brooders.

I thought we were close. It feels like forever. The sun is nearly upon us when I see the entrance. Others are ahead of us scouting for danger I hope.

We were never in direct sunlight of course, but once we are inside, it

takes a moment to adjust to the even lower level of light. Amazingly I can see quite well. We can escape from the sun or follow the ice. We are the same species. I would imagine that following the ice can get very dark with storms and such. Actually we could also be escaping the ice and following the sun as well. No matter. We are adapted to a variety of conditions. Oh, and for the journal, sunlight does not kill us immediately. We were forced in our training to learn how to adapt to some exposure. We smear ourselves with a light colored mud and make blinders for our eyes. Still gets warm, but doable.

I nearly run into the one in front of me. And the one behind me does bump into me, nearly making me drop my squirming larvae. Something up front clearly. We all fall silent.

Just like the Ceph, we can also communicate without sound by carapace taps and scrapes. The word comes down to be as silent as possible. Another colony is in a side tunnel ahead. We just got out of one battle, I really do not want another one. I know what we are, but still, watching a larvae squirm and then form into a full warrior is a horrifying sight. Glad that never happened on Earth Two. Hmm, I wonder how we compare to the Terror. Not that far off I suspect.

The worst is not really knowing. I can scan and I can see the second group. A normal bug would not. We have been instructed to not use our TK, even to defend ourselves. We know, just as in the battle, we will be moved to another form to continue our work. It is apparently important not to give ourselves away. For some reason we need to appear as normal bugs to anyone who encounters us. I do not know the long game of course and am following blindly. So many of the norms we have watched over have experienced this blind following. Horrible feeling.

We left the norms with the other TKs and some of us who were on Alexandria at the coring were invited to the Center. But, long before then it had already been decided there might be a point to the 'thn charges against us. We were over meddling in the affairs of the norms. I am beginning to appreciate their point. We were.

Are you alright Mouse?

Actually no. What are we doing here? We kill and eat our attackers, norms for this world. How is that fair or right? Are we doing the same thing here we foreswore not to do on our own worlds?

You need to talk with one of the leaders to get those answers.

Listen up everyone. Drop your loads. Yes, even the eggs and larvae. We will not need them any longer. Full TK shields, no prisoners, no norms can follow us. Move now!

Why the hell were we carrying these things only to abandon them. I obey, but do I have a lot of questions with no obvious answers. Why aren't we using TK or DS to get where we are going? I keep a scan on my larvae to see what happens. The only time a colony would abandon their young is if the Queen herself is in danger.

Sure enough, we get a few clicks away and I sense an invading force coming up to our young. They crawl all over them. Then they start eating them. Not really alive, but they are real in the sense of being food, just no one home. There are hundreds now. We were a really tiny colony by comparison. Our young are quickly distributed to everyone in their nest. They will start coming this way soon, but being a smaller colony and without burdens we are much faster, even within Bug standards.

I do TK to jump over bundles of food and water jugs we are leaving behind as well. We make those jugs from a special organ that solidifies when dried. Self sufficient. Unfortunately we are giving the appearance of a colony in really desperate straits. An easy kill for the ones behind us.

We are clearly not coming back to get our young, but we are a threat in front of them and also represent more food. They can keep us alive by nipping off our legs. We become a living food supply they can cache. Even dead, it will be awhile before we dehydrate enough as to be non-edible.

Sure enough, they cache the young and start coming after us. A LOT of them. Shit, how did one colony get so big? There must be close to a thousand all told. How? Ah, but running down and consuming colonies like us. Some of their numbers might actually be slaves recruited from colonies they have taken. That's how. I am beginning to think the battle we were in was a ruse. A test, to find our weaknesses, to judge our size. Now they know. We appear to be easy prey. Or bait. Now it is beginning to make sense.

You finally figured it out Mouse? I nod.

About time. Yeah, dumb old Mouse.

Magenta

We hoped for a nice quiet existence. Just Snap and I. After seeing everything since I was a norm I am not impressed by TK behavior. A new world another chance to try again and succeed this time. Going slow. Both Snap and I were adamant about going slow. Mistakes are made when a TK gets impatient and rushes it. So, why did we agree to take in nearly twenty thousand refugees from Alexandria. We only agreed if they were willing to go deep cover. We refused to set up a new Alexandria and see Magenta cored next.

No portals, once you are here, you stay here. The ship goes into the star. No tech. You will be on the other side of the world. We don't want to see you, show with you, know anything about you. No negotiations, no compromises. Don't like it, leave.

You would think this was simple. Never is. All we have to do is monitor for violations. These TKs are as powerful as we are. Have had years longer at the game, excel in advanced TK tech and methods. How do you monitor that? Hu and the others can't help it. They will cheat, bend the rules. Not right away, but eventually. Snap and I have a rule. Never trust someone evolved on land. I count the Cet as land creatures as they evolved on land, but only returned to the sea when the land became too hostile. Their land poisoning was never purged. They still want to rule.

Life is not about power, possessions, or whom you mate with.

To be truthful I doubt I could ever go back to being just a norm, no matter how much I play at it. I have to carefully question my own motivations as well. Am I that different? Life was simpler when I was just poaching crabs from the queen's reserve.

Twenty thousand may seem like a lot, but they will be spread over the entire planet. Being confined largely to underwater or at the worst on the shoreline, the lack of TK during the night should not present a problem. Besides, the shore cannot support crabs large enough and complex enough to have sentience and TK. Those will be deeper water. We really do not have deep water in the earth from sense.

The Ceph will be allowed to build villages if you will, but low tech. Nothing that would look out of place on Ceph Eden. For sure they will cheat getting started in setting up ceramics, food distribution, housing, etc. The higher TKs do have standards. Most of the refugees have chosen this path. They were exposed to it during their training and they already know what is expected.

The more imaginative ones want to try for a crab city of sorts. There is no model for this, but we have warned them again, no high tech or TK dependent tech. Initial showing has given ideas to a sort of underwater apartment complex, farming of tasty seaweeds and smaller creatures. Being underwater they can't use metals. This will all be mud, sand and protein based glues, and digging hollows out of rock. I will be very curious how this works.

Instead of queens, they have chosen a representative coalition. No village will have power over another, but they will share ideas of what has worked and what hasn't. Each village chooses for themselves what and how they will implement their ideas. Being so spread out will help enormously in this regards. Any group that decides they cannot abide by the entire village's decision is free to split off and start their own. TKs are more easy going as the Hu show than norms, but I still expect this to happen regularly. I also expect villages to combine in equal frequency.

Most sentients like variation, this is especially true of TKs. We tend to get bored easily. Silver used to say 'only boring sentients get bored.' My own experience is we need some change, even if just for a time, to keep being creative. We may not all end up like the three, Myra, Puu and Cat, but we all like to play with ideas.

First thing is getting them more used to their forms. They assumed their new forms while still on board their fleet of ships and containers. Can't really call those metal bubble ships. There are still creatures that bite and sting here. Being totally uncoordinated could be painful indeed. The crab form is the easiest for most of the earth froth TKs to adapt to, but the Ceph form offers some advantages, like eight brains, flexibility in tight spots, land as well as sea allows some tech. Pluses and minuses for each.

Snap and I sent maps and climate/ecology information up to them and are letting them decide where they want to set up. I am sure there were all kinds of discussions about that. Hu and Ku especially like to com forever over details. I am looking forward to the art produced by the Ba. We don't have leaves per se, but shell carving could work. I am expecting underwater art museums with sand and rock sculptures. Our waves and tides are not that large, but it will be harder to do the same on the shoreline. There was a reason why all of our homes and other structures were well rounded. Openings are always facing away from the surge. They will figure it out.

I almost envy them. The excitement, the challenges, even the failures. On the other arm, I am also looking forward to peace and quiet again.

I did come here for a reason. Snap and I rarely interact and that is fine with both of us.

The first sets are DSing down. None of the locations are near us. We got first choice by right of founding.

You had first choice and I am happy with it. Thank you Snap.

Alexandria System

Captain's Log

The last of the refugees has left. I am in a small scout ship with minimal crew, two eights and myself.

We are doing a very thorough scan to be sure we have not missed anything. This is our eighteenth time through. Each time we find something it means we have to do another complete scan. I am having a very hard time understanding how we keep missing things. I knew they were well dug in, but come on. There are layers on layers on layers.

I am beginning to think Alexandria was a quantum construct. The entire thing. It would certainly explain how Cat was able to move it about so freely, even into constructed pocket universes. I know how to get here because I was taught how. No map or instrumentation could get you here. The only 'thn that knew how to get here were Qr'thn, Br'thn, and Pr'thn. They were brought here to assume their new forms. Their old forms are now residing in the center of this star. Is it hot enough to melt 'thn metal?

Like most stars in Farout, this one is smaller than our home star, which also means it has a much longer lifespan, but less light output. The Goldilocks zone is much closer than our more familiar one AU of the earth froth. The year is shorter as a consequence. No moons either. All tidal forces come from the star itself.

Found another anomaly Captain. Shit.

Enough, start pushing everything towards the star. I refuse to spend the rest of my life cleaning up after those five. Silver, Turtle, Myra, Puu and most especially, Cat. The hard work will be the pieces that went extreme elliptical because of their trajectory when the world was cored. We think we have plotted most of them. Still, it will likely take a few earth years to do this cleanup.

Avi pops in, ^Captain, aren't you afraid that the 'thn will expect to find something here?^

"Not at all. There was nothing here, or at least Alexandria was not here until Cat brought it here. No idea whatsoever where she got the world in the first place. I doubt even she could set up an entire ecology that fast."

^There was a rumor that the world existed in a time bubble running hundreds of times faster than us.^

I sigh, "I had forgotten about that. This is getting to me even. So, you

are saying she could have made this world from, what, star dust? And then set up the ecology in a quantum time bubble? Is even Cat that good?"

^I certainly would not mess with her.^

"Nor would I."

Ily pops in, +Captain, found this floating in an orbit suggesting it was part of the CatLab at one point. It does not respond to me, so likely not generic.+ A Catbox of course. Could mean nothing, Cat was the one who invented them after all. Would make sense she would have blanks ones around. He sets it next to me and pops out again.

I should be helping, but I am also curious. I touch the top and it opens! I reach inside and pull out the message.

"Dear Pilot, Hope you are well. The three of us are fine, though a bit bored. How can a TK be bored you ask? We were so used to running things we are not sure what to do now. Oh, don't go to the Sal Eden world. They are nuts. Fundamentalists of the worst kind. We have enclosed the latest Cat Opera for you to listen to during your free time. Drup, Rand and White."

I have missed Drup and Rand. Never really knew White. Cat Opera, you have to be kidding, Cat's can't sing. I concentrate and read the file. Oh CRAP! This is horrible! I let go and drop it. It should be relegated to the deepest pit of hell! Very funny you two. I pick it up, now who can I play the same prank on? I smile widely.

I store everything and get into a smaller bubble to join the other two in hunting down pieces and sending them to the star. The three of us still need to decide which of the three worlds we want to join. I have been postponing that decision. I am not crazy about any of them. It is not that they would be boring, but I like being on a ship and traveling the seas or the stars. I cannot be bound to only one port.

There are near fifty thousand on Cyan. Only a few on Magenta as we have not found any sentient life there to interact with. Rooi and Snap are basically place sitting I guess. There are a few thousand on Yellow. Yellow was our latest find and the one we know the least about. Cyan attracted the most, as of the three, it is the most like our own home worlds, though the sentient life form is more Yesan than earth froth. But, we know Yesan, so not that much of a shock.

Yellow is a very hot humid world, very close to it's star. A lot of sulfur in gasses, solids and organics. This world would not exist out here if it was not a prison for some sentient. We have certainly found a LOT of black and a few brown worlds. This is the only other world with life on it

we have found. Is this a set up for a species yet to be placed or are we missing something. Hopefully the ones we sent down will figure it out.

"Got you!" Time to push that rock.

Crab Cove

"Story!"

"Which one dear? The Dragons of Mount Doom? Or the Peddler of Skunkville?"

"We want Andi!" Figured that. Only problem is this one is gorilla hard to translate. Who wrote this thing? The words are all wrong. I can't even begin to understand this next chapter. I am guessing a city is like a very large village. I decided to just use the words as written. Kids are more imaginative than us old ones. Maybe they will get it.

I go to my room and bring out the book. Still weird what it was written on. I can't make a mark on it that won't rub off. No knife, ceramic, or rock will mark it. How was it written?

"Where were we?"

"Andi just went on walk-about to find his purpose in life."

"Thank you Manaco." I pretend to fumble with the book to find it.

"Andi left the village. There was a big going away celebration to try and convince him to stay. They always did this and in most cases it did not work. It didn't this time either. Andi gathered his few possessions and walked out of the village. Adventure called.

He of course took the path less traveled, the one he remembered the old man in gray took. It has been heavy on his mind for years. He just had to know. The path was severely overgrown, probably even before the gray man went this way. He had said he was looking for herbs or roots that only grew in untraveled locations. He tried to find anything that He did not know about. He searched and searched and found nothing. What he did find was he was lost and had no idea which way was out or even home.

He wandered for days. He had been in the wild before on hunting trips with Ray. There is always food for one who knows. The weird thing was there was a large gray owl who seems to be following him. He has seen it at least a dozen times so far. One time he thought it had even left a rabbit for him to find when he was especially hungry, not having found anything more than roots that day.

He wandered for quite some time. In someways this was good. It allowed him to think about what he was and what he wanted to do. He knew he needed to see and experience more. Not the shaman induced dreams, but real things. Things no one has seen before, or at least no one he knew. His village was similar to ours about thirty people lived there."

"Bet there was no one named Manaco," he made it obvious he does not like his name, but he does not remember what he looked like when he was born. I smile which infuriated him even more. Flora laughs, sticks her tongue out with the same coming from Manaco.

"Maybe we have read enough for tonight." That shuts them up.

"He sees light! He has found the end of the forest. Has anyone in his village ever found the edge before? He runs down the small hill. Everything is strange. What are those shapes in the distance? He passes through huge farm fields. How do they grow so much in one place. They are doing it all wrong too. Only one item per field. That won't work. It will only draw the pests in. He searches the plants but does not find any. How can that be?

He sleeps that night in the field of corn. They are tall enough to hide him, he hopes. It works. Raw corn is not the best breakfast, but better than going hungry. It goes on forever. The strange structures don't appear to be getting any closer. He walks for days and days, eating what he can find. Why are there no rabbits? Rabbits would love this place. At first he thought water would be a problem, but everyday water came out of the ground flying into the air. He did not complain and drank his fill. Uncooked food and strange tasting water did what you would expect and he was having digestive problems. That slowed him down in a painful way.

He really needed meat or at least cooked food. He had no pot and a fire would alert attention, so he kept going. Eventually he reached a fenced in area. This was a new concept to him, but he was good at figuring things out and found a way in by opening a latch, which of course he had to study. He might have to make one at some point. Inside were strange birds running around. They did not appear to be afraid of him at all, nor did they beg food from him like the small blue birds and larger black ones in his own village. The little ones became so tame they would eat out of your hand. Younger ones love them. These were many times the size of even the larger black birds and a lot rounder. Nothing must hunt them.

As there was no one around to ask about them his hunger got the better of him and he grabbed one, broke its neck so it would not alert anyone and took it out of the area. Not wanting to eat it raw, he built a small fire he hoped would not be noticed and ate his fill. After giving thanks for the blessing of this bird's life of course. Tired from his large meal, he put out the fire with sand and lay down to rest.

He awoke to a sound, only to feel a sharp pain in his leg and fall asleep again. When he woke for the second time he was in a metal cage.

He had never seen this much metal in one place before. He tried the bars, but they were too strong. Curious as to what was going on, he yelled out for someone to come and let him out, please.

A man came dressed in very strange clothing like nothing he had seen before. When the man spoke he could not understand a single word. He shoved some food under the door and left. The food was very strange. The bowl it was in was strange. There was a clear container with a clear liquid in it. Playing with it he finally figured out how to remove the small top. He spilled half before he understood, but he was able to drink the rest. Water, but like in the fields, it smelled funny and did not taste all that good either.

All of his belongings were gone. Why? The man came by once a day, judging from the timing of the strange light overhead, which would suddenly turn off, not gradual at all. He slept and exercised to pass the time. Where was he and why did the man talk funny? He was not so sure he liked this adventure game at the moment.

Days later two men came to the door at once. One opened the door and the other pointed a stick at him. Rude. He quickly grabbed the stick and dropped it on the ground. They are slow. Strange. However this clearly surprised the two. They each took an arm and proceeded to take him somewhere. Equally rude, but this time he was curious and wanted to see someplace other than the cage.

After going through many tunnels with straight sides he was brought to a very large cage with many people inside. Most were sitting on strange objects, but the ones similar to the two males who brought him were standing in a ring on the outside. The two with him motioned for him to sit on one of the strange objects. He looked to see how others were doing this and copied them. There was an incredibly flat large table in front of him and everyone else. Some were talking lowly to each other, but he could understand no one. It grew quiet. Clearly they were waiting for something.

A moment later a new person opened a door and walked in. I know him! The man in the gray robe. He waved so he would notice and he smiled back at him. He comes over and sits on the object next to Andi.

"Andi, how are you doing? You are a long way from home."

"I am very happy to see you. I have no idea where I am or who these people are. I cannot understand a word they say. Your water tastes horrible," he said. Gray man laughs at this, says something in the new people's way and they laugh nervously too.

A conversation ensues between the gray man and the others in the

room. Everyone seems calm at least. Is this a good sign? Eventually some conclusion is reached and they get up to leave. Andi starts to get up, but the gray man holds him down. They are alone in the room.

"I know you have many questions and they will be answered in time. For now, you are to come with me. I will bring you to a teaching area where you can learn our language and ways. No one will hurt you, if you don't hurt them. All will be taken care of. No more killing chickens and eating them."

"What's a chicken?" Gray man smiles, then gets up. Andi does the same.

The trip takes some eighths inside several types of moving cages. Gray man is with Andi, so he does not get frightened. Looking out the clear hard area Andi sees the tall structures he first noticed when he came out of the forest. Gray man tells him this is the City. There are people inside all of those structures. How many? More than Andi can count. How can this be? They will destroy the plants and animals around them this way. He keeps quiet though. Time for learning.

They get off the moving cage and walk a short ways to a forested area. Andi is overjoyed to see trees again. He is led to a much smaller structure made from wood this time. There is no door, just an open passage. He is led inside and shown where his space is, the eating space, the waste space and the learning space. He is instructed that as long as he stays in the forest area he will be fine. He is given a device to wear that will instruct him when he should be where. This is very strange to him. He never needed to be told before.

When he comes out of the living area he sees others there as well. Several come up to him. They are not Hu. Gray man does not show any concern and introduces him to them.

"The bat like sentient is called a Ba and her name is Alessa. The bird like sentient is called a Ku and she is called Flor." He then switches to a new language which Andi does not understand, but he hears his name being said. They both bow to him, which he does in return.

"I need to learn your language." Gray man smiles.

"It has been a long day for you. Go to the eating area and get some food, then some sleep. We will talk again in the morning." He bows to Andi, who returns the gesture. Apparently this is how they respect each other here. When he goes to his space the large gray owl is waiting for him, sitting on a perch fast asleep.

"You have known all along this is where I belong." The owl opens an eye, sees him and then closes it again.

Who Knows, Who Cares

"Where are we?"

"Does it matter as long as we are away from that freeing M.O.T.H.E.R.?"

"I remember reading about the one in the journals, but prayed to heaven we would never meet one."

"Now we have. May we never meet another one."

"Amen!"

"Did not know you were religious Rand." Ha-ha!

"I was becoming religious over there." Drup backs me up. White snarls, but lets it go.

"I want a nice quiet earth. No sentients, dangerous bugs or beasts. Right temperature."

"Is that all? How about some beautiful fems too?"

"I don't care as long as they leave me alone." Everyone laughs at that.

"We are bound to find one sooner or later right?"

White snarls again, "Like one in a billion. Sure, no problem. There in a jiffy as you Hu say."

"Well, this black world sucks."

"But no one is trying to hijack our brains and abilities for its own purposes. I like this better."

"Ah, but it did get the old adrenaline going again. Never felt so alive as when thinking that even a TK9 could die."

"Damn fine limiters that thing had. You have to acknowledge it was good."

"Why are the 'thn coming after us? That thing was scary. You would think it was much more of a threat than us."

"Ah, but it did not have our knowledge. It could not DS or built star ships."

"Yet."

"Could we get a few more worlds away, like a few thousand maybe. It probably knows it is possible now. I really don't want to be around when it figures it out."

"Nothing like three nines showing up on your doorstep to give the secret away. We got sloppy."

"Real sloppy. Next time we send in companions and do a full surveillance first."

"Agreed."

Still in the state of shock and mortal fear, we wait a few more days.

Then we spend time making a star ship we can actually live in if we have to. Nothing temp this time. Backup everything, especially life support and propulsion. Both 'thn and AuC tech. No more surprises. Yeah, weapons too. We never thought we would need anything like that. But close range a rail gun is perfect and does not require TK tech, just charged batteries and a lot of luck.

We move a few more jumps over, okay maybe a few thousand. We are scared still. Maybe never get over it.

"Green world below. Send out the companions." We all send ours out in an agreed upon pattern. Six companions can cover a large amount of surface, but of course, not everything.

"We could make more?"

"Yeah, never bothered to learn. It was on my bucket list, but then, well, Alexandria happened."

"Yeah. As if a M.O.T.H.E.R. was not enough, we still have 'thn and super 'thn to worry about too."

"It won't be ours this time. We are in another one's territory."

"What are the odds they have all been told?"

"Certainty. That's why if we detect anything remotely sentient we scam. They rarely visit the pre-sentient worlds."

"I hope." I nod agreement.

We spend several eight days checking it out. We scan from orbit as well. That gives nine sentients scanning. No more surprises. All of the companions come back intact. Good sign.

We can find nothing more complex than seaweeds. The land is covered in mosses and fungi. No trees, no animals above creatures that look pre-cambrian.

"Is everyone in agreement?" I ask and White and Drup nod.

"Okay, two at a time. Different locations. The last one, trading off, stays up here. As agreed, Rand and White go first." Stupid me.

"North or south?" White asks me. I shrug.

"All the same to me." He is gone. Guess I get to figure out where he is and chose a different spot. The companions said the atmosphere was breathable and similar in temperature to present Earth Two. Works for me. I head for the tropics. I was spoiled being at Crab Cove and Hawaii. I am really up for sitting in a lounge chair under an umbrella. Blue water, gentle waves.

"And hurricanes! Shit Rand, look before you leap!" I am soaking wet when I manage to get far enough away to be in the sun again. I scan and

it is coming towards me. Of course it is. I pop to the other side of it.

"Can't leave you alone for a moment." White is right next to me.

"Got sort of jumpy and distracted worried about another you-know-who."

"She is not here, you can say her name."

"Not me. Never again. Well, boring, but nothing is attacking us at least."

"Yet."

"Don't do that White!" I am scanning all around me now.

"You did pick a nice spot Rand, even if it was random. I could tolerate it for a bit."

Something lands on me and I freak out, brushing it off.

White nearly dies laughing, "A piece of dried seaweed. You need to get your spine back. Someone took it."

"SHE did." He nods but does not smile.

"Go back up and let Drup see this. Leave your companions here with mine." I was about to tease him about being afraid now, but decide not to, nod and go back up.

"That was fast. Something wrong?" Drup is sitting back taking it easy.

"Lock onto White and go see for yourself." He looks suspicious, but sighs and pops out.

We spend several days popping back and forth, never all three down there at once, before we decide we are okay. In the mean time when Drup and I are down on rotation we build structures, my precious lounge chairs, umbrellas and cool beverages. Drup starts working on a ship.

"Really? There are only three of us."

"And six companions. They can TK you know. Should be able to sub for crew."

"They did know the Black Wind II as well as we did. Yeah, that makes sense. They may actually enjoy doing something real."

"We could, oh, I don't know, ask them?" Drup is smiling at me. They are sentient, they have a say. I really need to stop ordering them around. They did save us after all.

White comes down without his companions.

"They thought it would be better if at least they stayed up above."

"You asked them?"

"Of course. Why do you ask? You do ask yours right?"

I don't answer.

"Rand, you can't disrespect them that way."

"Yeah, I am figuring that out. Understand for a very long time they

were on their own. Total freedom to go and do whatever they wanted. I took them for granted I guess."

"Hey guys, come here a moment." They pop in next to me.

"Ah, what would you like your names to be? Does not feel right my naming you like a pet. You should decide."

They touch each other floating in front of me. Their way of com without my hearing. A red dot appears on one and a blue dot on the other. Never could tell them apart before.

The red one bobs, *I am Pop.*

The blue one bobs, *I am Weasel.* Cute.

Hey, I am sorry I have been disrespecting you all this time. Please, feel free to offer advice, opinions, whatever, whenever you want. We were meant to be a team, not master and slave.

This would mean we are free to leave whenever we want?

And never come back if we want? Gulp.

I sigh, *Yes, it also means that. I hope you will stay, but I will not force you.*

We will stay.

For now. In other words do not take them for granted again.

I have a question now that we are equals, are you finding enough to keep you curious and interested in our travels?

There is a pause. Likely they have never faced this question before.

You will not be mad at us? Have I ever been mad at them? Probably, though likely not them directly, just the situation.

"Hey, Rand, are you coming?" I wave I will be a moment.

How do you think I see you?

We are useful. We could be much more.

I smile, *Then please be much more. I would like this very much.*

They both pop out and I go to see what Drup wants.

White and Drup have made a dock and are nearly finished with a ship. A little smaller than either of the Black Winds. The companions do not take up much space and we do not need to sleep anyone, much less a crew of thirty or more.

I make my way to the gang plank and begin to come aboard. I am met on deck with both White and Drup staring at me. I know that look.

"What? What did I do this time?"

White asks, "A very good question. What did you do? The companions have all disappeared. I can't raise mine."

"I can't either."

"I didn't do anything to your companions. Drup thought I was not re-

specting mine, so I fixed it."

"How?"

"I, ah, gave them their freedom. I am no longer their master and they are not my slaves. We are equals."

"You do know they talk to each other right?" I nod.

White turns to Drup, "That explains it though." He nods.

They watch me as I examine the ship. I see problems.

"If they are to be willing crew, then we need to design things that are easy for them to use. Yes, they can TK obviously, but it is not intuitive how they are to pull robes and fasten them. These are all designed for Hu, not Comp."

"Comp?"

"You all agree they are sentient right?" They nod.

"Then they deserve the respect of having their own sen handle. Comp being short of Companion. They saved our butts on M.O.T.H.E.R. right? They are our equals. You would not treat Hu or Di TK7s any different would you?"

White turns to Drup, "Now see what you have done? You have created a monster?"

"He has found religion for sure. Wonder if it is possible to deprogram him somehow?"

"My thoughts exactly. Maybe M.O.T.H.E.R. got to him after all."

"You could be right. Keel haul or walk the plank?" I find myself tied up at the end of a plank stretching out over the water. I DS out of it and let the rope fall into the sea.

"Stop it. You made your point. But I am right. They are better as team members than as grunts. They have proven themselves, just as we had to do to get where we are. Silver could have left Drup and I on Magenta, but he didn't. We showed we could handle an unknown situation and make it work.

Mine have decided to call themselves Pop and Weasel. They chose their names. I did not assign them. You should do the same." I turn my backs on them and go ashore.

I make a cold drink and sit in a lounge chair. Not working for me. I make a bubble and go under the sea. We are still within the earth froth, yet this feels like a Farout world. This world is just as old as ours, in a good location in relation to the sun and moon. Actually no moon, just a debris field. The moon never really formed here or broke up when the world impacted the earth some four billion years ago. There are still tides, but very predictable solar tides at noon and midnight and unless there is a

rare unpredictable storm, always the same height and depth.

They never had to deal with uncertainty here. They adapted to get as far as they needed to get by and then stopped. Likely life has been like this from nearly the beginning. Silver told us in one of his many talks, life needs struggle to succeed. Seems counter intuitive, but I think I am finally getting it. We try so hard to avoid hardship, we even did the same on Earth Two for the Hu. When hardship finally came anyway, we tried to fix it. We blew it! We totally blew it.

What was Silver's first choice for our name? Not TK. I think about it as I am watching the life just outside my bubble. Then I remember. He called us Watchers. That is our purpose and reason for existence. We report back to the local OM when needed. She can't work at our sped up time scale. We are her eyes and ears. It will never happen here. This is a failed world, same as a brown or black. Shit.

Also explains how we pissed off the 'thn. We were failures.

What are the rest of our TK friends doing right now? Are they repeating these mistakes on new worlds? How do I warn them? Hell, would anyone believe me? Some thoughts I had while on a peaceful world. I would not believe me either. Mute point. I have no idea where we are much less where anyone else is.

A Comp with a red dot appears, *Hello Rand*. That is new. I like it.

Hi Pop. See anything interesting? Weasel comes in a moment later.

Hi Weasel. You good? I think that confuses them. Too much too soon?

They hang in the air next to me.

The way this works, is you don't owe me anything. Talk or don't talk. Up to you. You are free to participate in any discussion, as equals. If someone asks a question of ANY of us, it is not a command. Just a question they are hoping you can answer. I know this will take time. Change is not easy. I need to change too. You are free to call me on any mistakes. Pay attention to White and Drup, they will show you how. They don't let me get away with anything.

We wanted to report that there is trouble three jumps over.

Oh, sorry. What kind? Oh, please not another M.O.T.H.E.R.

There are early TKs present. Level three at the moment, but twelve of them so far.

This means natural, not made. A 'thn only chooses one.

It will only be a matter of time before they figure out how up to a higher level.

What gifts do they have? Please not DS.

They follow the Hu line so far. That means scan, TK and molecular.

Safe for now.

What form do they take? Pop sends me an image. I was expecting strange, but they almost look Hu, if you include trolls and goblins. I am sure we would look equally ugly to them. I have seen a lot of different sens. There were some really bizarre ones at the galactic center, as would be expected.

Now the weird thing is, in our section of the froth, there are sens on either side of us, for some distance. Why not here? Do you two have any ideas?

We will investigate. We are not used to being independent. We will learn.

I am sure you will. Good hunting. They pop out. I have to learn this too.

I go back to the ship and stand on the dock until they notice. They pretend not to for some time. I finally say, "We have neighbors in case either of you two are interested. TK neighbors."

We have a Catbox waiting.

Bug Eden

We will need to tell them soon. They are not idiots and this is not making any sense to them. They still have their abilities and can jump.

Where will they go? There are no green worlds for hundreds in every direction. We picked this place for a reason.

You picked this place because you had such a good time last time. By the way, the Queen? Did I have to be the Queen? This sucks. I was better off as a turtle.

You would put that on someone else? Besides, you know why we are here. They just aren't ready. We are about to ask them to do something that goes counter to everything they know.

They need more practice killing you mean.

That is part of it, but not everything. Killing is easy once they understand, but it is hard. They will understand once they figure it out for themselves. Our training up to this point has been soft. We took a wrong turn and are trying to fix it.

I liked the paradise model. It was so . . .

Peaceful. Well vacation is over. Maybe in your next life you can be a slug.

And get eaten by a goose. No thank you.

Yeah and a mad ninja bug is so much better.

And not quick either. We keep them alive as long as possible. Hot blood tastes so much better.

Unless you are the one being eaten. Total lie that bugs feel no pain. We just don't have facial expressions to show our agony.

The Raps and Di like it here. They get to run their hearts out, all five of them.

Ha, they are still under the silly illusion that we get to stop running at some point. We have five hearts for a reason.

Yeah, spares.

How are the kids doing?

As expected, ahead of schedule and waiting for us.

Of course they are. Best decision we ever made.

Edwin Eden

Over ten thousand years in a colony. Never alone, never any peace. Being with Myra and the others was good. This is better. Just me and Jack. He wanted to be a 'thant so bad, but I suspect he really wanted the colony experience in order to hide from himself. We can hide from ourselves just fine here for as long as it takes.

When I read about the original Edwin I fell in love immediately. How did Myra know? She had never met a lone male 'thant before. If we hadn't met I was due to be Warrior chow. She saved my life. I just hope that all I did helped in return.

The original Edwin nailed it as the Hu say. This is perfect. I have found over fifty species so far and that was from using an old earth guide. I wanted to recreate the experience as closely as possible. I like it. The RV is as close as I can get to the original description. I have old light microscopes, slides, and the necessary chemicals to test reactions to help identify them. Of course, they evolved differently here. I cheated and used TK to figure out the differences and adapted.

I close up the RV and head out with my pack. Jack shows up next to me.

"What do you think Jack? Where should we go today? Why don't you lead the way today. Something new." I have been all over this place, I really doubt that Jack can find someplace new, but she needs to take initiative once in a while. I know she wanted to be a 'thant so she wouldn't have to, but for a scout, it is essential.

Jack takes off at a run, the only speed a scout knows beside hide and watch. I run after her. Gender is a problem. Though Jack was born a male, scouts are fem. Not that it matters here. We are not in a colony. All this running is good for keeping this form in shape at least. I doubt the original Edwin had to run to get specimens. It's good for me.

I remember Squeak loved to run. Puu and Cat always getting into heated discussions, getting an aha moment and then rushing into their secret lab to come out days later with a new incredible creation even Silver and Turtle did not know was possible.

About that, I have read the records on a thousand worlds. Studied for thousands of years. Trying to figure it out. Yeah, I get it, we blew it. We thought we were doing the right thing. I thought so too, even if I was more cautious than the others. I am used to playing the long game. We, that is 'thants, play the long game. This will work itself out. Just be pa-

tient.

Wait, where is Jack going? Have I been here before? How did Jack find this place? Jack has been with me on many runs, but this is the first time I let her, off leash, so to speak. I have certainly picked up a lot of Hu expressions. We don't have those in 'thant. No fun 'thants. That's us.

Jack slows down and starts sniffing around, well using her antennae. Poking into crevices. There she goes off again. I remember dogs from visits to pre-collapse earth. Jack is acting like a dog. I run after her though. Glad I don't have to clean up afterwards. 'thant poo is not nice.

A few moments later she stops. She is waiting for me apparently.

thDo we have this species Edwin?th

I scrape some of it up and examine with a hand lens. This does look new. I put the sample in a specimen bag.

"Will have to check it back at the lab, but I think you found a new one Jack. Good job. I am actually really impressed. You are in charge tomorrow too." Jack shows the equivalent of happiness for a scout. Yeah, you kinda of have to have been a 'thant to see it. More a pheromone thing.

"Let's stop by the 'thant trap on the way back. Haven't been there in awhile." Jack leads the way at a run of course.

Number fifty one. I love this place.

The ten kilos of 'thant metal remains undisturbed. Maybe next time.

I am secretly hoping it never happens. 'thant don't take kindly to outsider colonies in their space. I could change Jack so she fit in, but then she would be anonymous and I would lose her forever. She may be hoping it will happen though. Do our thoughts cancel each other out?

There is a Catbox waiting for us when we return. I really hate those things. I press the top to open it, reach inside and remove the scrap of paper. It is written in our particular dialect of 'thant. I sigh relief. Just a progress report. Everything is progressing as expected. Stay awake and ready.

I have to remember, everything has a lifespan. Nothing is forever. Not even this wonderful vacation.

I take the new lichen, #51, to the microscope and begin my analysis. Jack puts things away and gets ready for tomorrow's run. I am really going to be upset if she finds another one so close to us. The rule is if we don't find any new ones for a lunar, then we move to a new location. This is our third move. I have to wonder what I missed in the first two locations that would have been found if I had let Jack help look. Sigh...

Maybe these emotions are a Hu thing and my being in Hu form are natural. There were some advantages to being 'thant I guess. Here we are,

Jack and I always wishing to be something we are not. We get our wish. I have to wonder if Jack is having any second thoughts too.

Sy Eden

=Bring the 'visitors' in.=

I hate visitors after what happened to us so many years ago. So many died. We will never make that mistake again. Still, not wise to discard an opportunity either. Take what we can from them and then kill them.

Three of them. Not Sy, not Wg either. What the dammed are they? I have never seen creatures living or dead so ugly. The little one especially. The larger ones could prove useful though. I can imagine them in a battle. With full gear they would scare the enemy Wg before a thrust was thrown.

Together the three bow in the proper manner. Who taught them?

I ask, =Who are you? Why are you here?= I don't expect an answer, how could they understand a single thing I say and show. It gives me time to think. There is a Scary on either side of me, just in case. Nor will they get any closer. Surprisingly they are not armed. Who goes between camps not armed?

The small one answers me, =We are here to serve you Great Sy, leader of the Ofa people. Only to serve.= It's accent is perfect. Only the inner circle proclaims so well. The small one might be male, but it's beginnings are so tiny. How could it possibly make a child? He did not introduce himself, which is seen as very rude. Still they are strangers with strange ways.

=What is your calling?=
=You may call and use the three of us anyway you wish.=

Only a servant pledging allegiance would humble themselves so. Why? What trick is this?

=Hagg, come forward.= My best warrior comes forward, does the proper bow and awaits my instructions. She is heavily scarred, which in and of itself settles most arguments. The smallest one is likely of no use to me and can be sacrificed. If the others do not try to avenge its death, they may be useful. If they try, a Scary will kill them and this meeting will be over in a satisfactory manner.

=Hagg, kill the little one. No mercy.=

=Great Sy, it is unarmed.= Trying to indicate it is not a fair fight. I never intended it to be a fair fight. Likely it has some skill Hagg is not prepared for and I don't want to lose my best warrior.

Remarkably, the little one comes forward, bows to Hagg and takes a fighting stance indicating it is ready. Unarmed. Being naked it can't hide

anything can it? None of them have manes, so a poison could not be hidden there. Some creatures have poison spines or bites. I don't see or sense anything. Hagg looks to me and I hand to proceed.

A space is cleared and they circle each other giving measure. Hagg knows her duty, removes a basik from her belt and swings to kill. The little one easily moves aside. Hagg, being more careful this time tries again and again misses. She throws the weapon down and goes for an arm kill. Yes, crush the bug. Make it suffer for its impudence. In the meantime, the other two show no emotions, can they? They remain motionless and do not attempt to help their companion.

A moment after Hagg should have made contact, Hagg is on the ground on her back, stunned. She rolls over quickly and tries again to the same effect. The little one turns its back on her. The ultimate insult. Basically saying Hagg is a coward and not worth notice. Be careful Hagg, this one is crafty and dangerous. I signal the Scary on each side to be ready. They acknowledge. Each has a hand full of very hard quartz balls ready to attack with. I have seen them in practice. A few more Scary and I would not need an army. Never understood why they never tried to take over. Just glad I have these two with me.

A Scary is forbidden in battle of course and the reason why no ruler ever has more than two. The first leader who figures out how to gain more will rule the world. I did not even have a say on who. They disappear when an old ruler dies and two new ones arrive when a new leader appears, often after many years of battle.

Hagg is getting exhausted trying to even catch the little one. It does not appear to be tired at all. Jumps around like a Wg high on assa weed. Normally this would make it easy to kill, just like with the Wg. The only reason we need fear the Wg is that they breed much faster and can overcome a camp by numbers. Fortunately, they prefer a wetter area and usually leave us alone. Only starvation brings them to us or us to them.

Hagg knows that unless she can defeat this one, she will be shamed and never fight again. Death would be preferable, either one dying will do. I have just lost my best. I am not happy about it.

Hagg reaches for her poison pouch. A coward's way, but this is an extreme case clearly and no one will fault her for it. But, when she throws the darts, the little one easily bats them out of the way. It even catches a few out of the air. Now it is armed as well. Instead it does a most remarkable thing. It purposely stabs the three darts it has into its arm and legs. Nothing appears to happen. Hagg is watching in shock as are we all. It finally removes the darts and lets them fall, only to assume a battle stance

again.

I signal the Scary on my right and she launches a barrage of balls at the little one. Hagg steps aside and smiles.

Not a single one hit him. What? I signal the second Scary he lets loose. Again nothing. The quartz balls just seem to disappear. The two Scary are confused, as am I.

=Is that all? Do you always treat guests this way? Very rude.=

=What are you? What do you want?=
=We have been over this. We want to help.=

=You are Scaries?=
=Of course.=

=All three of you?=
=Yes.=

=Of course.=

=All three of you?=
=Yes.=

=Yes.=

=Three in one place is illegal. This is not allowed.=

=Says who?=
=This is the way it has always been.=

=This is the way it has always been.=

=Ah, tradition. Sorry, tradition is worthless. You could be so much more if you abandoned it.=

The largest one finally says something, =For example, did you know that if you gather eight Scary around a ninth, you can raise the one to a higher level, like ten times as strong and a new talent as well. Win-win.=

How can this be?

=We have been this way for thousands of years. We have always done it this way.=

=How many wars have you had? How many have died? You still live like peasants, scraping the ground and raiding your neighbors, rebuilding at the last raid on you. There is a better way, if you want to take it. We can show you how. It will take time. You have a lot to unlearn as well as learn.=

=And if I say no?=
=Then we leave you in peace and you can continue to slaughter each as you like.=

=Then we leave you in peace and you can continue to slaughter each as you like.=

=I will need time to think.=

=Then you won't mind it we tour your fine camp in the meantime.

Find something interesting to eat.=

=You will scare everyone to ground looking like that.= I want to crawl under a rock myself, but have to look brave.

=We don't intend to look like this.= All three of them morph before our eyes into Sy. The little one gets bigger and the two large ones get smaller. When they finish they look like anyone else in the room, com-

plete with armor, patches and clothes.

=What are you?=-

=What you can become if you want.=

They leave without using a gate. They just vanish. This has been a very bad day. I doubt anyone will even admit what they saw. We would be seen as insane.

Wg Eden

||Strange things have been happening Wisdom.||

||Explain.||

||Scary stuff. Large boulders have been moved. Too large for us to move easily. Only a pair of Scary could do this.||

||What is the problem then?||

||They are perfectly placed. It is a design we do not know about. The ponds have risen a meter already, yet flow is maintained. The harvest this year should be better than previous years.||

||Someone is helping us. Figure out what they did and repeat it for the other ponds. And find out who is doing this. A Wg who could improve can also destroy. We are not like the Sy, we do not fight each other all the time. Cooperative behavior is more efficient and new behaviors can be learned.||

||Understood Wisdom.||

It is strange though. We heard the rumors about the closest Sy camp. Some strange creatures showed up there and beat their best warrior. We are much smaller and weaker and depend on stealth and poisons when confronted. Even our skin is poisonous to Sy. They usually use arrows against us for that reason. We are good at hiding use poison darts in return. We never initiate an attack, but we will defend ourselves.

I make my way to the food ponds. We are heavily dependent on them for a growing population. Sure, we migrate to new areas and we have a network of helper routes set up if an area suffers a disaster. When at a pond, I go to the outlet. There are some new boulders. They obviously came from below the water. There is still a lot of moss drying out on them. The fit is exceptional. Uki was correct. This is definitely an improvement. I get closer and study how it was done. Looks simple enough. How come we did not figure this out ourselves?

A Warrior sees me and comes closer.

||Wisdom, something strange has happened?||

||You too? Show me.||

S/he opens their hand and shows me. Poison darts.

||I am not a Warrior, so please explain.||

||Better to show you. You see the Acas tree over there?|| I affirm.

||This is our usual dart.|| The tree is too far away and sure enough s/he just misses.

||Good try, but the tree is too far away.||

||You see the knot on the tree part way up?|| I affirm.

Sh/e loads the new dart into the tube and tries again. It hits right in the center of the knot. I toot surprise.

||Why are you here Wisdom? I tried to find you in the learning place first.||

I point to the damn, ||Someone improved the damn as well. I am guessing it could double our food supply next year. And they did it to all of our ponds.||

A Healer comes up to the two of us.

||You will not believe this.||

We both say, ||An improvement to a healing salve.||

||How did you know? They even left a description on how to make more. It is complex, but we have the materials.||

A Counter comes up to the three of us. We all stare at them, showing humor.

||What is so funny? This is serious.||

Healer says, ||A better way to do figures.|| They affirm.

Two more start to come towards us.

||Meeting space now.|| I announce. When I get there it is clear that every area of understanding is represented by at least one Wg.

No one saw anything. This is the strangest part because of the Sy, we have Watchers on duty at all times.

A Watcher comes up to me holding something I have not seen before and holds it out to me, indicating I am to place it over an eye. We see exceptionally well in the dark, so I can't imagine how this could be an improvement. Still, I try it.

I have to remove it then place it there over and over to believe it. I hand it back.

The Watcher tells me, ||Our guild made this ourselves, following the details left in our workshop by someone. We worked all night we were so excited.||

||What is happening? Has anyone seen anything at all?|| Our hearing is not so good. A definitely weakness. Wonder if there are any gifts for that.

No one has one. We will accept the gifts of course and share them up and down the coast with other Wg colonies.

A Sy will drown rather than swim. They do not float, nor have the hands and feet to move well. A Wg will dry out and die further inland. Normally we do not trouble each other, but when they do, because of hunger, it is easiest for us to just swim out to sea. We can remain indefinitely under water. We always lose some to an attack, but not many. Guild

leaders are well protected for this reason.

What we fear the most are the Scary. They can propel a stone faster than we can see and move away from it, and with precision. Our new darts could change that.

SyWg Eden

"That's weird. Hey White, have you seen the companions?"

"Nope, not since we got here."

"Hmm, the last time I saw them was when we got the Catbox and they were very curious about it."

"They were all over it for some reason. Never seen them do that before."

Rand comes up. He seems to enjoy the Sy form. Maybe because we are all the same size. Even when we were Hu, I was always larger.

"Rand, have you seen the companions?"

"Have you tried calling them by their names?"

"Of course, but they are not responding."

"No, their true names."

"What do you mean, I named mine same as you. Of course I know their names."

Rand sighs, "That is their slave name. You need to ask them what they prefer to be called for their free name."

"What the guano are you talking about Rand? Have you been eating that loco loco stuff they have here. That really packs a punch."

He ignores me and walks away.

I admit it would be fun to show up at a Hu settlement in this form. Not the fastest form, but we can tweak that by going into fast time with TK. That was funny watching Rand use just a touch to take down their warrior. Soft brown thing doing it to a huge hardened troll like creature.

White comes up to me, "Can't raise mine either. What's going on?"

"Rand said something about using their free name instead of their slave name."

"They agreed to be here to let us know how it went with the Wg."

"Then they will be here. Relax Drup. You are getting too stressed."

"No, I am pissed. I thought we were free to do our own thing and then that damn Catbox shows up telling us what to do again. I would rather be on Earth Two on a good ship than here."

"I thought you liked adventure?" White smiles, which in this form looks truly hideous.

"What, do I have a bug on my face?"

"Sorry, still getting used to this form."

"Makes no difference to me. At least we have something to do. It was getting really boring. We are not that good at entertaining ourselves. We

need to be on a project. Or at least I do." Could always go back to M.O.T.H.E.R., though maybe a bit too exciting?

I sigh, which sounds like a gross slurping sound, "I get it."

Pilot

^Pilot, we have a Catbox.^ I place it on her desk. She does not look happy about it. I leave. We are not in danger of going rogue, but we can still get mad at situations.

We have finished pushing the rest of Alexandria into the star. We had a little memorial ceremony to honor all the lives lost and a world lost. I was not there very long, but even my memories were good. Can't believe I let a Hu teach me advanced leaf cutting. Oh if the guild ever learned a clumsy Hu out did them. I smile. Of course he used TK to become Ba in form, but did not use any to do the actual art. Had he maintained his Hu form he would never have been allowed in the hall.

I meet Ily in the food room and make myself some hot bug juice. Can't stand coffee. Pilot lives on the stuff. Ily can drink it if forced, but he will drink bug juice, though not his drink of choice.

^I put the Catbox on her desk. Not happy.^

+Those things always mean trouble. I am not happy either. I want to know how they survived to even send it to us.+

Guano, she is coming this way. Prepare for bad news.

We both stare at her when she comes in. She ignores us and gets some coffee. Adds sugar and cocoa to it. Not good. She sits at the table with us and sips her coffee.

"I opened the Catbox." And?

She notices us staring at her.

She sighs.

I am going to die. What is going to happen to us? What do we have to do now?

"Prepare to leave the system. We are going back to Cyan to pick up the Mothership and some of the crew we need."

And?

She sighs again. Not good.

"We need to make a transport ship capable of carrying tens of thousands. Species unknown at this time. So, a flexible interior."

^Hmm, all species need temp and light control, access to food and water, waste disposal. I think we can be flexible. Even with the species we already host there is some of that built in.^

+But tens of thousands? Where are we getting the mass from? We can't just take a planet apart and there is very little else out here.+

She sighs again, "We are to use what is left of Alexandria."

We all laugh. I am so tired of pushing rock and then find out we did not need to. What else can you do but laugh.

^Yellow and Magenta need different atmospheres. Wait are the fleet remnants still in orbit around the three? There is our mass. May even be partially built for us.^

"Great idea! I am still tired from pushing rocks. The training areas are already able to handle different environmental conditions too."

+It would be good to have lots of bulkheads for emergencies anyway. Maybe design this as a sort of bubble complex?+

"We are definitely going to spend time thinking about this before we do anything. We did leave those ship's there for a reason remember. Just in case sens just could not make it in their new worlds."

+Yeah, I certainly did not volunteer. You two are stinky, but whoa, those places reaked.+

^Ha-ha batshit. You are not flower either.^ They both smile and look at me.

"I have no disagreement. Hu stink. Find me an alternative to using the current ships for anything other than a master template to copy from."

^Yellow has a tiny asteroid belt, but if you thought pushing rock was bad here, gathering those rocks up is orders of magnitude worse. A lot of distance between dust particles.^

"But available. This is a crazy idea, but why can't we remove mass from a star directly."

+Even for a TK9 that is still very close and most of the mass will be hydrogen and helium. That is a lot of conversion to do.+

^But a possibility. We build machines to do the lifting and conversion for us, then send product in an outward trajectory. It could work.^

"We are starting to think like The Three. That is very scary."

^But also very exciting. I need to 'figure it out' to advance to nine. Sounds like a good project to do.^

+Speaking of which, how did you do it Pilot?+

"Navigation of course. I can instantly go from one end of the multi-verse to another. Simple really, but it took a lot of brain hitting to get there." They look at me like I have some big secret, which I do, but it is cheating to just tell someone the answer.

Grunt time. I hope they were not expecting all this to happen quickly. Damn Catboxes anyway. Where are they and what the hell is this all about. If I figure it out can I advance to TK10+ like The Three and probably Silver and Turtle also?

Crab Cove

"Mother, how much of that book can you actually read? I can't make out a single word."

"I was stumped at first too, but figured out it was written in an old language not used any more, Chin. One of the books saved from the fires years and years ago was a dictionary. More modern, but it helps. Some of the words do match. The rest, as you have guessed, is me making it up as I go along."

I smile at Mother. She is doing a great job even so. I am sure she is doing way better than she admits even to herself. As with any work, you develop an intuitive sense for things eventually.

"I am worried about Macaco. He seems to be drifting towards the blood arts."

"You mean hunting? Everyone does that. Even I catch the occasional rabbit and such. We get weak if we don't get enough protein."

"No, he has been hanging out with the Protectors."

She sighs, "We would of course hope he does not take that path, but it is his right if he feels called. He could be the village's salvation in the future."

"Even if it kills him. So few realize the dangers."

"Oh, and felling trees and building bridges from heavy stones is not dangerous? Picking mushrooms and berries from cliff faces is not dangerous? Even hunting a boar in wild cat country is very dangerous. We all accept the risks of our chosen path. It must be our choice though and not someone telling us what to do."

"Of course, that never works. Just builds resentment. I know. I worry though."

"That is our job Ray. Now help me fetch water. Bath night too."

"Good luck with Flora." I smile when I say this.

Mother just smiles and we head off to get the water. In the rains we can collect enough without fetching, but this being dry season means we have to do the work. At least it is not far.

When we return Mother is suspicious. She checks the wood pile, then goes inside to the root cellar. She comes out not convinced, but they have apparently done their chores.

I split some wood and bring it in for the cook fire. Mother nods her thanks. I go to work on a roof patch while she cooks. It is not raining now, but it will again. I prefer a dry bed.

We eat quickly. Even I want to hear the story. Cleanup happens maybe too quickly, but I dare not correct them tonight. It is story night.

Mother goes to her room to get the book. We wait around the fire pit where a small fire is going. Enough to read by.

"And so it begins. Where were we?" She does this to tease of course.

Flora answers, "At the training center with Alessa and Flor. Almost my name."

"But how can a bird speak?"

"Parrots speak don't they Macaco?" He nods. He knows this. Never mind, back to the story.

"So Andi is at the training center. First, after food, a bath and being shown his space, upon entering it, he meets his new roommates.

The first roommate he meets is a dragon! What is a dragon doing here? It snarls at him. He backs up in surprise. Then he remembers this is a safe place and this is either a student or a teacher. Always best to err on the side of caution, he bows to the dragon.

Surprisingly the dragon bows back. Student or teacher? How do you tell the age of a dragon? Or status? He looks over this companion as the dragon looks him over, possibly for dinner?

The dragon finally smiles? Then reaches out his hand in greeting? Not sure what to do, he does the same and they shake. He was expecting cold, but the hand, though scaly, felt as warm as his own.

"A pleasure to meet you. My name is Andi."

"Also a pleasure. My name is Drup, though most call me Droopi."

"Are there any others?"

"One, she is right behind you." The dragon says smiling. A she? Is it right to have her as a roommate? He turns around and sees no one. A trick. There is a pool of water, for bathing? A large stone in the middle.

He has nothing to lose, so he bows and says, "Happy to meet your acquaintance ma'am."

The stone moves and a crab slowly unfolds before him. She is the third roommate?

"How did you know?" Drup asks.

"You told me everything I needed to know. The fact you are not Hu and I have already met a Ba and a Ku would suggest there are others here as well. I only had my own shame to risk looking the fool by bowing to no one."

The crab clacks a message that Andi does not understand.

"She says the three of us may get along fine."

"I hope so. I don't even know where I am or what kind of training I

am to take."

"No one told you?" He shakes his head no.

"This should be very interesting indeed then. We have not been told either. Who brought you here, an owl or a turtle?"

"Owl. There is a Turtle as an instructor?" Drup laughs and the crab snaps her claws. He guesses this must be laughter as well.

Andi asks, "You understand her?"

"She is of the sen called Crust. You will learn."

"Not very big."

"She is still very young. At maturity she can be hundreds of times larger, especially after training."

More clacking.

"We have a long day tomorrow, especially you." Drup turns and goes to his space.

"What is her name?"

Drup shouts from his space, "Snap."

Before dawn they are woken up. The others immediately get themselves ready and start out the door, with Andi trying to keep up.

Drup tells him, "We separate here. You go that way. They will tell you what to do." Andi is confused as he is the only one going in that direction.

He follow the path to a clearing. There is no one there. He sits on a bench and waits.

An enormous turtle slowly walks in, stopping near him. He quickly gets up and does a bow. The turtle bows in return. He has guessed correctly.

"Are you my instructor?"

So, this is what the old owl has dragged in.

Andi thinks, what is this that can talk into his mind?

The turtle changes before his eyes into a Hu fem. He steps back in fear and wonder.

"At least you did not run. What do you think of your housemates?" She has a sly smile.

"Oh, they are wonderful. I am eager to learn Crust. Drup speaks Hu, but I would like to learn his language as well."

"You will if you survive. This school is very difficult. Not all pass."

"I am ready." She laughs.

"It has already begun." She removes a handful of pebbles from her pouch and proceeds to pellet him with them. He bats a few away easy enough, but they keep coming. More than could possibly fit in her pouch and increasingly fast. They sting at first when one hits him, but now they

hurt.

He gets annoyed and then angry.

"Stop, please stop."

But it continues.

"Stop thinking. Put your hands at your sides and concentrate."

The pebbles continue. The pain is so intense he forgets the pain. He gives up and drops his hands and closes his eyes. His mind opens and he sees. He SEES.

Earth One

I need a predator. I think I have found the answer. Hu are the ones I know the best. Why reinvent when I can use this knowledge to gain a faster start?

Civilizations are too complex for what I need. Would take too much time to set up in a believable manner. Besides they are used to combating others of this sort. A singular killer that also works well in a pack. Sneaky, hard to find.

Hu desire gold more than anything else, more than the lives of those close to them even. I can use this. A creature that hordes gold, but has no other material needs besides food. Something large, scary, ruthless, voracious, the stuff of nightmares. A dragon!

In the old days I was the dragon that terrorized them into gaining new skills, to master ever increasing tech. Forget the virgin part. That was just an evil ruler lusting after the pretty stupid things. Hu are so ugly, why would I want one of them. There are no Hu here to terrorize and one dragon can only do so much. I need a world full of them to conquer other worlds, to destroy everything that those two ever built. Gold is the bait for the trap. Blood is my creature's reward.

Raise them on cattle, antelope and other game, but with a preference for Hu blood. I will destroy their work!

Or so I thought. The first dozen attempts were disasters. Dragons can be amazingly stupid. Even a TK cannot create life. I had to work with the material at hand. A little of this, a little of that. Cats with a capital 'C' are no longer here, but smaller varieties are. I used their intelligence and cunning and formed a dragon from my own memories of my original form and the more recent birds. It has to fly. I should have used a little more bird. Cats are not good fliers. Pouncing skills are good though.

Ninety six attempts later I finally succeed. Well, at least something I can work with. Down to fine tuning now. Let it run for a few generations to be sure. Hu did teach me about necessary genetic variation, gene pools and such. Could have learned that from a fungi, but not important. I have a working dragon. I smile at the thought of someone doing a genetic analysis of one though.

They seek three things in life: blood, gold and of course mating. I used a lot of Cat there. They make an enormous racket going at it. The fights for male dominance are good too. Should scare the shit out of any other sentient.

I am forbidden to leave Earth One, but I need test subjects. Simple enough, make a portal to Earth Two and let some wandering Hu stumble into my hell. I smile. My dragons will stay here for now. But soon.

Last Chance

We have had to make our facility ten times our starting size. Squeak has cages and aquaria full of live specimens. I stay away. There was not a large variety of lifeforms on Mars. Really just the bare minimum to keep our ecology going. This put us at an extreme disadvantage. At least now that they have TKs they are able to fix things when it goes wrong. How did they ever do this before? I already know the answers, because I was personally a witness to their killing excess population.

Squeak comes in excited to see me moving, *Welcome back!* I have been communing with the local OM. We are using TP instead of voice. Much quieter.

It was interesting. This OM was very depressed and had given up any hope of succeeding, especially when I explained where we were. She was ready to begin to decay and die until I told here we were both TK9s and here to help. Of course she have never heard of 'thn less TK9, but I showed her it was real. She is very excited to be working with us and learning more.

Feels good to be appreciated at least. We still have a long way to go, but I think I have an answer, a land polychaete worm weighing in at nearly fifty kilos. It can manipulate its environment, build large structures, work together, which means language and social skills.

They are the ones making those huge mounds? They certainly eat a lot.

They have worked out transport using lesser species as muscle. They have only domesticated five animal species so far, plus a host of plant life of course. Oh and of course fungi.

Basically where Hu were some ten thousand years ago. Squeak nods.

I am setting up learning tasks. They passed the mirror test easily.

Do they have war? Why should this be a sign of an intelligent species is beyond me. In my mind it is a sign of a primitive one.

If the mounds are spaced far enough apart they leave each other alone. It is only when their species gets too crowded or resources scarce that they get nasty. You were gone five hundred earth years, so I have seen many cycles. They, ah, neuter many of their own to keep their numbers down, so they know how offspring happen at least.

Always a good start. I would be more impressed by a voluntary celibacy.

Is religion a good idea? Squeak asks obviously concerned.

It worked on Hu earth and Mars for awhile. Eventually tech will overrule it and provide other means to the same end. Does not matter as long as it works.

Our resident OM. I am surprised there was even one this far out. These star systems are immensely old. Earth could have gone bust and started over many, many times. How did she hold it together all this time?

Farout has always been Farout. I don't know yet if the OMs here are different or another real possibility is that this is not the first resident OM for this world.

Cycles of death and rebirth? Wouldn't entropy eventually run down the system?

We still have breathable air. That is a miracle in itself. No earth would have lasted this long. All the oxygen would have been sequestered long ago or lost to space.

Which begs the question, are we the first TKs to be banished to Farout? A high TK could easily make more of what is needed and attempt to start over as we have. Thankfully we are not starting from the black world you sent me to at first. We are nearly done here. A few million years should do it even if we weren't here.

A few hundred is more like it from what I have scanned of our progress. This OM was really depressed. We got here just in time. Good fortune for both of us. What 'thn would come all the way out here to help. In fact if some of the earlier banished TKs came here, there would have been no 'thn to mate with to raise them to nine. An OM needs the help of a nine to succeed.

We need to keep that in mind and help in that direction. I have already looked into the local plant and fungal genetics. I believe it is doable judging from Silver's notes on the New Hope spore event.

We need to thank our Companions as well then. They are our source of knowledge of events past.

They are sentient. While you were gone they insisted on choosing their own names and not being ordered about. They will choose when to answer or not, to do something or not. I have learned to treat them as equals on this project.

As we should. I have had long philosophical discussions with the ones who have chosen to remain with us. I am real careful how I phrase this statement. They are close by and listening I am sure.

How long does a multiverse last Ron?

That is hard to answer. It would have been a question for Control.

Some think that the universe has a life cycle just like we do. We come from a single cell, become an embryo, born, grow up and learn, gain wisdom hopefully, but eventually we will die as well. There have been no exceptions. We start over again in the next incarnation. This need not be a depressing thought. It is even thought that the start of a multiverse goes through many very rapid evolutions that contain intelligent cultures that last less than a millionth of a second. Of course to them it feels completely normal.

As the long slow down a trillion years from now will appear to those after us. Interesting. Well, we are here and now. Best make the most of it and do good work! She goes back into her lab.

I smile. Squeak is way too optimistic for a Martian like me.

Though it makes you think. Was there 'thn equivalents for them? For the ones who come after us? Or is each epoch unique? What happens between times? Were others treated like us, marginalized and pushed to extremes?

I scan to where Squeak has her observation post set up and use that as my point of reference. Talking with any OM is VERY SLOW. I am sure I missed a lot, but it was easier for me to make contact than for both of us. The 'thn operate in fast time. We would have been defenseless if we were found both in slow time.

Ah, those must be the creatures she meant. These are not simple worms as in the earth froth. Very complex inside. I was wondering how they could carry anything in their tunnel complex. It appears they have a very interesting pouch system where they can store different objects in different places. Prevents snagging an external pouch all the time I guess. They do not appear to wear clothing, but they have tattoos in addition to natural surface coloration. Between the two it is trivial to tell them apart.

How do they see this? No obvious eyes. Wait, their front ends can extend out and there are eyes on stalks there. When they travel a tunnel they retract them, for safe keeping is my guess.

They will only 'advance' when they realize that what they have by virtue of evolution is not enough and they need to make things to assist them that are external to their form. In other words tools.

I make my way to their fungus farm. Insect like creatures are working away there. They use tools to dig, prune, harvest. Did they invent the tools or only use the tools provided by the worms? There are guard worms at the entrances. Not obvious why they are being in control. I scan for chemical clues and recognize pheromones. Ah, when an insect goes the wrong way, a worm regurgitates a bad smelling substance and the in-

sect does a rapid retreat.

I scan further and find no other areas where insects are present. But, I do find workshops where apparently the tools are made. Is this any different that a plow made for a horse or cow to pull by Hu who would not use the same tool themselves?

A close look at the tool shop shows they work differently than we do. The tools are not metal, but bio polymers. Plastics of sorts. A worm sucks up raw materials from one side. It goes into specific pouches. Different materials into different locations. It then goes over to what must be a mold and regurgitates the two substances, mixing them at the same time. A mix product is carefully laid into the mold where it polymerizes and hardens. Another worm removes the finished tool and places it into an oval cart.

Once the cart is full, another chemical squirt and a very large beetle comes over and pushes the cart away. These insects are nothing like the farmer ones. Squeak said five species. Are they all insects?

Now, how is waste handled? Surely they must evacuate? I follow several around at once until I find one eliminating. They just let go wherever they are! Interesting. Much smaller worms suddenly descend on it and consume it. They leave just as rapidly. I follow them and see them going back to the fungus farms to deposit their changed material for the worker bugs to work it into a new plot.

None of this can work without sunlight or chemical redox. Where does the energy come from?

I go up to the surface and find hundreds of mounds. I see movement and notice a worm filling in a hole with a concrete like polymer. It is almost a jungle, but I do not see any of the worms interacting with any plants on the surface. Their domain is below. I go back down and notice they are tapping the roots! The trees exchange sugars for soil nutrients that the beetles move around for them. Everyone has a task and everyone works.

How do they treat their sick, injured and dead? If I remember the earth froth worms, they were hard to kill. They can regen from a small part. Maybe they don't have death? At least not for the worms. I follow a beetle around. Eventually it does meet up with others of its kind. I see young being cared for. Ah, finally a dead one. It is being cut up by another species. These take care of the dead. I watch and they cut the bug into small pieces and carry the bits away. The bits are fed to yet another creature, a sort of hydra like thing in a shallow pool.

The hydra creature digests the chitin bits and emits a sort of soup.

This is washed away in the water, which I follow back to the fungus garden.

Well, they definitely have a working system. Would Hu be recognized as the intelligent species in an early farming community? Many species all playing a role. More of a communal organism than a singular intelligence. Given that they are already playing with animals, plants and fungi, it won't be that difficult at all to bring them to their greenman equivalent. They already have fungi and bacterial symbiotes in each of their forms.

Bug Eden

It has taken us near a hundred years Hu time, which is about a thousand in Bug time apparently. It seems like forever, but we have come a long way with a culture that was highly resistant to change.

If you remember from previous entries, the bug culture was one of separate warring tribes in a harsh world trying its best to kill them and all life here. The major effort was always concentrating on staying alive when the world and your neighbors are always trying to kill you, either for food, or because it did not care. Life is worthless and decisions are made on the spot as fast as possible. Not the best situation. Make the wrong decision and you die. No regrets, no rules, no second chances.

You would think this would not be the best incubator for sentient species, but it worked quite well. Not in terms of tech, but in terms of strategy, problem solving and getting along, at least in your own troop. But even between troops a certain understanding had to happen in order to exchange genetic material. Everyone in the troop has the same mother (well, for normal bugs, obviously not for us. although come to think of it, we all have the same genetic code in this form.)

It is obvious our leaders, The Five as we call them, knew a lot about this place before we arrived. Especially the tunnels. When we arrived, they were not continuous. A few years later and the first one was completed. Then the second, third, and so on. Now there are eight spread across the latitudes.

Except for a few outliers, we are all one troop now. That was not easy nor fast. A lot of bugs died in the process. Those that survived and adapted see the benefit. Teaching our fellow bugs to think long term was the hard part.

Being in the tunnels, which all interconnect now, means we are free from the eternal run. Not that we don't all still run, but it is inside a tunnel system and free from burning and freezing at least. We have set up areas for housekeeping, learning, and keeping up our warrior skill set. I did not understand that last point, but apparently we are preparing for a much larger confrontation where we will all need to work together. The Five are our leaders and I know they have some foreknowledge the rest of us lack. Best to just go along.

Well, I had better end this. I have assigned tasks as well. My turn in the nursery. At least we do not need to pretend with pretend eggs and larvae any longer. No one is any the wiser that our queen never produces vi-

able eggs. A relief for Turtle to be out of that role. She hated being so big compared to the rest of us. And I thought we had it bad.

SyWg Eden

I have not written in this journal in years and years. I don't know why, certainly enough has happened. It has been crazy. Maybe I was too distracted.

The Sy are up to the Renaissance finally. It was SO HARD to get them out of the Medieval times. This is not Farout, why were they so damn slow? We still have wars. The Scary are still level three. Any that tried to get to level four rogued out. Bad. We stopped trying and they stopped trying.

They are clearly sentient. All the usual signs, art, music (yuck), stomp dancing, sports if you count bashing each other to death. Keeps the population down at least. Both genders participate. They are very gender neutral for the simple fact that they can change gender. Hu should have got that one.

At least construction has improved. Gothic. They love to work with stone and once we showed them how to carve and shape it, they went nuts. Everything started being made out of stone, even hovels for the poor. You weren't considered a person until you had a stone house. They tried to outdo each other of course. A lot of Sy died in 'accidents' until they learned about gravity and balance. Still happens occasionally.

We have kept a low profile since our introduction. We give a tip to some crafts person once in awhile and the idea takes off. Adapted of course. You would think after so long we would 'get' the culture, but we still feel like newbies. We get outed every time. White really hates this form. Can't run worth shit. Now a poor little Hu like me, this form is great. I finally feel strong, in the non-TK sense.

We set up our own village and run a sort of inn for travelers. We hear the latest gossip and no one minds much we are 'different' from normal Sy. Word got around that we have the best hooch. A horrible tasting bitter tea that gets them mildly high. Makes them fearless, which I guess is the major selling point. We are well armed, not counting the subtle TK help. No one messes with us. There is a nerd night we set aside for them. They get a time without being hassled or bullied and we get an audience to slip tips too. They come back for the ah, 'discussions'. I am the resident nerd of course.

We purposely set up shop near the coast. Both Drup and I really want to sail again. Problem is, in this form, we are dead in the water, as in sink like stones. Not even a remote possibility of floating without help. Every-

one is afraid of the Wg anyway. The water is their territory and they respect it. We can see the sea from our vantage point, but high enough up a hill to discourage the Wg from coming after us.

I should say something about the Comps. The Wg are way, way ahead of us in every way. They were once a fraction of the Sy population, but now are three times the size. Almost every coast and river inlet is covered. Only a few wind and wave swept areas are just too hard to live in. And the poles of course. Not frozen, but cold enough. Hard to grow enough food too.

We did not set this up as a contest, but I personally think they saw it as one to prove they were at least as good as we are. They have to win to believe for themselves they have earned the full sentient tag. I never doubted it, but am also ashamed that we did not treat them as such from the beginning even after being told by Myra this was the case.

Maybe it is because they look like baby 'thn and everyone knows the stories there, even if they have never met a baby. Okay, the RGC had them of course, but we never interacted with some other sen's children from another froth system. I guess it was also because they were so darn helpful.

But, hey, I know I am not the best one on this team, even if I supply most of the nerd hints. Okay, I love nerd nights and look forward to them. Solving problems is what got me sorted by Silver in the first place. It was so long ago. I still remember how much I liked figuring things out and fixing them or improving them. Same here as well. I just have to be careful not to give out too much too fast. Makes people suspicious. But I want to so much. It has to look like their idea, at least most of the time.

=Rajn, you are needed downstairs.= Hate my Sy name, but it helps to fit in with a common name. Drup is called Dhuk and White is our resident old Sy and just called Old Sy. This is a good disguise actually. He can appear to be sleeping in the corner and no one pays any attention to him. Smells horrible too. Not even the Sy get near him. Which is saying a lot.

I make my way downstairs. Too early for nerd night, but there is still lots of work to do. Dhuk points to the cellar and I go down to retrieve a barrel of our latest batch of Tea. I bring it up and place it on the back counter, then test the spigot. One of the inventions we got them to figure out. Now inns all up and down this area have them. Beats losing half a batch using a cork that leaks and occasionally pops out draining the barrel.

As long as I am here, I take down the stools at each bench to get ready

for the afternoon. Nerds will stay up all night working or studying, but socially, they prefer the afternoon time. Before the bullies come out. It is always amazing to me that in every culture we see this split, but it never goes as far as splitting into two species. A tale as old as Sauron and smiggles. They need each other.

Today we have a special presentation on sanitation. A definite concern for most villages of mixed livestock and Sy waste. Granted, they are like dogs, not much will make them sick. Come to think of it I have never seen a Sy vomit. We finally had to use the aesthetic argument to get them to even think about it. First stone houses and now toilets. What is the world coming to? I smile, which looks horrid in Sy form. Next time we have a TK meeting I am definitely coming as a Sy.

=Rajn, they're coming.=

=Got it Dhuk. All set.= Funny that he is still the boss after all these years. Maybe I should pull a Comp and declare my independence. We started out as equals on Farout. Guess I prefer not being the top target.

He goes outside to greet them. I start pulling Tea to make it go quicker. They come in in twos and threes until there is not a seat left. Of course, the speaker is running late, disheveled and all. Could be a Hu prof except for the form. Convergent evolution I guess. Old Sy stumbles in and takes the last seat in the far corner.

This should be interesting, White TPs me.

Hey, they are not throwing chamber pots on people's heads at least. Almost got a smile out of White.

Not yet, don't give them any ideas.

Moggy, a third year apprentice is carving something out of wood at her end of a table. No one pays her any mind, so I wander over and pretend to examine it more closely. Not wood, but a soft clay. Teach me not to TK everything without question.

She says out loud, =A model for a valve to control water flow through a tube.= What they call a pipe.

I comment, =Outside is clear enough, but what happens inside? A straight disc or a ball?=
=

She looks at me, =A ball? How would that work?=
She ignores me, thinks for a moment and then it comes to her. She takes out her notepad and furiously draws the shapes out, then gets up, running out the door, leaving her clay behind.

Do you think that was wise? They don't have the precision yet to do a good ball valve?

Correct, but it will set them on the path.

This is the time in their development when they need to get beyond everything done by hand and starting using machines to up the quality, reproducibility, throughput and precision of course. We have been trying for months. Have to be careful, if none of the ideas work, they will stop coming here or listening to me.

Dahn, here leader, comes up to me, =What set Moggy off?=
=Let her do her own project Dahn. No cheating.=

=Might be time for you to come visit the workshop. We have an opening for an apprentice if you are interested.=

=What and give up the great job I have here?=
We both laugh. Heads turn to see what the excitement is about and Dahn sits down again whispering to a few others.

Two Sy come in carrying another, =Someone help! We have an injured Sy.= Well, no one would be stupid enough to bring a Wg this far up a hill to get help.

Old Sy and I immediately go the person who they set on a cleared bench. Leg is at an impossible angle.

Old Sy tells me, =Go, you know what to get.= I run into the kitchen and grab a pot of hot water and some clean rags and come back. I place them where Old Sy can reach. He soaks the rags in the hot water, brings one at a time out to clean up the area. A bone has breached the skin.

=What was she doing?=
=Fell of the cliff spying on the Wg. We were lucky to reach her before they did. They don't take kindly to our watching them.=

=Ah, just because you would eat one if you caught it. Why would that upset them?=
They know not to go there, but Wg flesh is a delicacy some are willing to pay the cost for. There are also bragging rights to having survived a capture. They do fight back and usually win. They don't eat us though, too tough. They just throw us into the sea to be eaten by others once we rot enough.

At some point the two are going to have to learn to work together, but clearly it won't be today.

Old Sy sets the bone with a loud grunt from his patient. He then wraps the wound and sets some wood to act as a cast. We heal quickly, but it is going to hurt for several lunars at least. May have a permanent limp too. I secretly hope so. This activity has to stop.

Old Sy then scowls at the ones who brought her in, =Get her out of here now! Don't come back, ever! You're lucky I don't turn you all in to the Wg myself. If any of them were harmed, you will pay the price. Go!=
I hold the door open as they carry her out.

Could have refused to care for her you know.

I could not lived with myself if I had done that. But, I don't like it. This is the second one this lunar. No one is starving. We need to find out who is buying Wg meat and stop this.

Oh, an undercover investigation.

Figured you would like that, but I will be less noticed.

I sigh for effect. He is right though. He goes in the back and I can sense him popping out. He has already changed his form. We have multiple personalities we can call on. He is now a wealthy land owner from out of the area, looking for new experiences. He will have heard that a special delicacy is available for a price.

If we were not who we are, he would likely be conned instead. There are some advantages to being TP capable. IF the mind you are reading is in on the deception of course. Not always easy.

=Shit,= Druk says. I scan outside. A party of five Sy are coming this way. This is highly unusual. They really hate being this far from the shore. Likely take some time to reach us. The Comps are not with them. Awfully brave of them. Adding up everyone in the room, not that nerds are good fighters, we easily out number them by many times. I go to the kitchen to hide from the norms and make some treats for the Sy. Dhuk covers for me and I go out the back to meet them.

Pop or Weasel, five Wg are coming towards me, do you want to be here too? Hey, at least I am asking.

Pop answers, We are aware of the situation and are monitoring.

Thanks.

The Wg are far in advance of the Sy, tech wise, and if they wanted to could easy cause a great deal of pain to any settlement within range of the coast. That makes these 'meat' runs even more stupid.

I make it to an open area in the shade of the late afternoon. Wg do not like to dry out. There is a stream near by, so I gather some water in a large sack. Using TK I carve a stone basin out of a large rock and put the water into it. I wet five stones for them to sit on just as they arrive.

I bow deeply in shame. I want them to know I know of the situation, even if not their side of events. My hands are open in front of me to show I have no weapons. Two of them are heavily armed with sharp objects and poison darts that only affect Sy. They have emblems indicating they are well trained in the martial arts as well. Of course I am no longer the Hu they have heard stories of. Just a poor Sy inn keeper.

I motion for them to sit and I bring out the bowl of treats to be passed around. Part of their etiquette. The two guards pass. They are well ac-

quainted with poisons and if something happens to the three they will fight me to the death. I eat some too. Actually these are much better than the typical Sy chow.

Bowing while sitting I begin, ||I am only partly aware of the sorrow you have suffered. Please tell me more.||

||We demand the lives of the three and the removal of all Sy from this area. We have suffered long enough from the continual attacks on our people. This will end.|| Interesting that they are not specific.

||The three are not far away and you are free to hunt them as you wish. They are going slow because one has a broken leg and needs assistance from the other two to move.||

At a signal one of the guards moves and disappears. Wg are faster, but need to keep to the shade or wait until dark. I am sure many a child is warned the Wg will get them if they wander out at night or misbehave. Likely true.

||Why did you not detain them yourself?||

||I am one and they are three. Until you arrived, I was not aware of their crime. I know you would not come this way unless it was of high sorrow.||

||Did not the broken one tell you?|| They admit their crimes in Wg.

||There are many ways to break a bone. We live in a rocky area. They did not offer information beyond their need.|| The Wg nods understanding. Their culture is not so private. Likely there were witnesses in their crowded living situation. Their crime rate is very low. Punishment is harsh, especially if you hide it.

In many ways, the Comps got to help the better species. The Wg are much more civilized, but wet. Being wet can slow down tech development. At any rate, we will need to get the two to work together at some point. These 'meat' hunts are the worst possible thing that could happen.

We are not the community leaders. Old Sy will give them a chance to deal with the situation that clearly goes beyond the three we met. If they don't the Sy will likely attack in force. That would set things back at least a hundred years, to what it was like when we arrived. This time the Sy win easily. No contest, total slaughter.

||The inn, where I work is the closest Sy structure. We will move out and destroy the structure as a gesture of good faith. Moving the entire village, which is much further from the shore would be much harder and likely be met with force. A lot of innocents, who had no knowledge of this evil, would be affected unfairly. A hidden force has been contacted to bring the evil ones to account. We will keep you informed of their

progress and results. They will not fail. If for some reason they do, we will help you attack the village responsible ourselves.||

They look to one another.

||Agreed. If any more Wg die we will attack Sy without mercy.|| Not just this village. Interesting. Must be happening where ever they meet.

||Agreed.|| *Did you two get that. It is over the top serious this time.*

I have gotten everyone to leave the inn and will dismantle it completely. It will be as if we were never here.

Think about where we go next.

Also means the Sy think they are strong enough this time to win easily. They don't do ifs or maybes, they deal in certainty.

Do the Comps remember our orders? This is way out of balance. Especially if we don't do something.

We have to admit we need their help. This was a set up. Who set it up though? Sy, Wg or Comps? Sigh.

Max Star Ship

If this thing gets any bigger we could just add sparklers to the side and call it a planet. Guess this is what happens when we get a hundred years to work on it. It can hold up to two million alive and five in stasis. Stasis sucks. The amount of upkeep is nearly the same and the conversation is way worse. Ha-ha.

It was so much better on Cyan. But, no, a chance to be on a ship again and I jump on it. Big mistake.

The only reason I was made a five was so I could take care of my own medicals. No one below a lifer on this raft. There are only five other Hu on this tub. One is the Captain of course. Only saw her from a distance once. Being a five means we don't get the exciting big stuff. We ended up with the anal detail work. Boy are they anal. One quantum bit out of place and all hell breaks loose.

Oh, we found a new sen. We call them Star Childs, SCs for short, for lack of a better name. They are high enough TK to get between systems here in Farout eventually. They live off the remnants of nearly dead worlds. Great scroungers, stink to high heaven and boy are they ugly. No gender. They either bud or fuse. It is weird. Good survival strategy I guess. There is even a theory that they evolved out here. Don't care.

"Bobby, you are wanted on J45D1K immediately. Move it slimer." Ha-ha. I will get that cluck when I get a chance. Oh, we are best buds, but resort to pranks to keep from going rogue. So tempting. A five could punch a lot of holes before they were taken out.

We have a lot of downtime, waiting, forever waiting. I have taken to reading the journals. Being Hu myself I can relate best to Randy. He got stuck at mid TK levels for thousands of years. I cannot imagine. But now he is a nine. There is still hope for me yet.

J45D1K is a long way. I think they purposely do that to us non DS TKs, just to watch us hustle. I was promised the end of bullies and 'masters'. What a joke. They may think they are not doing it, but it is intrinsic to all of our cultures.

"Shit, now what?" There are a ton of SCs about. The place is covered with them. Ah, a new star ship has docked. Strange design too. Raw materials are being off loaded as fast as possible. The SCs get first pick of what they want. We can change mass to anything we want, they can't. I am really slow at it. They use me for the final fine details of anything non-quantum. That means food, structural materials for small objects, and

small parts.

"Bob, over there!" A Ku yells at me. Has to because of all the commotion. I raise my hand to indicate I have heard and walk quickly. Running is dangerous give how crowded it is. I don't recognize this cluck, but they apparently know me. There are a lot of Bobs, could be just an educated guess.

"Scan this." I comply, and nod.

"Can you make a hundred more?"

"How quickly? I am only a five. It is small enough, but will still take time."

"Do the best you can. Ask the SCs what you can use for mass."

The SCs do not have a verbal language we can understand. Too high pitched even for the Ba, and they can hear in the ultasonic. I use a sign language we have all learned to get along with. One grabs my hand and takes me to a pile of debris that looks no different from the other piles.

I have the part in my hand. I close my eyes, sit, and scan it carefully. Simple metal parts. Likely something trivial like plumbing. I sigh and begin. I only get to thirty three when I run out of mass. That's strange. I open my eyes. There was more than enough when I started. "Shit!" Only eleven of my finished pieces are still next to me. Someone is stealing the mass, even from my work, from me.

"Very funny. Where are they?" I scan as far as I can as a five, but it is like finding a grain of sand on a beach. There are no more piles of debris to use either. Everything is clean and the SCs are gone. I appear to be the only one left. When I turn around, the eleven remaining are gone too. Fine. Be that way. I get up and make my way back to my section.

It is frustrating when the higher ups don't bother to acknowledge your effort, tell you what is going on or even when you can stop. I am sick of it.

I am not in a good mood when I enter the mess hall. It is a mess. I see high TKs just leaving. They could clean this up with a thought. I sigh and get to work cleaning the place before I make myself something to eat. I refuse to eat in a messy mess hall.

Finally I sit down, mumbling, to eat. Someone sits across from me. Not in the mood for company, I look up to see a Hu fem wearing crew clothing like I do.

"This place is clean. How unexpected. Do you know what happened?"

I open my mouth to speak, change my mind, shake my head and keep quiet. I finish my meal, clean up what I used and place it away where it belongs. Technically, as everyone is at least self maintaining, we do not

even need mess halls, but moral went to space when they tried to cross them out of the design. Mess halls are not for food, but for a brief relief from the tedium of the tasks we have been given.

I find a corner of the library, another place that should not exist, given we can access anything from the coms in our rooms. I guess technically, we do not need rooms either. None of us sleep. Hell, they could work us continuously, and they do under emergency situations. No mess hall, library, rooms, time off. Just work till we drop or go rogue. Surprisingly even the high TKs complained when that was suggested. Given, some of them do actually work that hard, but even they want the option not to. I smile. Most of the them do not appear to me to be working that hard.

The journals are all printed on never wear sheets and are available in all the sen languages except SC. These are the only printed books. The library is pretty large for this reason alone though. I find Randy's journal and the place where I left off. Then I find my corner.

There is someone already there. I recognize her and the Hu fem from the mess hall. I sigh and turn to find another place. This ship is huge, why did she have to pick this one spot? I had never seen her before today and not twice in less than an eighth.

I hear a voice, "Are you Bob?" I turn to face her.

"Name tag give it away?" I give a nasty smile.

"Some one woke up on the wrong side of the asteroid." She smiles anyway. Great a fuzzy one. The overly optimistic drive me nuts. I mean, we are in Farout, cast out of the multiverse by the bully 'thn, ordered to make this huge star ship for who knows what reason. I am only a five and the stupid high TKs can't even clean up after themselves.

"Bad day. I'm sorry."

"Want to talk about it? I have time and am bored."

"Where do you work?"

"I serve everyone it would appear." I smile for real this time and nod.

She continues, "It was you who cleaned up the mess hall wasn't it?" I nod.

"Never go there after the high TKs have been. They never clean up after. Something about being too busy and beneath their dignity or something."

She fumes, "It is everyone's duty to at least clean up after themselves. How long has this been going on? Do you know how widespread this is?"

Whoa, got a live one. Not fuzzy anymore. More spiny toad.

"I get called all over the ship for trivial reasons that the task I am asked to do could be done near instantly by the higher TK sen asking.

Certainly in the time it takes for me to get there at least. Then my work is sabotaged before I finish. ANY mess hall I enter after the high TKs is a mess. I have never once seen them clean up after. Of course, this could all be just bad luck, there are thousands of us and I certainly have not met everyone nor been everywhere on the ship." I am nearly out of breath.

"Unfortunately is not rare. I have noticed the same phenomenon."

"Too bad the Captain does not know, or seem to care."

"Oh, she cares. I have met her and she would be furious."

"Is she as nice as I have been told?"

She smiles, "You mean short tempered and nasty to anyone who does not meet expectations? Yep, that is a good description." I laugh and so does she.

"To answer your earlier question, yes, I am Bob. There seem to be hundreds of us on board."

"Actually there are only two of you and the other one is a very nice Ba who just liked the sound. This is part of the problem. The high TKs have taken to calling everyone beneath them Bob or Alice for some reason."

"Stress? They are given harder tasks after all."

"Have you ever met a stressed out high TK outside of an emergency situation?" I laugh and she takes that as my answer.

She asks, "Have you ever been to the observation bubble?"

"What observation bubble? I can't even remember the last time I looked out of a window. Granted TK allows me to scan a ways, and there is only one star in the field of view, therefore not much to see. But, no observation window."

She grabs my hand and leads me off on a journey. I get lost fairly quickly. We eventually arrive in a high TK area. Normally I would not even dream of coming here. She marches on and ignores the looks she is getting.

"I don't think we are allowed here."

She turns and faces me, "Why not? Not a sensitive research, life support or propulsion area. Are we not called on to serve all over the ship? Are we not allowed to be here same as them?"

"Permitted and allowed are two different things. I don't even know your name." She says nothing and leads me further in.

There are actual guards, two huge Ku and Di. I did not think we had any Di onboard.

She makes to go though them.

+Alice, you are not allowed here. Off limits.+

She answers in Ku, ah, not nice Ku either, +Why the guano not?+

!High TK only Alice. Take the Bob and go before we DS you back to where you belong.!

She responds with the most evil smile, "Do you know who I work for?" The guards look her up and down and decide she is definitely not a threat. She is fuming now.

"We should just go. I don't like the idea of being spaced half a solar away right now." Would not kill us, but would take some time to return.

+Wise Bob you have there deary. Best to follow his lead." They are starting to piss me off as well. Why are there even physical guards anyway? I can scan the room we were about to enter. Not that large or far away. We walk out of range of their voices. If that even has any meaning.

I whisper, "Anyone with DS could just pop over. Empty even. Strange. Why even bother with doors and guards?"

"Does the fact it has doors tell you the reason? All of us are allowed to enter if we want. As you said, it is empty. Why bother guarding an empty room intended for everyone?"

"Feels like high TKs have granted themselves a whole lot of special privileges they are denying others."

"You think. Come with me. We are getting to the bottom of this right now."

I follow again. Not that far this time. Seems like we are headed for Control. It is on every guide and we all know where it is, but I have never had a reason to go there I guess. Nor interest. That is where the bully TKs hang out. Never met a low TK who has in fact been there and yet we are going there apparently.

There are no decorations on the walls like in the servants quarters. Very plain and boring actually. I can sense all kinds of strange instruments in the walls and such.

"Best not to scan here. Might make some of them nervous."

"Got it." I stop. If she has been here, she knows the rules.

No guards or doors this time. Suddenly we are in the navigation room, or Control as the rest of us think of it.

^Captain on the bridge!^ Everyone comes to attention. Strange. I look around and it is just the two of us who have entered. She goes up to the Captain's chair which was just vacated and sits.

I whisper again, "I don't think we are allowed to do that."

She looks at me, "I never told you my name. I am called Pilot, Captain Pilot. Forgive me my deception, but I had heard reports and needed to check it out of myself. It has been very enlightening."

She hands me an object. It looks like a coin.

"With this you will not be denied access to ANYWHERE on this ship. I have an assignment for you, TK 6 Bob."

"Sorry, I am only a five."

She gives me that evil smile again, "Not any more. You can call me Pilot. Any time, anywhere. There are going to be some changes. Tour the ship and let me know any more pockets of wrongness you find. Place that coin on any com system and you have direct access to me. You are released from all other activities and orders. Nothing supersedes that coin. Ah, you can close your mouth now. Good job. Very happy to have met you today."

"I can see the observation room?"

She smiles again, "I hope that is the first place you go. From that room you can see the progression of portals that allow us to harvest mass from our star. Quite beautiful. Now I have some work to do, knocking the heads of a lot of high TKs." Pure evil. Glad I am not them. I smile back.

Actually wish I could see that. Hope they don't associate this with me.

I make my way back to the observation room. This time they let me pass without question. Word travels fast I guess. Maybe they can tell I am a six now. Need practice with the new talent though. Not ready to DS through walls just yet. Might take awhile after a hundred years as a five.

"Holy shit!" I am the only one in the room. It is gorgeous. The portals are round and flash every time something comes through them. There is a telescope near me. Never used one of these. Only takes me a moment to figure it out though. Look through one end and move this knob to focus. They use a spider TK tractor bot to suck plasma from the upper atmosphere, condense it down to a tiny sun, then push it through the first portal. There is is transformed with a Philosopher's bot into a glowing aluminum sphere. Easier to work with a solid I guess. Each stage moves the sphere and changes it into a heavier element. By the time it reaches the ship it is 'thn metal and tiny. Not more than a meter across. I look over the bubble edge and watch it enter a portal into the ship. I scan and see it move down the tube, bits taken from it as it goes. Each smaller sphere rapidly moves to an area of the ship where it is needed. There is nothing left by the end of the main tube. I scan back at the portal to the ship to see another one just coming in. Cool.

I can scan the entire ship now. That is really cool. Presumably I can DS to anywhere on the ship too. That is why she made me a six. I wonder how many other watchers she is using. I go back to my room. Everything feels different. I suspect I am to pretend to be my usual self. We learned in class that everything is a test. Weird instructor. I think I am finally get-

ting it though.

My two SC friend are waiting for me.

"High guys. Good to see you. Have any fun today? I met the Captain, I think. Nice lady. I think." They ignore me. We each have two. The questions is, are we watching them, or are they watching us. Actually kind of surprised they weren't with me all day. Did the Captain know what was going to happen before it did? Why are they back then? I am going to get super paranoid if I keep thinking this way. I am sure she checked me out.

Yeah, I have gotten in trouble and written up a few times by high TKs. I know I have a record. I did not start any of it, but they look for any excuse to bully us. Why? This was not part of our training. We started out taught to respect. How did it get this way? A hundred years is a long time, but I am beginning to think it was rushed. How much longer do we have?

I look at the two SCs. Do I respect them? Am I equally guilty? Might be time to change my own behavior.

Cat Eden

Yawn.

Yaaaawn.

Anything to eat?

Same as always.

Bring some to me.

Get it yourself.

Yawn.

Yaaaawn.

Earth Two

We flipped a coin and I lost. How can that be done fairly with TKs? Drup claimed it was not his home world. Not mine either, I grew up on Earth One. We both spent an equal time here. First at Crab Cove, then on the Black Wind I & II.

Nice to get out of the troll form though. I can stretch and run again. Okay, not really into that. More a Rap thing. Drup likes to run too, though he did not do much when he was here.

We are blowing it again, on SyWg Eden that is. The Comps are doing way better with the Wg than we ever hope to do with the Sy. We saw the Wg as the lesser species because they needed so much humidity to survive. BUT, the Wg work together. Sy only care about food, entertainment and power, mostly entertainment. It is nearly impossible to get them to work together unless they are only immediate threat and then only as long as the threat remains.

Enough of that. I am here to assess how things are going without us. Probably better. I have to maintain a very low TK presence so as not to alert the 'thn overlords. Pests.

I figured the best place to start was our old stomping ground, Crab Cove. Problem is no one around has ever heard of it. Language has changed a lot too. I keep having to explain that I am not from around here, which of course makes everyone suspicious. Getting old. I finally give up and use a sleeping person one night to adjust my vocabulary. Not perfect without knowing the context of course, but at least I won't sound so strange now.

Sap chow will never fly around here. Too many questions. Take land animals and people can complain you are poaching on their territory. Fishing on the other hand, especially on the shore next to an ocean, is usually safe. Nice tropical location with lots of sun means I can dry the fish to a sort of jerky that is easy to carry. Stinks. I roll it up in well oiled skins to keep the odor down. Won't fool anyone of course. They will smell me coming. Better than surprising someone with a weapon. Having to explain instant healing or not healing, well, you understand.

I should have gone with lizards or snakes. Most don't consider those part of their belongings and they stink a lot less. Actually, I might be okay. Baths are likely infrequent right? The afternoon rain is unlikely to change that either.

When I get close to where Crab Cove should be I start doing pulse

scans. None of the original buildings are present and lots of new ones. It has been some time after all. There are three trails in. I pick the one closest to me and make my way to it over land.

A sign post or marker presents itself. Now entering An'di Land. What the hell is An'di Land? A name, place, god? I keep going. The path becomes better, paved with stones. The leaves have been brushed off recently. Why? Not wide enough for a standard cart. I pulse scan and see fields on the west side. Self sufficient. Was never the case in the past.

I turn and pulse scan the port. Nothing there. No shipping then. They really are cut off. Someone behind me on the trail. I pull up and wait for them. Someone comes up to me with a very ornate robe.

"Welcome pilgrim. Are you here to learn of Saint An'di?"

This is a cult. Okay, let's see what it's about.

"I am. Is this the correct path?"

"It is a start. Come, we can walk together. I am Father Ruby. We are all named after gem stones." He laughs, "Stones that have no value with us." I raise an eyebrow.

I laugh, "Can't eat gold or gems."

"No indeed. Can't build from them, or learn from them either."

"Are you against all learning then?"

"No Brother. We are for learning. A light in the darkness. Let me tell you about Saint An'di."

I think I am going to die. I hate cult talk and this is one big time. They are so full of themselves. They have a temple devoted to this Saint An'di who apparently was some kind of wizard with magical powers. Yeah, sounds like a TK. Could be where the tale started. Certainly was not present when we left. A hundred years could be five gen though.

I am put up in a dorm with others. They are gathering followers. I count five dorms for each gender. They are strictly against mating until approved by the high priest. No problem here. I look old enough to not be a threat to anyone. Bunk beds. Great. Can't sneak out at night then.

Morning is a simple breakfast and exercise. If I wanted exercise I could have staid with the Sy. You would think a species that is already beyond bulk would say enough, but no, they pride themselves on being able to push over Sy bigger than themselves. Being essentially genderless you can't say it is a male thing either.

"Rand are you up for an interview? We like to assess where our new pilgrims are before assigning them classes."

"Makes sense. Lead on please." I follow the Brother and am led to an empty room with one chair and a small skylight. Great. I sit and wait, and

wait, and wait. Is this an interview or an interrogation? The later I suspect.

A small door in the only door in, slides open. Grated so I can't see who it is. Scanning tells me it is one of the under priests.

"Where do you come from?"

"I am been all over. Got off a small ship at Frog Point and walked from there."

"Do you speak Standard?" I am surprised by that. I thought what we were speaking was the new Standard.

"Necessary unfortunately. Not the most imaginative or eloquent language, but it works."

"There is a small door in the wall in front of you. Please reach in and pull out the device. Hold it up so I can see it." I smile. I have already pulse scanned and know what it is and now why I am in this room. A sort of TK Faraday cage. Standard AuC configuration. A bit ornate, but it should work if I let it. I don't. Though it might be more interesting if I did. There is a weakness to these. I wonder if they know.

I am wearing a silk scarf. I rub it on my rubber waist band. When I reach for the device it flips to an extreme. The door in the door slams shut. Two brutes come in and I am escorted out, down a long hallway to another room. A room with very crude limiters. Might stop a two, but nothing higher if they have had any training at all. They clearly have had some experience. Naturals? I don't think we left any TKs here. Certainly not a five who is essentially immortal and can make more TKs.

A priest comes in. One of higher standing.

"You Rand," He says this sarcastically, "are a most unusual man."

I laugh which confuses him. I touch the TK sensor to the metal edge of the desk and it folds down instantly. This clearly surprises the priest.

"Not my first rodeo." Of course this reference confuses him.

"Your cult worships the idea of wizards does it not? And this is a wizard detector right? Unfortunately, they are easy to fool by charlatans and such. Easy way to convince someone you are more 'interesting' than you really are. Then you steal or con your victim and leave in a hurry. Not that I have done this, but I watch and learn." I pull out my scarf and indicate my rubber waist band. I rub the band again and touch the sensor. It rises to the positive direction again. I touch it to the metal and it falls.

Now the priest laughs, "I thought only we knew about this trick. Very good. Relax. No more interviews of the 'scary' type anyway. You must have seen much on your travels. You must tell me sometime. I will approve you for the next level." He rises and turns his back to me. I rise and

leave.

I am led to a much nicer building with a simple private room. I am shown where the restrooms, dining hall and library are. I bow, not knowing the proper etiquette, but a bow is returned. When in doubt bow. Works for almost any species. The nature of the bow itself is different of course. At least this is not Ceph Eden. Hate getting that flat to the floor.

There is a schedule of sorts on the wall near my door, but no clock. I hear a bell. Three rings. Ah, much easier than issuing everyone a watch I guess. Works on a ship too. I look at the schedule again. Ah, they are using ship time. Interesting. Even though the harbor is gone, clearly someone in the beginning of this cult knew ship rules. Works for me.

I spend a lot of time in the library. They appear to have translations of something called the An'di book. A total fairy tale. It goes on for volumes. My impression is it is a layperson's interpretation of imaginary TKness. They have the levels and gifts totally wrong. Still, it is well written and an amusing read. They even have dragons! We never had dragons. I want one so bad. Much better than some mangy Cat. We got Cats, they got dragons! Unfair.

"Brother Rand, we have noticed you taking an interest in the Journals. Most drift to the other books here, yet you went straight to these. A most interesting person. The High Priest would like to meet you personally. If you would come with us." Are there any fem here? Right, don't mix the genders, evil things can happen. They are safe with me.

I am led to a much larger, much more ornate room. Cults sure do go for the fancy shit. I get it, supposed to impress the ignorant. An altar of sorts of course. Behind it, lit by an array of skylights is what looks like a stone tablet. Not stone. Shit, AuC of the TK kind. I study it.

Someone comes in, the High Priest I presume. I bow low. They seem to thrive on that sort of thing. I am smiling inside though.

He stops near me.

"We felt you deserved the right to see the original after all your study."

"May I touch it?" A test. He looks horrified of course.

"Even I am not allowed to touch it Brother." As I guessed.

"Strange text on the surface. Can anyone read it?"

"Alas, not currently. Our patron Saint Mother, was the only one who could read it. May she rest in peace."

"I sense a story coming." He gives a small smile and sighs.

"Normally this would be part of novice training, but seeing as how you skipped all of that, I will tell you. We accord years from the time The

Book was found. We are now in the year 106. Descendants of Mother are still alive and among us. Someday you may even meet the High Priestess herself. I have only met her once. You have only met males while here, but in reality, we are the lower caste. Fem are very much in charge.

The Book was found by the husband of The Mother and brought to her. She was the only one who was ever able to read it. She was their Knowledge and had much experience to draw on. She read the book to her children, who copied it down in Standard, passing it on, generation after generation to what we have now. Along the way, many joined us as you have noticed. We live a simple life, grow our own food, make our own homes, tools, whatever we need."

"Explains why the port is gone."

He looks at me confused, "How did you know there was a port here?"

I make a quick recovery, "Old ship charts referred to this location as Crab Cove."

"Ah, yes, there was a port here, but it was already gone in the many wars and raids even before The Mother. Those charts are very much out of date."

I sigh and smile, "All the captain could afford is my guess."

"You have been to many places. I watched you study The Book. You can read it, for real." Not a question. I shrug.

"Do I want to know what it says?" I shrug again and smile.

"I did not think so. I like my life here. Started as a child born here. Yes, we do mate occasionally. Grew up in the order and now you see me as I have become. Not a bad life. Simple, no surprises."

"Or adventure."

He sighs, "No, but I do not miss it as some have. They are gone and I remain. I live through the stories others bring in."

"Safer anyway, but the risk is part of the thrill."

"No doubt." He pauses, "I expect you will be leaving us now." I nod.

"Last chance." He shakes his head no. I thought not.

He shows me a way out the back. I take a trail to the west.

I smile inside. The Book is a catalog of the library that still remains many kilometers below the Altar Room. Now if they had found that . . . it still would not have helped. Written in Ceph at the nano scale. Oh well, dreams and imagination. Almost as good as reality. NOT!

They are making a good start. Their tech is way ahead of where they were a hundred years ago. After so long making no progress this is an extremely welcome change, IF they can keep it up. Cults, religions, whatever, tend to stagnate and rot from within. The high priest has already

taken a step in that direction. How many others?

Pilot, CMYK

Cyan

I will not ask you to resume Earth Froth forms just for this meeting. Please use targeted TP. I will remain in this bubble so as not to give myself away. Like a two meter sphere never before seen on this world is not weird.

Understood. They are playing along.

We do this because it is expected and because it helps with the boredom.

Progress report.

Esi begins, We have surpassed Earth Froth Tech 3 and making rapid progress towards Tech 4. Understanding has been exponential.

What?! How?

I sense amusement.

It is like we lit a fuse Captain. Once they got a taste for working out problems they went crazy.

Hek comes in, We tried an experiment based on our initial analysis of their behavior patterns and cultural expectation.

I thought the Cyans were one of the most boring creatures we ever met.

They hated that. The pressure kept building over a million years. That is a lot of frustration building up.

We split them up into temporary teams and pitted them against each other. Once a positive outcome occurred we split the teams up and allowed the new knowledge to influence others. A new challenge was presented with new teams. Repeat over and over a thousand times.

Change up the problems, getting harder each time. Have an entire world of sentients begging to participate.

You made a world AI out of the sentients?

Affirmative. Amusement again.

Esi asks, Do we have any idea when we will be needed?

I sigh, I have no idea. We will just have to go with what we have when it happens. The ship is ready. We have space for several hundred thousand Cyans.

No problems at your end? Jfi had to ask of course.

Of course we have had problems. Lots of them. A recent find is helping a lot. Be careful your high TKs do not get cocky. We need everyone

on the same side and not working for their own egos.

Got it. Thank you Bob.

Magenta

I hope I am less embarrassed here, but with Rooi and Snap, I expect more. Bob really blew the lid on the ship situation. One of the problems being a leader is no one wants to tell you about the small problems. Of course problems never stay small.

We ended up fitting limiters on everyone above five (except Bob of course). I included myself. We then spent a lunar as underlings. The low TKs were a lot more forgiving to us than we ever were to them. They were under orders to mimic what had been done to them, but they explained what they were doing and why the actions were hurtful. Saved time, but maybe did not sink in as deep.

At the end I made it clear anyone caught abusing anyone of any level would be spaced without question. We have TKs to spare. We can't afford another mess like we got ourselves into. Even a low TK could do a lot of damage, but they didn't. They staid true to their pledge and training whereas the high TK, well some of them anyway, did not. Enough did not that we can't afford another round.

Magenta is below me. Time to get this one over with. I DS into my bubble and proceed down to the surface. Slowly.

Hello Pilot. We are ready. I'm not.

Snap suggests, *You might be more comfortable outside your bubble. Your form is totally alien and not recognizable to our children.*

Children? Ah, I remember the journals. Snap populated an entire planet with modified forms of herself. If she taught Rooi this trick, then they are the only two I know of who can create new sentient fluidic life.

Now the question is to what end? What part of this puzzle we know nothing about do they supply?

I exit the bubble and proceed to walk along the shore. I purposely chose an area without a swamp. Not many locations where some sort of solid material reaches the sea. I sit and wait. A few minutes later more and more crab like creatures come out to see if I am predator or prey.

In a nearby tide pool an octopus comes up to poke at my bare toe in the water and likely taste it. It grabs on, but does not bite. A crab comes near and the octopus hides behind my foot. When the crab comes closer, it snaps out and crabs the crab to envelope it in tentacles. Dinner. I was just a convenient temporary blind.

Okay, cute, but any earth froth world has similar goings on.

Your genetic material has been sampled and is being processed. Of course information of this event would not normally be shared.

What's going on guys?

Out of the sea comes a shape. As it emerges I can see myself. A bit awkward, but it certainly looks like me. I rise to meet it. I analyze the DNA. An exact match. It even has TK, low, but a start. It smiles at me and does a Ceph bow, which I return. It looks at its hands and raises a foot one at a time. New to this form clearly.

She has your memories and most of your non-TK abilities.

You can make a sentient duplicate this quickly?

We use a Ceph as a sentient and put it into a copy of your form. Of course the subject would not normally ever meet their duplicate.

What else can you do?

We come in all sizes and abilities. Ceph as you know are amazing escape artists, but we can also break into tight spaces. Add DS and there is almost no place we can't get into.

And the crabs are patient, highly reproductive and size varies from nearly microscopic to the size of a small sailing ship. We can exist in water and land. We can appear as a rock until activated.

We basically fill the role of intelligence gathering.

I comment, And if one dies it is easily replaced.

Of course. We can even transfer an individual to another shell to continue their work.

TKs do that of course. What level TK has you gotten one up to?

Only two so far, but we are working on it.

How many are you?

I sense amusement.

How many do you need? Small forms work the same as the larger forms. We can ship as small and become large easily without much down time.

Shit. That is scary. What is all this about? Do you know?

We have each been given a piece. I am sure it will become clear when it needs to be. Never a waste though. We have thoroughly enjoying our time here and the opportunity to work on an interesting project.

The ship will be ready when we are called. I have two more stops. Good work I guess. I know even less than you do apparently.

Trust in the goal.

The Question.

The Question.

Yellow

Yellow, also known as the Big Stink. Sulfur based. Not for oxygen based life forms. Definitely staying in my bubble this time. I don't even want this place touching my skin. Maybe the Ship will contact me. Please! Postponing this duty will not make it go away. Sigh.

I don't know the group who chose this duty as well as I know the others. Took a special kind of sentient. Sens who are chosen to become TK fit a specific profile. I thought so before I met this group. I don't even know who chose these sens. I suspect The Five. When in doubt, blame The Five.

I decide to up my protection. I laminate my bubble with layers of 'thn metal, AuC and a single neutron layer. Makes it heavy as hell. Limit me and you will have a deep hole in your world.

I am down on the surface, nervous as hell. This group is nastier than other TKs. Like to play practical jokes that hurt. They never tried it on me, but I am on their playground now. They know why I check in. Pulling one over on me would be a way of showing they are succeeding.

I am here. Where are you?

I feel TP laughter. Of course.

Naa-naa-naa, catch us if you can. I hate games, I hate them.

That is a Hu phrase. Only one of them was Hu. Josh. Of course they have all gone native. No Hu could survive here. But we all still maintain a signature. I scan. It is everywhere. Shit. No, not everywhere, just the hundred kilometers surrounding me. What the?

It is alive, if you define life as metabolism and change. I TK a piece off and the whole fills in nearly instantly. Then it starts creeping up the side of my bubble! How the hell does it do that? The shell should kill it instantly. Shit, it is using a micro TK shield. Barely perceptible from inside my shell. I am soon covered. Yellow orange goo.

I DS the bubble and myself out of their shell. As soon as I set down, the process starts again. I DS up a hundred meters. Pieces break off and rise from the ground. An entire field of them are rising and coming towards me. Now what?

I TK the atmosphere, not to oxygen, they would be expecting that, but to fluorine. I add copper as a gas. It combines with the fluorine and turns everything black. A necrosis starts and spreads.

Well played. The CuF6 disappears. A Hu TK4 could do that eventually, so I am not surprised.

Shall we play again?

I would rather not please. Just give me your report.
A yellow Hu shaped creature rises from the remaining yellow orange goo.

Cute. Can you dance too?

It starts to do a crude dance.

Sorry, was never a dancer.

Neither am I. So, your report?

You are no fun.

The report or do I mark this exchange as unacceptable and leave?

What you see before you is a communal organism. A million tons of pure fun. Any organic or inorganic compound you can think of we can make. We can survive in almost any atmosphere or lack thereof. We can be microscopic to mega. We are Yellow.

And the other sens? Where are they?

More or less evenly spaced on this world. We do not play well with others, but this has also given us an opportunity to improve.

They are weapons, both chemical, think poisons and likely explosives.

Move towards the edge of this form and you will see.

I pick a random direction, staying well above it. No more surprises. There is a black zone between this one and the next. It extends over ten kilometers. I analyze the zone. Sulfides. Metallic sulfides. A dead zone. The next goo zone over is a slightly different color. Intentional or not it helps identify them as separate.

The Ship is not large enough to accommodate any one of you, much less all of you.

A vial full of each will suffice.

Stay ready. I will be back when we are called.

Understood. We will continue the experiment. Hopefully you will not be so lucky next time.

I leave, destroy the bubble, make a new body from outside the ship from parts of one of their tiny moons, really large rocks, and move to the new body. I then destroy the old body and send the gas towards the star. I want no chance some of that comes back with me. I do this five more times before approaching the Flyer. I will self quarantine when I get back.

I hate this world.

Black

I am still shaken up when I reach Ron and Squeak's world which I have called Black for no other reason than it is a different color name and it is still out here in Farout space. Definitely not a black world as the multiverse defines it. The variety of life forms below me is immense. Lots of different ecologies and climates too. All three, air, sea and land are populated.

There are cities! At last something I recognize at least. Granted on Earth Two we had villages and we never got back to the true city level of density and infrastructure. Definitely cities down there though.

That is not to say this is an earth froth world. There are no vertebrates here. None. No rats, birds, fish, nothing. How can you have flying creatures who are not vertebrates, like bats and birds? Floaters of course. Inverts are experts at gas bags. We have seen them on many worlds. Not fast, but then they do not need to be as fast as birds because there are none here to eat them.

Like most inverts they depend not on precision but numbers. They reproduce like crazy. Thousands of eggs at once. Not a good way to produce sentients. Ah, but they have a trick there as well, colonies.

Time to see what the two have been up to.

This is Pilot, request permission to enter.

Permission granted. Come in the dome sticking above ground.

I pop in. No one there. I wait patiently until they arrive. These two can be paranoid which is only slightly better than the lethal pranksters on Yellow. Squeak enters first. When she sees it is just me I feel the shields going up again. Ron enters. Paranoid as I said.

"I am here to gather the progress report."

^RIs it that time already?^R Squeak is being funny.

Ron nods and says, ^MBest if you come into our control room.^M

We go down eight levels. I said paranoid.

The control room is huge. Several thousand meters in width. It can be compartmentalized in a fraction of a second. There are limiters ready to go, ox, temp, water, etc. in each section.

"Who are these beings that induce this kind of caution?"

Ron smiles, but Squeak answers, ^RNothing local to worry about. This is against outsiders. Did you really think the 'thn would not eventually show an interest? These sections you have no doubt noticed are self contained, even if they core this world. We will not be caught a third time.^R

^MI would recommend the others do the same. We know you have other

worlds you are preparing and watching.^M I open my mouth and close it. Black was supposed to be isolated. Magenta for sure, they would know about. But Yellow and Cyan? Cyan maybe. Anyway. Now I am being paranoid.

"Noted. What are the sentients here? Who made the cities?"

Ron smiles wide but Squeak says, ^RYou would never guess.^R

"Please no games. I am tired and have a lot of work to do."

A number of screens come alive and four Companions come in.

^MWe were waiting for our partners. We work together as a team. Everyone is equal here. As they outnumber us, they have most of the ideas. All decisions are by consensus.^M

Of course. It was not just the low TKs, it is everyone.

"One team. Got it." Ron and Squeak sit down, so I do as well.

Two of the Companions come forward, the rest form a circle with us included. Seems more a Hu construct, but then so are the Companions I guess. Well part Meep too.

This world is different than any earth froth world. The dominant is not a species, but a collection of species. All species on this world work together for the benefit of all. Yes, there are still predators and prey, but it is seen as a sacrifice for the good of all to be eaten by another if it is your duty.

Another Companion comes in, *The most intelligent is a collective of polychaete worms. On the earth froth, they were largely aquatic. Here there are both land and sea species. The cities you have noted were built by them. By working together and with other species, they built the cities. We, those of us present, have been slowly feeding them information of possible technologies and understandings that might be of use to them.*

They were already capable of building large collectives, but by adding metal, ceramic and cement knowledge, they are now able to build larger and more connected structures. Knowledge is shared, so this knowledge has gone world wide as has the connectedness.

They have achieved Tech 4 level understanding and we expect them to reach Tech 5 soon. Their grasp of genetics and genetic manipulation is already far in advance of any earth froth species.

Computation abilities are still organic and thus far they have seen no need to include solidic forms. We are learning much from their algorithmic understandings. This has allowed us to improve on our own designs and understandings.

Ron asks, ^MDo you have any idea of when we might be called?^M

"No idea. I know as much as you do. A world wide communal organ-

ism. Ship is large, but not large enough to take the entire biosphere."

^RNot a concern. The community is capable of reproduction at a smaller scale as well.^R

Di Eden

It has been over a hundred years. No one I knew is still alive. No one will remember me or Squeak. We have faded into the realm of legends if they remember at all. This means I can walk around freely at least. I sense no TK activity at all. I sense very little activity at all. Seven cities and seven lifeless corpses. What happened?

This can't just be because their slaves are gone, can it? I sense no obvious destruction from explosions or war. No radiation, though they were pre-atomic when I left. When we left. I am finding skeletons. Lots of those. Not buried or burned. The flesh long gone. It was like they died where they were. There are no domesticated animals, no crops. Whatever happened, happened some time ago for nature to take over so completely.

I continue my search deciding to search in places were a few Di were before. If this was some fast spreading plague, then an island would be a good choice. We do not travel well over water, though when I left we did have ships. Not great on the high seas, but could work coastal waters, rivers and lakes. Drup should be here instead of me if not for the fact that I know this word better.

Using more TK could draw attention I don't want, so I keep fairly quiet and short range. I visit smaller islands first and find nothing. Di were never there. There is plenty to eat and chasing down game is not a problem. Even find a few melon patches and other tasty treats. I finally take the leap and make my way to the larger islands.

It is there I finally find life of the Di kind. I am immediately attacked of course. A stranger could mean death if I was infected. I shout I am not infected, but would you believe me in their place? I hole up and do pulse scans of their village some ten kilometers away.

Tech level 2 at best, barely above stone age. We have not been this low for millions of years. Likely they never understood a word I said if they have digressed this far. This is very sad. A thriving intelligent culture reduced to a few hundred individuals liking on the edge of existence. Totally dependent on chance. They are hunter gatherers. No tech higher than stone and wood. Some weaving and hut building. At least they are not in caves or in trees like the monkeys did.

I need to find out what happened. I settle down and using TP hitch a ride on a Di mind. I will become this Di for the duration, feel what they feel. It is unlikely any remember what happened. Too many generations unless they have story tellers and then the stories have likely changed so

much it might be hard to see truth any longer. Still, I don't want to scare them or mess with what little they have. Would not take much to push them over the edge to extinction.

I decide on an older fem. If they are still matriarchal, she would know the most. She has prematurely aged, likely from malnutrition and smaller infections. She has parasites of all kinds, inside and out. I am guessing they all do. A younger fem is spreading mud on her skin. That should help. It feels good to her and she is appreciative. Her name is Mal'e. She is the leader.

A number of others wait on her and she does no apparent work herself. Likely she no longer can. Food is brought, waste is taken away. No one is wearing clothing or tool belts. Crude sacs are used if they need to carry anything small and in number. Hides from some creature they hunted or found. This clan numbers only about twenty, from hatchlings to elders. Mal'e and another fem are the only elders. There are numerous hatchlings. Must have high infant mortality. One fem is incubating two eggs. That is different. We usually only had one at a time.

Mal'e has trouble chewing her food and a younger male mashes it up with a stone on a flat stone surface before feeding her. As if she was a barely hatched one again. I am thousands of years old, but have no experience with old age. This is sad, even if she is taken care of and still seen as value to the others.

A fire is started. Food not eaten is buried apparently so as not to attract flies, which bite apparently. The mud helps, but is not perfect. They always seem to find the one spot where the mud has flaked off. I have felt several bites since taking this ride.

The clan gathers around, waiting for something from Mal'e apparently. Ah, perfect. She is about to tell a tale.

!In the olden times, life was very different than it is now. Di did not respect other life. Thanks was not given for a life taken. Too much life was taken, even when not needed. Water life and air life and land life were equally mistreated. All suffered because of the greed of our kind.

As a consequence, as is the way of life, a balance came that was not kind to us. We suffered horribly to pay for our misdeeds. Countless numbers died. Entire clans died and no one could do anything about it. We had forgotten the ways of life and had to pay the price for that forgetting. Di died, Di killed, other life and themselves, blaming each other for what all had done.

A few escaped on boats and through fortune their boat was washed ashore here after a horrific storm. Most died by being washed overboard.

A lot died of starvation once they reached our new home. They had forgotten the ways of life and had to relearn lessons we now take for granted. The clans split up so as not to overburden any one area during this learning time.

Runners took knowledge between clans as one clan or another found a rule of life to be shared. Eventually, over many generations, we learned again how to live life again. Thus we are here today, in balance and harmony with the life around us. We are not warriors killing all we see, for to kill is to kill ourselves. We are not hungry bugs eating all that we find, for to eat with abandon is to starve to death. We are not flies, to reproduce without end, so as to annoy all we encounter.

These lessons are holy and cannot be forgotten. We will not be given another chance. We cannot return to the ways of old without death following. Let us give thanks for the wisdom sought and found by those before us then and now.!

The clan does a short chant echoing the basic tenants just told.

I back out and return to my own form. Plague. The smallest of creatures can bring down the mighty with ease. Being so isolated, it likely they were able to learn the life lessons fairly quickly. Will they return to the main land and forget again these lessons?

I think about the mandate the OMs all have. Produce life forms containing plant, animal and fungi, who then make OM spores to be broadcast to other worlds. Understanding is needed. Understanding at the most fundamental level, but tech is not needed and likely slows the process down. OMs have trouble with tech in my experience. They tolerate it, because it happens too fast for them to understand it.

At the same time tech is not needed by the 'thn either. Understanding of the psiotic force does not require tech. In fact, psiotic tech feeds off the same force needed to do TK. Except at Farout this is not usually a concern, at least at first. But what happens where there are countless starships and entire worlds are running on psiotic energy? An insatiable appetite for life force that prevents OM spore formation. Ultimately prevents life understanding and, dare I think it, enlightenment.

Most sen fear death, their own death, and the death of those dear to them. Di are no different. We should have seen this in the Rap we enslaved, as they were at least our equals. We should have seen it in our livestock, the food we grew, the forests we destroyed. All because of the fear of death. ALL life cycles. Even TKs will eventually die or at least be transformed.

Is this what the 'thn feared? We had gotten off the Path and though

they tried to steer us back, we hardened ourselves and fought back instead. We made star ships, we polluted the Regional Galactic Center with our polluted ideas. We made far more TKs than were necessary for either spores or baby 'thn or even to help answer the Question.

Do I have the correct understanding now or is this another false path leading to a different destruction? What do I tell the others?

Earth One

As this journal entry is to be read by earth froth sentients, an attempt will be made to make it understandable to same. Some may be lost in translation. Though many years have been spent in the presence of such sens, their ways are still not understandable. Check the 'thant library for the Yesan version if greater understanding is sought.

The standard practice of dispersal, that is a massive reproductive event, was initiated upon arrival. Maximum stealth mode. Air, water and land means used. Patience, which is obvious to Yesan, but not so to earth froth sens, was essential to success. As was the choice of whom should have this assignment.

Implantation on Earth One was initiated soon after the protagonist was freed from Tridon, "Sauron" as labeled by the Earth One Hu. The assignment was simple. Insure the success of said Sauron's mission. Secondary, do not let said Sauron know.

Before assuming this role extensive research in the 'thant library was necessary to understand Sauron's methods and practices. A conclusion was reached very quickly that Sauron was incompetent, even for an earth froth sentient.

Consider the evidence. 1) It took sixty five million years to finally produce the Hu sentient. 2) This self same sentient was able to defeat Sauron within a few years of reaching TK status, with a very low number of individuals, who had no reproductive capability, with no technology other than the newly acquired TK skills. Shameful.

Now this Sauron wants to complete the current mission using a fantasy of Hu origins. Sixty five million years of experience with countless species and the best proposal was an ergot induced dream by a random assortment of Hu scattered over Earth One over time. Needless to mention, but the dreams, being dreams, do not even match in their descriptions. It comes down to the Hu emotion called revenge. Revenge for the fact that Sauron's creation was better than Sauron. How this transference of thinking from an unrelated species occurred can only be assumed to have happened because of the close association with the creation itself during the time of its rising.

The most interesting aspect is that in no way can Sauron take credit for the rise of the Hu. It is even conjectured that the rise would have occurred much sooner if Sauron had not been present.

Hence the need for Yesan intervention. Without such, there was zero

probability of success. You would think that the time spent as a Tridon, a distant ancestor of the Yesan, would have instilled some wisdom. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Further proof of Sauron's deficiencies.

Belief is that a Hu sigh would be appropriate at this point. It was important to understand Hu to understand what Sauron hoped to accomplish. Without the experiences with Sam and Marie, Pilot and others this assignment would be impossible. The product was to be a horror to Hu specifically.

Basically the assignment is to accomplish the end point while making Sauron think that the idea originated and was worked by same. Only the time period is exceedingly short in comparison to the rise of the Hu.

Interestingly, most of the genes for this project existed in Sauron's past. The forms of the present were radically changed and of little use. Sauron still remembered this form. Part of the trick was getting Sauron to see this and transform long enough for genetic material to be collected and analyzed. Of course climate and ecological conditions were much different then. A direct genetic transfer would not work either. A complex problem to be sure.

It comes down to a large scary vertebrate with lots of sharp teeth and claws. Dinosaurs had feathers and those will help with the generally cooler climate of present day Earth One and Two. A short trip to Di Eden to collect some genetic material would be helpful, but even there, most of the Di confine themselves to warmer regions, inland rather than coastal. The target Hu on Earth Two are coastal. Much to work out.

As to fire breathing. Not possible without TK. There is no permission to make them TK. Not sure they would be considered sentient enough to handle it without going rogue. Sauron might want them rogue though. Limiters could prevent that from happening.

There is a large open graveyard of bones and rotting flesh from attempts that failed. Sauron does not clean up or recycle. Doing so for him would be too obvious that someone else was here. Sauron has noticed some of the horde and killed a few, but analysis suggests they are seen as local arthropods and not a threat. At this rate it will take Sauron another sixty five million years, in which case the Hu hated so much will be gone. It is decided to do a sub experiment on an isolated island to produce something close to what is needed, then introduce them one at a time to this region and see how Sauron reacts to them.

This has already been done three times with no suspicions on Sauron's part. A poor drunk old Ku would have. Is it time to be more overt? Each time Sauron captures the introduced one and begins experiments again

from that point. It is understood now why the Hu TKs were able to defeat Sauron.

Frustrating, even for a Yesan, to witness such stupidity.

Bug Eden

When I joined the five I had no idea what I was getting into. They were all legends. The Meep and subsequent daughter Meeps got me in the door. The understandings gained made me part of the team. Way too fast. I certainly do not remember my last incarnation, much less many of them. I am the youngest too.

What I do understand is we are in uncharted territory. We checked the Control files, which was a trip. Never would have got it without 13D abilities. We are controlling the circumstances of our existence now. We chose Bug Eden for lack of a better label. We sent out requests to the rest of our gang, for lack of a better label. We have no idea if this will work, but are agreed we have to try. For The Question. All for The Question.

Our lab and offices are deep underground, very deep. Extremely well shielded, definitely not earth froth or anything like it. The part that scares me is Silver was on a similar froth, though not this one, on a previous incarnation. I just hope that is not enough of a clue to lead them to us. The other thing that scares me are the Catboxes going out all the time. One direction only. Nothing comes back. Hell of a way to run things.

I had my Meeps do some research while I was in Control. I had this theory that there must have been sentients from the beginning. There were. Incredibly different time base. We are in very slow time right now by comparison. At the other end the time base will make us look like Brownian motion. VERY slow. Each has consciousness. I really need to come back in one of those time periods. Just for fun.

But, I am here. I need to concentrate on now. Puu is out on patrol. We have become a finely tuned army of fearless warriors, but they still need checking up on. Cat is working on some surprises of course. Who would have thought a kid from the wrong side of a Hu city would come this far.

Silver and Turtle. I read their files of course. They only contain what they want us to know. I suspect there is much they are not telling us. Those two scare me the most.

A Meep shows up. They patrol the multiverse around us. They can be in a huge number of places at once. We have taught them all about 'thn and their tricks. We appear to be of no interest to the 'thn here. That is weird. We are sentient. Why aren't they here? Did Silver and Turtle do something at Control to throw them off? Are we in some kind of blind spot? Cat knows how to do that, so of course they would too.

I especially want to know what our three super 'thn are up to. They

cored Alexandria, but I suspect that was on orders. I suspect, hope, they are still on our side. Whatever that means.

SyWg

I understand why the others left. White was more Di than I am by a large amount. Rand is Hu, so he had to go back to Earth Two, even if he was technically Earth One stock. But did they have to leave me alone with all six companions? We, the Sy, are failing here. No doubt.

Of course the Sy did not accede to the Wg demands. Worse, they openly attacked. So stupid. We warned them, but pride is a terrible thing to bury. They really are not much different than Di or Hu really. How many times in history did the same thing happen on those worlds? Countless. There are no Sy settlements within ten kilometers of any coast now, including major rivers. Any Sy that even tries to enter these zones is found and killed. No trial, no questions, just killed. Wg poison darts are a horrible way to die too. They were warned, they chose to defy the warnings.

To be fair, the Sy thought they were much better. Always have been in the past. They are stronger and faster, if you count troll strolling faster. A typical strategy was to hit and run for the safety of the hills. The Wg simply waited until the sun went down and then destroyed the entire village the sniper came from. They seem to always know which one too.

The Sy tried using mercenaries from far away regions. The Wg simply destroyed the five closest settlements instead. Every new strategy was met with increasing retaliation. I am so ashamed of the Sy that I have resumed my Di form. If I see a Sy, I chase them away.

The only smart ones appear to be the Scary. They absolutely refuse to attack a Wg, even if being attacked themselves. They can shield from the darts of course. If they see a Wg, they turn around and go the other way. The Sy have stopped using them and stopped feeding them. This forced the Scary to retreat to the abandoned towns. This means they are having to do their own crops and livestock where before everything was done for them. At least they did not have to make their own tools and homes as well. They will get by. They do not reproduce and if parents give birth to a Scary, they do their best to hide it from others. Too bad they can't handle being a three. They would be a big help. The best I can do is give them amps, but that only doubles their current gifts.

I am seriously gave some thought to throwing in with the Wg, but dare not without the Comps permission. Given our record, I would not take me. I live like a Hu hermit. A small place in the middle of the woods on a high hill. Very beautiful when there is a big thunder storm. Hut got

hit once before I put up huge lightening rods. Those get hit every time there is a storm now. No one visits, not surprising. They can see the lightning hitting this spot from a long way off. This hill is feared by both the Sy and Wg and called Lightning Hill. Wg, being wet, never survive a lightning strike. Just knocks out a Sy for an eighth or so, but they usually recover.

The Comp known as Ghost comes into the hut.

!Hello Ghost, welcome.! It bobs a welcome in return. At least they are not mad at me, outnumbered six to one at present. I am stronger, but they are more clever.

You are no longer helping the Sy. Not a question, so I don't answer.

I continue my work on a bark basket. I have taken to wood carving and have a large array of creatures 'guarding' the hut now. It adds to the mystic of the place I guess. I store tools and such in the baskets in a sort of minimal organization. I find I like working with my hands. We did a lot onboard the Black Wind ships of course. I miss the sea.

What are you thinking in regards to our assignment?

I look up and think about it.

!No species succeeds without some challenges. The only use I can imagine for the Sy is to help harden the Wg, make them stronger.!

They are already doing so.

!Then I have no other ideas.!

Do fluidics always give up so easily? Huh?

!No point in working on a failed situation. Best to move on to a new assignment.!

Or adapt the current one.

!What are you thinking?!

What were the exact words of the assignment?

I laugh, !They were not exactly very clear. The best I can come up with is prepare for mischief.!

Does not appear to say dominate this world or subdue all other sentients present.

I look up with my eyes open, !No it does not. Mischief. Hmm, that could actually be some fun. Do you have any ideas?!

Ghost has already left. Nice pep talk. Mischief. Yes, that changes everything. Time to pay a visit to the Scary. This is where they could excel. I certainly have a lot of experience training TKs. When in doubt, do what you do best.

Time to shake things up.

Galactic Regional Center

ωI tell, you, I do not trust them. They are up to something.ω

δWe have not heard of them since their secret world in the Farout was cored. Have you ever seen a world cored? No TK can survive thatδ

ωI heard the High 'thn cored their first hidden world too.ω

I affirm.

δYou have to admit, it has been a lot quieter here without them. Did you ever catch one of their Di/Rap runs in the game room? Most fun I have had since coming here. We have taken it back to the home world and now there are competitions on all continents.δ

ωNot to the death I hope. Or do you have that high of simulation tech?

ω

δNo. We are only tech four. We have no intention of attracting the attention of the 'thn snoops. We did learn something from the earthers.δ

I show amusement, ωDon't upset the 'thn.ω

δTo be fair to the 'thn, they were given a lot of warnings. First lot were sent to that Farout place. I certainly have no idea how to get there.δ

ωYet, they came back. Made a mess of things yet again. How stupid can they be?ω

δPretty stupid. At least they all died when their place was cored. No sign of them since. Very quiet like I said. There are wanted alerts on every TK world in the universe and no one has reported any of them. They are gone. Life goes back to normal.δ

ωTill the next one. Given the odds, we will be gone before that happens.ω

I affirm.

δI don't trust the 'thn either, but they never did anything to hurt us. The 'thn are more of a threat, but we can avoid their wrath.δ

ωPossibly, at least they do give warnings.ω

'thn High Council

The Froth Front is progressing normally. The slight interruption appears to have caused no harm, but we are only doing the black worlds so far. Quantum Syms were placed on many and they duplicated without error.

There has been no sign of the Rogue 'thn. They are now transdimensional, not just in abilities, but also in form. It is possible they could be here and we would not know.

Then we best proceed as if they were here.

In the absence of the Earth Froth 'thn, we have sent two trusted retired 'thn in to take their place. They have extended their range to ten froth. We would need many more 'thn to extend to the limits.

How big is the gap left by the Rogues?

We estimate at about one hundred froth, but this is only an estimate. Qr'thn was with this line for some sixty froth. Of course she was not responsible for all those worlds. She has had many offspring. Her mother was killed in the flash 'thn war.

Has anyone determined how that happened? We do not die. Death is unknown to us.

There is also the Sleep. No one knows how that happened either. Some 'thn seemed to have been immune from the first wave, but succumbed to the second.

This unacceptable. We are the Gods.

Any activity on the Rogue worlds?

Minimal TK activity. The resident OMs are attempting to recover from the missing TKs. They still have a mission to perform. These are not plantimal worlds. This is not negotiable. They need TKs to form the sporophytes. At least one eight is needed. Normally the 'thn assigned helps them achieve this level with ONE and only one individual. They can make low level TKs, but it takes time to teach them how to advance.

OM com is very slow indeed.

We are not slow, just cautious. [this is the most humor you get from the 'thn]

New business please.

Vagk quadrant need watching. The TK concentration and levels are rising unexpectedly.

Send two 'thn as a coupled pair to monitor. NO ONE goes to a suspicious site alone any more. We cannot allow another earth froth to form.

The principals are dead, as are most of their students. This cannot be allowed to happen again.

Beijing

Gum Yu Monastery

Our fifth monastery. I am lead for the moment. Positions change all the time so no one feels overburdened. We took the overflow from the other four. LOTS of kids. All girls of course. We are all clones. From what I have heard about sex I am not missing it. Disgusting.

Those who can work do so of course, including the girls. A lot to do to set up a new place. The main structures were built by everyone, but the details are up to us. A lot of details. There means farming, herding, weaving, cooking, cleaning, etc.

Our population is exploding. This was not our intention or goal, but we got new orders that told us to make as many of us as possible. We would be needed. For what end, we were not told. How this would happen, we were not told. Just make more of us and wait. Easier said than done. I swore after my first that it would never happen again. First was the incubation, not fun, then the birth, worse, then the diaper time, terrible twos and threes. Do not get me started on teenagers. The worst. Now I have five of all different ages and am temporarily the head. I will die of exhaustion I am sure.

There are no norm locals in this area. We purposely pick locations without them. Our interactions with same are never pleasant. They speak Standard, which we all learn as well, but we speak "Jane" a much more complex and nuanced language with a ton of weird rules. No norm has ever been able to understand more than a few words and never the context. If some norm should wander into our territory, we politely ask them to leave. If they do not, we use them as fertilizer. Harsh, but necessary for our goals.

We all train to be warriors and are excellent at weapons and improvisation, should we be caught off guard. We also have low level TK, just level two. Follows the standard Hu line so far. Scanning and telekinesis. Enough to get out of a tight situation, but not enough to draw attention from the 'thn. A hand full of pebbles in a pocket works wonders.

Of course we also have what is called the nuclear option. Though none of us know where the term came from, we all know what it means. Our own deaths, or at least our awareness of self. Add it up. We are several thousand strong at the moment, if you count the little ones. Certainly enough to destroy all but the island cultures if set off. The activation sequence is well hidden. It won't be by accident, but it will happen. Scary.

Edwin Eden

They broke through a few days ago. I am back in my 'thant form. Jack was right, they would never have seen a Hu before and likely attacked. On the other leg, they have never seen 'thants like us before either. These 'thants are weird. They are white with red stripes. All have the same pattern. There are weird bumps and spikes all over too. I feel very plain next to one of them. We have taken to referring to them as Fancy 'thants. Sounds better in 'thant.

Language is very different also. I thought all 'thants com'd the same way, but I guess out here on the fringe of Farout that is not the case. I had to use TP for Jack and I to learn their language. I also had to shield us until I was able to com. They do not know what to make of us and decided to ignore us as we presented no threat, for reasons of numbers if nothing else. Thousands have come through the portal so far.

They are eating the world clean. All my precious lichens are being stripped off every surface. I am glad I have live samples of every species in stasis to reseed this world. I am sure they will leave as soon as they have gotten all that they can. Strange that none ever commented on finding 'thn metal to build a port from. Opportunists. Don't question good luck, just use it.

They don't appear to have warriors. Guess out here where an encounter with anything living is so rare, it does not make sense to keep a herd of angry mountains of destruction. Given where we are I am beginning to think these are the original 'thants. Jack and I are much younger, species wise. Maybe warriors are a more recent response to threats that did not exit so many billion years ago. If they had shown up on an earth froth world, they would have been attacked instantly with an overwhelming force. These 'thants don't appear to be so territorial.

One of their scouts comes up to us. I have told them Jack is my attendant as is customary for a male of my standing. They don't care. All the same, it is very unusual for one to get this close.

thI am to give you a physical examination to be sure you do not have any diseases or parasites. This is not optional. thAh, there is the 'than attitude I remember.

thYou are not my Queen, nor do you represent her. th

She ignores me, thOnce the exam is done I will transmit the information and then be destroyed. thHarsh.

thI am the highest ranking male of my colony. You will need to give

me more information. Why do you need an exam? We are no threat to you.th

This confuses the scout and it turns a few circles trying to understand what is happening. Probably never had an order questioned before. It goes close to the portal where another scout is waiting, but does not enter. Instead it hands a message to the scout, then sits on the ground. The scout sprays it with a dissolving solvent. Nasty stuff. The scout that confronted us is now a pink puddle of goo. This scout comes forward.

thI am to give you a physical examination to be sure you do not have any diseases or parasites. This is not optional.th Another scout appears at the entrance to the portal.

thNo.th

This proceeds the same way and ten more too.

thThey are trying to wear you down,th Jack says.

thThey have no idea how patient we can be. It would be a horrible waste of life, but that is their choice remember. Neither one of us is hurting them in any way.th

thWhy do they want a physical anyway?th

thMales serve two purposes. The Library and mating. Whereas I would love to examine their Library, I do not think that is the reason for this.th

thEuuu! You would mate with her?th This is clearly grossing Jack out.

thIt makes sense from their perspective. We are more evolved and closer to the multiverse standard. Granted, there is still a lot of variation, but they are like no 'thants I have ever seen in any Library, even the Regional Galactic Center Library. I thought the Center had a complete catalog until now.th

thThere is not much selective pressure way out here for them to change.th

thVery good Jack. You have been doing the reading I asked.th

thThis is not curiosity. If they encounter a more recent evolved 'thant colony, they would die. They are asking this for selfish reasons.th

thDo you think surviving is selfish Jack? Do you not wish to survive?th

thI am one and will never reproduce. I am already dead from a genetic perspective. I have made my choice. We also have a mission to complete.th

I hiss out my sphericals. Equivalent to a 'thant sigh.

thAnd mating with the Queen may be our best or at least easiest way to accomplish that goal. No point in leading a colony of 'thants to their death.th

thThen why let so many scouts die?th

'thTo see if they are serious or just curious. You are correct. They have assessed the situation and determined they need the new gene set to survive.'th

'thIs not the male sacrificed after mating? You would leave me here alone?'th

'thant do not express humor or you would see me smiling at the moment.

The scout awaits my answer.

'thI will never enter your portal. I will not be sacrificed after the mating. If your Queen wants a mating, then it happens here, just the two of us. No one else.'th

The scout goes back and is dissolved. Very rigid group. They would never survive an attack. Flexibility is key to survival against an unknown agent.

Another scout comes forward. I pop Jack and I to a remote location.

'thWhy did you do that?'th It is near sunset here.

'thThey can never be allowed to learn our TK levels, but they also need to understand that we and specifically I am way outside their understanding.'th

'thWhat are their TK levels?'th I TK our camper and lab to us. We have moved many times. This place was next on our list to survey anyway.

'thThey are all norms as far as I can tell. They may have had TK in the beginning, but TK takes energy from the psiotic field. An entire colony of TKs could deplete the field over time. It was better for them to not have TK in Farout.'th

'thWon't the earth froth TKs do the same?'th

'thEventually of course, but for some reason, low level TKs deplete the field faster than high. Besides, their numbers are much smaller. A 'thant colony can have upwards of several billion members.'th

'thHow far do you think their colony extends?'th

'thFarout is not a multiverse, so they can only spread three dimensionally. Best guess, given the time out here is that they extend millions of light years in all directions. Any bigger and they would split into multiple colonies.'th

'thBut the fact they are so interested in you means the other colonies are similar to us.'th

'thYes, I believe so. Their scouts should find us in a few days and the process will begin again. Only this time, it will take much more time for them to get information back to the portal and send out a new scout.'th

'thMaybe we should not have been so close to the portal then.'th

'thMaybe. Let's go on a lichen hunt while we are here and they are busy.'

Of course their scouts have limited DS capability and it does not take long before they find us again. We managed three new lichens: Samples, descriptions and cataloged. That felt good. This is a low green world, but there is a surprising amount of diversity. Lichens are a mix of algae and fungi. It makes sense that we find both in moister areas. Separate they need more water. Together and they can survive in a desert given it does rain even there occasionally.

I am ready to confront the scout when it unexpectedly turns around and leaves. Strange.

Jack sees it before I do. The scout left a small 'thn metal tag on the ground.

'thDon't touch it. Let's see what they do.'

Jack affirms. I am scanning them, easy enough for me and I am curious. They are all returning to the portal. It takes time, but they all eventually enter and leave our world. We are alone again. Works for me. I turn my attention back to our lichen hunting.

'thWe should leave just in case.'

Jack suggests. 'thNo, actually we should stay. As much as I have enjoyed this vacation from all the fun, it not our assignment. We started the portal for a reason. We wanted to be easy to find and look attractive to the 'thants. Well, it worked and they found us. We need to let this play out.'

'thUnderstood.'

He, or rather she in this form, needs to get over this. Asking questions is good. I let it go for now. It is a few days before anything happens and then it is a 'thant walking towards us. A single one. Clearly the new species, has the red and white stripes and bumps. We wait. She comes closer.

'thShit!'

'thWhat is it Edwin?'

'thThat is not just any 'thant. That is a virgin queen. They want me to start a new colony here.'

'thHave you ever mated before? Do you know what to do?'

'thWe only mate once normally. So, no I have never mated, but I know what is required. Part of our training.'

Now the question is, do I want to? Now I understand our assignment better. This hybrid would be very interesting.

'thJack, I am afraid we are about to be spending all of our time, and I mean all of it, raising baby 'thants. I am sorry, but this is what we were designed to do.'

'thCan we use TK?'th Up until this point we have been hiding it, well if you don't count popping to the other side of the world. Yeah, that sort of gave it away. That explains why they want my contribution now. But TK is not in our genetics. It has to be given from the outside.

Rap Eden

^RWhat are those things?^R Jaf asks. I look to where she is looking and see three goldish black things floating a few hundred meters above us.

^RNo idea. Never seen anything like them.^R I don't like unknowns. Unknowns are often dangerous. We have been here long enough to learn that lesson the hard way. When we came here locations were found that had space, water and plenty of prey. We weren't stupid about it and quickly learned to raise prey and grow crops to eat and feed them. We do not want to make the mistakes of the Hu and Di.

I scan the objects, but they don't scan or are too far away for a two. Hard to judge their distance. Am I seeing things? Are these a projection from a high TK?

Not everything on this world is safe. Many have died. Often from small innocuous plants or creatures. It makes sense, there are medium sized predators here. They are fun to hunt actually. All creatures and plants try to avoid being eaten. Red in tooth and claw, or in many cases, nasty poisons of every kind.

^RHegge are you ready for the council meeting?^R I wave I will be there. As the ranking TK I have to attend. It was much easier when I was a norm. I look back up and those things are gone.

We don't have the strength of the Di, so we depend on brains instead. We have always worked well as a pack. Like the Di, we are not crazy about heights unless we have the TK gifts, therefore all of our structures are one level. We have space for the time being. Not sure if any of us ever want to see cities again. Don't like enclosed spaces either. Reminds us too much of our time on Di. Only a few of us were there of course, it has been many generations. We are nearly feral again. We can't go back all the way though, we like safe communities.

^RThe Art Council will come to order please.^R Had I known I would be involved in such boring activities I might have elected to remain a norm and be buried by now. I could have had a bonding. It would have meant helping to taking care of hatchlings. I have helped a few times. Not my idea of a good time. They chew on everything, including adults and each other. We all heal quick enough, but it is still painful. Was Squeak like this? Was I?

I stand in the back. I rarely say anything unless they feel they need to appeal to a high TK to make something. Most of those requests are turned down. We need to be able to do things without TK. We have plenty of

twos to help with lifting and such. They can DS into tight spaces for exploration and such. I spend most of my time as a healer for major injuries.

I happen to glance up. Our ceiling are fairly high so we don't feel trapped. Those three spheres are up at the apex! I try scanning them again and still nothing. What are they? They disappear again. Strange. Am I seeing things?

We saw nothing of them for several eight days and most of us forget about them. TKs were all trained to recognize 'thn of course, though none of us had personally seen one. These did not match that description except they were round. 'thn can be scanned, even if they don't like it and it is not advised to do so. These could not. Even looking at them was disconcerting. It was like they were only half there. Sort of fuzzy. Not rat fuzzy, but cloud fuzzy?

I was assigned to the Art Council because if we wanted to be accepted as true sentients and eventually join the all earth froth council, we need to appear sentient. Therefore we tried art. Mostly sculpture. Most of us prefer to work with our hands and make good engineers for that reason. Sculpture was logical I guess. Being TK, I could sculpt with stone. Obsidian was my favorite, but would settle for basalt if there was none locally.

Contrary to popular belief, we did try and keep a low profile and not flaunt our abilities. We put in our required time in kitchens, farms and latrines. None of us are squeamish. Rumor has it the Hu were. Why? It is all a natural part of life. There were rumors about all the other earth sentients. Having never seen any, most thought of these as fire tales to be told around a fire pit at night. I knew they were real, having seen some. A normal lifespan for a Rap was some fifty years. Some lived to be eighty if an accident did not catch them.

That means the only ones who were on Di Eden are all TKs now. About a hundred of us. We have a replacement number in training, but as so few of have died, the number is low, less than a small pack. Yes, we have had to demote a few who did not work well with TK, but even that has slowed down as we did a better job at selection. There are eight at my level of six. We can heal and raise new TKs. Theoretically we could raise a seven, but no one wants to be the first. We really have no need. It takes a few hops, but we can get anywhere on this world very quickly.

^RHegge, you are up for herd thinning. Fresh meat!^R We don't let any rat go to waste. My mouth is watering at the thought. We eat any rat that does not pass inspection. Being a six means even an infected one can't hurt me. The more I eat the more there is for someone else who needs

fresh rat more than I do. I will admit, I am getting a little tired of rat though. We are breeding larger varieties, but they are still not much of a challenge. We used to take down a full size Di. Imagine that!

At the rat farm I take up a position. We run them through a sort of obstacle course. The ones who can't make it or who act strange are removed. It is usually only a few each time, but enough to keep our eyes watching out for them. Some of it is a judgment call of course. I am sure some healthy rats do get eaten. Not enough to cause any harm.

They let the rats go from the crowded enclosure and they start running towards us. They do not like being out in the open and will seek any shelter they can find.

Fy is my partner this time. She is really fast. We smear ourselves with mud so as not to give ourselves away. We remain motionless as they race towards us and the tunnels that should be their goal.

Something is not right. They are acting strange. They run into the walls and try to climb them anyway. The weird part is they are not giving up, but continue to paw the wall as if that is the only option. I grab one as does Fy. Hers is down in a second, but I hold mine out in front of me. It seems totally unafraid.

^RFy, scan the next one. Something is wrong.^R She affirms and grabs one. It does not struggle either.

We both yell at the same time, ^RParasites!^R

Everything stops. The others with us confirm our observation.

The leader for today yells the expected, ^RIsolate this colony and burn them and the nest boxes. Get out the anti parasitical agents and everything, I mean everything gets hosed down, including us.^R

I hate those agents. Gives you loose guano for a few days. We will be isolated as well. If we had not found them, our entire community could have been infected. Fy ate one without thinking. She looks like she ate broken glass.

^RDo you mind Hegge?^R I nod no, scan her and remove all the parasites from the meal she just ate and scan the rest of her for any more.

^RGood to go.^R I whisper, ^RYour eggs are safe too.^R She affirms and hand signals a thanks. Normally someone who is pregnant would be excused from this duty, so she must not have told anyone yet. I certainly won't. That is her duty.

^RI feel so stupid, but I am so hungry.^R I show humor. She has three more to feed now.

^RDon't worry about it. No damage done. Be careful. Get registered. You will get extra rations once you do.^R

^RIt's complicated.^R I sigh, it usually is. One thing we have in common with the other sentients. She is not an alpha fem and normally would not carry eggs, much less to laying. She will have to square this with her alpha and the rest of her pack. The eggs are too far along to remove safely. She will need to lay them. That usually means being excluded from the pack. Raising them on her own won't be easy.

She notices me thinking, ^RIt was the alpha male.^R Even worse. The alpha fem will be furious.

^RYou will have to immigrate. You can't stay here safely anymore. Once we get out of quarantine, I can help arrange that.^R

^RI appreciate that. I was hoping something would go wrong before now and I would lose them.^R No such luck.

ATTENTION ALL TKs.

^RDid you hear that?^R I ask her. She nods no.

ALL TKs ARE HEREBY REMOVED OF THEIR GIFTS. THIS IS NOT NEGOTIABLE. YOU ARE ALL NORMS AS OF NOW.

^RWhat is it Hegge?^R

I hold up my hand to wait a moment. I try scanning around me. I can't. I try lifting a pebble on the ground. I can't. I try opening a portal. I can't.

^RIt would appear there are no gifted ones any longer. We are all norms now.^R

^RHow will I get way then?^R

^RWe will need to move quickly. Once everyone knows there is likely to be some resentment. I will no longer have special access or privileges.^R

^RWhen an alpha falls, the pack attacks.^R I affirm.

^RWe are now a pack of two. Looks like you will have some help raising them after all. I can't stay here either.^R

At least I now know why those 'thn like things were hanging around. Squeak and the others warned us it might happen. We had hoped we were off the normal earth froth path and would avoid notice. Explains why it took over a hundred years to find us. Well, they apparently have. Rap Eden is now on its own. No more special helpers.

I just hope that the start we have made holds. I hope we don't revert to pack rivalry and fighting. It could happen so easily. Once it is dark, we make our escape. We meet Jaf outside the town. Now we are three. Likely other former TKs will meet up. We have a place already chosen. Supplies

and more advanced tech have been cached. It will be some time before we get there without our gifts, but it is also the reason we never liked being in the larger concentrations of Raps. We were warned. I just hope our preparations were enough.

We run all night. Fortunately we were not dosed yet with the anti parasite mix. Shitting the whole way would have made us easier to find.

How can I remain so calm? We were trained for just this event.

Scary

Rand and White are back. Thank goodness. I have been on my own before, but this place was driving me crazy. Okay, not entirely on my own, but outnumbered six to one by the solidics. Still, I think we have worked out a solution for us and the others agree. We are proceeding.

A Scary Sy cannot become TK3 without going rogue. Their abilities are scanning and telekinesis. That's it. We don't even try to raise them beyond this now.

Well, they were wrong, Wg can become Scary too. Same problem, they cannot go beyond two. Their abilities are like the Cats, telepathy and dimension shift. We still have no idea why different species get different abilities.

Sy and Wg are mortal enemies. That is the fun part.

They need to learn to work together for this to work. Even more fun.

We have given up on the adults. We have taken to kidnapping kids. Turns out the cliché of getting them before puberty is essential. I hate kids. Yeah, we have dealt with thousands, but I still don't like it. Not crazy about kidnapping either. Fortunately the same rules for Scary selection are here as they were for us. We have learned to seek out the smiggles, the nerds, the ones who don't fit, the loners. But ones without hate in their hearts. Those always go rogue with power.

It is almost a relief to the communities when they go missing. At least judging from the short period of time their loss is mourned. Nice. I suppose the same happened to me. Been too long. I really do not remember my parents. Just some vague ghost images long gone.

We blew it spending so much time trying to go it alone. Now the nine of us are together. Six solidics and three fluidics. We work together. We expect the Sy and Wg to work together. Again, getting them young before all the prejudices are hard wired. Together we are stronger, we are better.

We pair the Sy and Wg from the beginning. They learn Sy, Wg and Standard. No favorites. We don't even tell them which one they are from, though of course they will find out eventually. We hope by then they won't care. We are isolated from the others for the training and raising.

Pairs are combined into packs of six. Packs are combined into troops of thirty six, which are combined into legions, of well, everyone. We are legion.

Both Sy and Wg have been taught to fear each other and unless we start kidnapping new borns and hatchlings, they will arrive with some

baggage. Besides, it takes at least a few months to determine their ability to accept the abilities.

You can imagine how it was when we forced the pairings. We gave them the abilities, a minimum of instruction on how to use them and then sent them off as pairs to isolated locations. The ones who made it back were bonded. The ones that did not, well, we never found them.

This may seem harsh, but we are running out of time and they needed to be impressed that this was real and serious. Once bonded they would die for each other and totally got over their prejudice for the other species. Forming packs, troops and the ultimate legion was trivial once the bonding took place. Granted, both species are really stubborn naturally. We just benefited from that natural aspect of their personalities.

We have a few more years of training, not on their abilities, they have mastered those and are extremely effective as a team. Next step is to train them in leadership skills. We need not just the Scary, but all of the Sy and Wg. Their working together without question will be the example we need to convince the others. Well, and the fact that they really are Scary.

A pack can subdue a village easy. A troop could handle a city.

Normally, they do not live in the same ecological niche. Again, working together they made it work. Scary live near streams and rivers. None are in isolated desert or small islands. Yes, this does leave an avenue for true haters to retreat to. Good for them. It will be an extremely hard existence if they choose this path and they will never be welcome back into society.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the Comps. And the Comps, just like our Sy Wg pairs, have come to understand there is benefit to working together with different forms. We are equals forever. No more I am better than you because of my form.

A fluidic might complain that the Comps were made. I would counter with then how come they each have unique personalities, likes and dislikes? That does not sound like something made. The way we reproduce would suggest we are more of a cancer on the ecology of a world. Who is better then? No one. We are just different. We have different strengths and weaknesses, but working together we become more than the sum of parts. Old Di wisdom.

At Farout we worked together sort of. There we split by TK level, not by species. The three of us were the losers. Anytime you see someone as other, you have failed. There are SyWg packs that can run circles around us. I would have it no other way.

High TK is an illusion of strength, not a reality.

Council of Five

"A lot to cover, best we get to it."

"Why Standard? Not the easiest in this form."

"So no one listening can understand us Cat."

"Except our entire group. But, if you mean the resident norms, okay, I get it."

I nudge Puu, "I doubt even a Hu could understand us right now. Way, way, too high pitched." She smiles.

Turtle is not amused and gives us a dirty look. That is really scary in Bug form.

Tewk comes in. God, it is HUGE compared to us. Are we cockroaches? It is moving slow, but then speeds up to our time frame. A data cube is handed to Turtle and it pops out. Those things are scary.

"Tewk has several undercover projects going for us."

A giant pause. Well? The Meeps are around me and motionless. Not normal for them. Just glad I can be with them again. Outside this room, they are a tad conspicuous.

Turtle sighs and looks at Silver. He nods.

"Tewk just reported on Sauron. He is attempting to produce a dragon in order to terrorize Earth Two." Turtle shows amusement. I never met Sauron in his native form, but I read all the reports. Silver was able to defeat him as a brand new TK. A warning that being the only TK around makes you soft. We need some competition to stay sharp.

"Unbeknownst to Sauron, Tewk has been helping. We have a timeline and there was no path to success without waiting another sixty five million years anyway." That gets laughs. Turtle shakes her head.

"They, meaning basically Tewk, is getting close. Nothing that breathes fire of course. Started with the basic Di/Rap design, dumbed it down and made it more lethal. A whole lot more lethal. Not Terror lethal, the difference is they don't turn everything into more copies of themselves. One can take out a village in short order without breaking a sweat."

"Is this really necessary?"

Turtle comes in with an answer, "We have baby sat the Hu long enough. Any time a push is let up, they revert to a plant like passive state."

"A lot of Hu will die."

"Not compared to the plagues they set themselves up for. They have been much more destructive to themselves than anything from the out-

side."

Silver adds, "They will be forced to up their tech game. They can't stay at the Medieval level forever. Time to wake up and take their place with the other sentients."

Turtle looks at Silver and nods. He looks at Puu.

Puu starts, "Offspring of a Yesan can be very useful. Small enough and no one pays an attention to them. Larger and they get squashed as vermin, but even the small ones can split to reproduce. Spread them thin enough and they are invisible. All of you know our history. You know what happened to Cat and I pre-TK. You know what happened to me at the RC. Then came New Hope and Alexandria. Without the warning from Br'thn, a whole lot more would have died when it was cored."

"But didn't the three do the coring?" Turtle asks the question the rest of us were thinking.

"They were undercover with the 'thn. It was critical that we all disappear. They had to believe we were gone for good. They had to do it to get back in. In their changed state and given their close association with the Sleep and assassinations of a few 'thn, they needed to do something big. Better them with the warning that the 'thn High Council without a warning."

I ask, "What has been found?" They really drag these things out.

"Not enough time to be sure yet. We only have hints." Aaaagh! I am not the only one. Cat looks like she is about to bolt or do some harm to half the planet.

Silver tells her, "Cool it Cat. Let her tell her story." Cat fumes, but settles down, waiting. Bugs are not patient, worse than Hu even.

Turtle smiles, "Who runs the 'thn?"

What? "The 'thn High Council of course. This is not news."

"That is only partly correct. Who runs the 'thn High Council?"

Silver gives a hint, "This has taken countless incarnations to figure out. Not obvious."

Puu comes in, "Wait, are you saying I was not found guilty by the High Council, but by someone else? Who! I will tear them apart." She is fuming.

I state the obvious, "Wait, you are saying the 'thn did the dirty work for someone else? They sent you to Farout, cored planets, yes, we have heard of others. The records are in Control. I found them. They did not give the names of any fluidics or solidics who approved the actions."

"Fluidics? It was clearly the 'thn who did this."

Silver shouts, "Stop!" We settle down.

"There is a group above the High Council that can direct them in certain cases. Oh, there are rules, which we broke, to get sent to Farout. We know of other cultures that have suffered the same fate. What we now know as Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black, were once thriving TK cultures. They went native again in the millions of years they have spent out there."

Shit. If Silver and Turtle had not escaped that would have happened to us as well.

"What about Alexandria? Why was that hit?"

Cat adds, "The other Farout cultures have had to make peace with their ecologies and became integrated. Alexandria was not originally from Farout. It was not a Farout world. I brought it there. Anyone who can freely come and go to Farout is a threat to their 'prison' system."

"Correct."

"And New Hope was not a natural world either. So, why were these worlds a threat to them, whomever they are?"

"Leaders don't like it when servants learn the truth."

Puu laughs, "Don't pay any attention to the man behind the curtain." Huh?

"Preciously."

I don't get the reference, "Just tell us who please." I say this quietly.

"There is a High Sentient Council above the 'thn. The 'thn are just grunts. We were hoping the our three would be able to suss this out, but no one trusts them, even after Alexandria. We decided we could not wait. By then none of our culture would be left."

"Are they solidic or fluidics?"

Turtle smiles, "Plasmodics. Six dimensional. Nasty. Very hard to see much less find. They keep out of sight for a reason."

Shit.

Cat comes in, "They would be in a millions of times faster time reference. No wonder they can run circles around us. Why did it take so long for them to attack?"

"They are trying very hard to stay out of sight. They are the ones who made the parasites. That is normally enough to take out any TK culture that starts to get too big. Next they take out leaders, sorry Puu. Then they send whole groups to Farout as examples and finally, they core planets. Give the size of any given froth set, coring is hard to do without a lot of side effects and is only used as a last resort, carefully targeted. New Hope and Alexandria were not part of any froth set and therefore easy targets. We won't make that mistake again."

"How come the Meeps have not found them?"

Turtle and Silver look at each other.

Cat answers, "The Meeps are related to the plasmodics."

"Correct. They are the ascendant form. The plasmodics are a degenerative form." Shit, how does that even work?

"There is more. There is another layer. It turns out sentient TKs sit on their council too. Not 'thn, but naturally occurring fluidics and solidics. Forms they know they can control."

"Wait, how is that even possible? They run millions of times faster. No way they could com with each other."

"Really Myra. We can if we wanted to. We time shift all the time."

"Yeah, but millions of times."

"What's the difference?"

"You two, stay on task." Right. TKs are natural? I thought they were created by OMs and 'thns. Layers in layers. I should be used to this with the Meeps.

"Basically the plasmodics think they are the masters of the multiverse and we are pond scum?"

"Basically."

"But even pond scum can cause a stink at times. It needs to be controlled. The bad bits destroyed so as not to ruin the rest."

"We are the bad bits. This analogy suggests it happens all the time. Really?"

"But we are the worst case scenario. VERY close to throw out the entire batch and start over. Would they do that?"

"Actually unlikely. They fear death too. The funny thing is that their normal life span is incredibly short. Their equivalent of TKs a little longer."

"Wait, we can slow down to com with the OMs, so they can slow down too then."

I suggest, "Meeps are in our time frame, well, most of the time. You said they were related. Are the Meeps spying on us?"

"Do you really think Meep would have asked you to care for its offspring if that was the case? Remember the parasites are related to them too."

"Parasites work by abandoning everything non-essential."

"Viruses are the ultimate parasite. The smallest tightest package. They can bring down a civilization."

"Worked twice on Earth."

"Crazy idea. Are 'thn the equivalent of a solidic parasite? The smallest

package possible. Gas takes up less space than a plasma, liquids take up less space than a gas, liquids take up less space than a solid."

"And a quantum entanglement takes up even less space."

I come in, "Then wrap it in six dimensions. The new super 'thn."

"But they are sentient. Parasites are not sentient, are they?"

"We are getting sidetracked bugs." I keep forgetting we are bugs now.

"What exactly are you saying then? We can work out details and implications later." We look at the two.

"This is what it takes to finally get the attention of you three? If I had only know back on the Mesa." I think that was more directed at Puu and Cat.

Raj pops in. It is weird, but all of a sudden the Companions became much more independent. Maybe they are like the baby 'thn upon their awakening. They are much more independent and alive is the only way I can express it. I like it. I hate baby sitting, well, I do love the Meeeps, but anyway.

"I have a question. What power exactly do the plasmodics have over us?"

"Most could not care less. They live in their own world, well, star really. They go about their lives, totally different than anything we could even imagine, but, most do not care or even know about us."

Cat comes in, "But like every other group we have interacted with, there are some who decide things need to be their way. They want to control. At some point a plasmodic smiggle found us, were pushed aside by their bullies and here we are."

"Is this normal? Is this the way the multiverse is supposed to happen?"

Silver shrugs, "Anything to answer The Question."

Turtle looks pissed, "No. It is definitely not."

"Perfect, a puzzle for us to figure out. I'm in!"

"ah, Myra, we all are."

"In case anyone hasn't noticed, we are not exactly normal either."

I look at my appendages. "Really, we are not normal?" Everyone gets it.

Turtle sighs, but Silver answers, "Right now we are working on it. This is why we are here. Not because I am nostalgic for the wonderful life I had here previously."

"Does previously even make any sense for incarnations?"

"Shut it Puu."

"Raj, give your report please." Sorry about that Raj.

Orbital realignment is on schedule. Raj pops out.

"What, what?" I ask.

"Bugs are never going to amount to much as long as they were running a line as fast as they can just to stay alive, barely. The tunnels were helpful. They allowed us to combine, but that was only a start. The world is still spinning too slow to do much but hide here. We need to make this world livable. We need to progress rapidly. Our fun is only beginning."

"Where is this all going then?" Silver and Turtle pop out. I hate it when they do that. Feed us crumbs and expect us to work it out.

Pilot

I have no idea where we are. I mean I can get here and back, but we have no name for the place. A nice star and a nice distance from it. Works. We decided it would be best if we kept on the move. Harder to find us I think is the thought. Do they realize just how large Farout is? There is almost no life here either, so the psiotic field is stronger too. Does not recharge as fast when life is around. Once the ship is full we will need to get back to the multiverse ASAP or we will all be in trouble.

We got the specs on all the sens we will be carrying. It will be a zoo of epic proportions. How do we stop them from killing each other? They were chosen and are being trained to be dangerous. Of course for most of their evolution it was others in their same worlds of course.

The Ship Council decided it would be best to wall off partitions. With AuC limiters all over. We know some of them have limited DS, scanning and TK abilities. Still it scares me. They are sentients. They will eventually figure out a way. I know this is a good thing. They will definitely need their thinking caps on when we reach our conclusion, whatever that is. I really wish we knew more. I smell The Five behind this of course. They like to keep us in the dark so the solutions are original and unexpected. I suspect it is entertainment for them. Must be hard to see something new when you remember past incarnations.

I don't. I don't think so. Maybe. I certainly have dreams and a good imagination. Yes, TKs can dream. We don't sleep, but we still appreciate quiet time. You can't come up with new ideas if you have not thought about them ahead of time. Free association, with your eyes closed. It is not sleeping. It really isn't. We have to keep half our awareness on surroundings. For a TK8, that is a lot of surroundings.

We can't risk so many high TKs here at once. For one they will drain the psiotic field if they all go off at once on some emergency. Two, we can't afford to lose them on their new worlds. We set up an intermediate location for each. Their high TK deposits them there and one of ours picks them up in a flyer. They are in stasis the entire time. That has to be scary for them. They are briefed, but even that has to be scary. On the other hand having a sentient of the type we will transporting view the accommodations where they could be spending a lot of time could save us and them. Hope they chose their candidates wisely.

Cyan Eden

I come down to the surface to meet with Ta. The place has change exponentially. Unfortunately.

They are tech 4. That was not the agreement. Granted we are a little squishy on what tech 4 means, but we agreed to not do anything that went against the ecology.

Tewk helped me track them back in time. As you might have guessed from their anatomy, heavily changed from what they were. They are related to the Tridon, Yesan, Tafa and Aaaha. Guess this is not too surprising. It is not always the case that forms that look alike evolved from the same line.

You will remember that the Tafa found religion of the extreme ecology kind. There were some who did not agree with this change. They were evicted and sent to Farout. How did they have the ability to do that you might ask. They didn't, but they had some powerful 'friends', the entire Galactic Regional Sentient Council. They themselves were ordered to get their act together. Tech scares the council for some reason. They agreed to go eco and kicked out the ones who didn't. Problem solved.

So why are the Cyan occupants so afraid of tech you might ask? Well, they were kicked out of their own Eden and sent here. There is no place to go from here, short of being cored. Word of what happened at Alexandria got out and the Cyan made an abrupt turn. They already knew to be suspicious of tech and were not above tech one when we found them. Our experience reinforced their decision.

I come into the clearing. Ta is really mad. Not surprised.

You promised! She, for lack of a better pronoun, spits at me. The worst insult that a Cyan can give another being. I am not sure what she expects now.

Earth Froth beings are different than the Tridon spread. I am dealing with many other worlds at the same time. I could not be here to micro-manage them the way you are used to. I am sorry. I will attempt to correct the situation.

We let our people die to make room for you. There is nothing you can do short of fitting everyone with limiters and removing the tech. However, taking them away would horribly upset our ecology. There is no answer. We are doomed. It is only a matter of time before we are cored too. We were warned.

*How fast can the new ones be replaced by reproduction of approved

stocks?*

We can repro very quickly if we have to. It is the raising and training that takes time, hundreds of years. Their years are much shorter than ours, but this is an unexpected set back. It should not have happened.

*Start the process. I will install the limiters. The tech is bio, so it has a lifespan and will die off eventually. But the genie, as we say, is out of the bottle. They will remember. The hill top com system will likely stay. The simple mechanical engineering is too easy to make again. On Earth Two we removed metal concentrations and prevented mining, which fortunately did not happen here. But it worked. They dropped back to tech 2 and stayed there. We will fix this. Please understand what happened to us is NOT the same as here.

Both New Hope and Alexandria were made worlds. Though there was and OM on New Hope, it was not the same as here. The worlds were made from raw material gathered from asteroid belts. We got in trouble as much for making these worlds and hiding them as for the tech level we were at. Alexandria was tech 10, enough to scare any council. There are A LOT of worlds at tech 4. You are in no immediate danger.

But, we broke our promise. You have every right to be upset, and we will leave.*

The process will begin. I will not see you again. Your kind will be isolated as quickly as possible. We will reseed the areas once you are gone. She pops out.

We blew it yet again. Why do we keep doing this? What is it about Earth Froth that always gets us into trouble.

I prepare a Catbox and send it off. Let the Five deal with it.

Attention all Earth Froth TKs. Limiters are happening in five seconds. Please get to a safe place. This is all. We are leaving Cyan. Transport will be here in less than a Cyan year. Take nothing with you.

Hek and Jfi pop in next to me. I fit them with limiters too. They were my eyes. They should not have let this happened. Or at least told me. They will stay norm Cyan for the rest of their lives. TK is dependent on trust. That trust has been broken.

If I have been too harsh, they will rejoin the ship crew, but never come back here nor ever be in Cyan form again.

Ta'aha

Cyan used to be Tafa, but were kicked out to purgatory, an old Hu word, but it fits. Our group comes in and tries to 'fix' them. It is what they do. Usually this is very good and the locals truly appreciate it. It was suggested from Pilot's conversation with a local Cyan, Ta, that the Tafa are on the Sentient Council.

My late assignment was at the RGC. Intelligence collected by my subs also suggested the Tafa are on the council or are heavily involved. They have a lot of influence. It is already well known what my own views on the Tafa are.

My opinion, and it is only an opinion, which I know is heavily influenced by my knowledge of the Tafa, based on schooling mostly, is that the Tafa are the 'thn poster child. They keep to themselves, run a perfect ecology, low tech, low TK, in sync with their OM. Perfect.

Do the 'thn know what they did to get there? Do they know about the Terror? Do they know they have their sights set on the Hggy also? The fact that they believe the Earth Froth should die is an open secret. It would be very easy for the 'thn to tell them where earth was. I have to wonder why they haven't? Maybe because the Terror is non-selective and kills everything. Easier to just core the planet.

I am now a nine. The first Yesan to reach this level in a very long time, maybe forever. And still, I am given the shit assignment. We have history with the Tafa, so maybe it makes some sense. Our form is similar and works more or less the same way. It would certainly be easier for me to adjust without notice. I don't like it though.

I pop to a chamber a half click under their altar. I wait. I, well Yesan in general, do not like surprises. I don't trust them. Not that they should trust us either. I have no intention of using the chamber, just curious to see what they do about it, if they even notice or care.

I am not Tafa, but the same evolutionary lineage. I don't approve of what they did, are doing, but maybe the Earth Froth has taken things too far. Neither extreme is ideal. What are the Earth Froth planning now? I only know what Pilot has said. I believe her. We don't know much. How could The Five leave us like this? I don't believe for a moment they are dead or gone. Just in hiding. Yesan hate not knowing what is going on. We are a deeply suspicious species. Hell, even the Hu think of us as spiders. The only good spider is a dead spider. The small ones certainly have suffered because of this deep prejudice. They wack before they even

think. Even the TK, who should know better.

I go deep cover. I find an individual that matches what I need and make a complete duplicate. I need the memories, language and skills of a pilgrim. I move in and dissolve my old form. I can't risk it being found. Not the first time. I doubt I would even be recognizable as a Yesan on the home world any more. Over the years I have made adaptations to fit current needs. No reason not to and it did make it easier to do what needed to be done. No different now.

I am well away from The Altar of Ta'aha. This will give me time to get used to the form and accepted ways of interacting with other Tafa. They are not all high priests and who-ha's thank goodness. As a pilgrim from a distant location I will be afforded some leeway. I need it. I make so many mistakes, even with the knowledge I borrowed. On Yesan and most of the Earth Froth worlds, there was a standard language for each. Not so here. One of the Pillars of Ta'aha is Diversity. Diversity offers a path to Resilience. Resilience leads to Sustainability. They all agree on these concepts. But food, language, customs, all vary with each region I walk through.

This is good. I will be expected to have some familiarity with the regions I would have passed through to make the pilgrimage. I am really avoiding the temple as long as possible. It is a simple life. The paths are dirt and narrow. The tech is low tech, nothing more than one individual could make entirely themselves from materials at hand. There are no fields of crops or livestock. Everything is integrated into the local ecology and well spread out to minimize impact. An Eden as the Hu would describe it.

The dark side is don't get sick or injured. You are on your own. Someone can assist only in making suggestions. You have to do everything yourself. If you are conscious enough to do so. The dead are left to rot and provide food for other creatures where they fall. Shelters are crude, given the one individual mandate for construction. A simple lean-to, cave, hollow in trees and such. We are water proof and don't melt if we get wet. Similarly the only clothing is something fashioned to help carry something, which is then abandoned. I put them at tech one. Language is probably their highest tech and that is high level.

Story telling around a campfire, where everyone contributes scrounged downed wood, is the center of their communal life. Food is not shared so much as the information where a good place to look is.

Punishment is severe and I did not see a single instance where this happened, but it is talked about in every story. There is only one punish-

ment, your death and the death of any offspring. The bad seed is removed without question. The most severe form of natural selection I have ever encountered. Compared to the Tafa, the earth froth are wild demons and devils.

It is vital to attend a local fire circle as soon as possible to avoid any local taboos. There were a few times I ended up being run out of town as Tia and Sam would say. I find I miss them. I never heard what happened to them when Alexandria went. I was with Pilot at the time and everyone else who survived was split up. I heard about them. Eights were certainly needed, but all of us were so busy we just never met up.

There are special camps for pilgrims outside the altar area. We are well spread out. The Temple practices what it preaches. We are only allowed during a narrow window of time each year when food is plentiful. Outside that time and you spend your time waiting in camps much further away. I managed to join a group with permission to proceed. That is how we got to the Altar Camp. It may be a day or two before we actually get to the altar.

The Altar is adamant that only the truth may be told. We are allowed any one question without hesitation. I intend to take advantage of that fact. Of course, my cover will be blown at the same time. But, just as with the Hu visit before, if I don't break any rules, I should be safe. I have a secret Catbox ready just in case. Well, I know how to make them quickly. Not exactly easy to hide that kind of tech on me without anyone noticing.

We are watched constantly. There is no way all of these watchers, assistants and priests are doing their share of community service. I also guess that if one of them gets sick or injured they are not left on their own. Some are more equal than others. A very old story indeed.

At this camp we are taught and drilled on how to approach the Altar with the respect it is due. Right. Surprised they don't sacrifice virgins like the Hu. Failure to show due respect can be fatal. Yes or no questions are the norm. Too easy to lie your way out of a complex answer. Of course lying is also lethal. Not sure who the judge is on what is truth though. Only one question may be asked, so phrasing is critical. This is also part of our training. A few even leave out of fear or frustration. I do not know.

The idea is that there is no wealth, power or reproductive advantage to lying and a great deal to lose. It is no wonder they are still tech one if you discount their social organization. No one else will hear your question or the answer. Nor are you allowed to tell anyone what you learned. This would never work on Yesan. Sooner or later, everyone knows everything.

Very hard to keep a secret when everyone has their little ones watching and sharing. We will approach the Altar tomorrow morning. It is likely our group of eight will take most of the day to complete our visit. The amount of ceremony is very intense, boring and lengthy. The idea is this is suppose to impress you with the seriousness of the process and what you will learn. Of course, everyone is expected to visit the Altar at least once in their lifetime.

The Altar itself seems to be a simple stone affair. Which is strange as the logs indicated a Quantum Matrix of some sort. What happened in the last several hundred years? This is not true. Ah, it is heavily fortified with subtle TK tech. The only place on this world that is. Spontaneous TK to level two is common among our kind. I suspect that is true for the Tafa as well. We are woken and start our holy procession before dawn. Small torches light the path. Surprised they allow these.

It is indeed strange to be among the Yesan's worst enemy. The Tafa are the worst kind of zealots. Rabidly perfectionist. There is only one way, the Tafa way. Yet, their name means flexible. Maybe that is an aspiration only. They are certainly being anal as the Hu say about this approach to the altar.

We reach the Altar area and being our seemingly infinite series of bows and strange arm gestures and recitations of complex phrases. I suspect this means more to the other pilgrims who seem to be taken in by all this.

There is a special area in the center with a high priest of some sort waiting. Each of us is allowed in one at a time. There is a sort of sonic barrier that prevents us from overhearing. We are forbidden to use hand signs, yeah, I know, on penalty of death. For a culture that worships life and perfect ecologies they certainly dwell a lot on death.

The first two go in one at a time. I am third in line. They come out again fairly quickly. No wonder they have to stretch this out so much. The longer it takes the more precious the wisdom.

My turn. I do the necessary bows and such and proceed into the center area. I did not bother to record previous conversations, but will do so now.

I am apprehensive. I know I can die and they likely have the means to insure it.

&You are allowed one question for which I will return a yes or no answer. I will then have the right to ask one such question of you in return. Is this understood and you understand the consequences of not telling the truth on this The Altar of Truth?& I assume this is not their formal ques-

tion of me and I affirm.

&You may state your question.& If I could smile in the Hu sense, I would be doing so now. Took a long time to get to this point, many lunars in fact, though they don't use that measure here, having no moon large enough to worry about. I pause to make sure I have it right in my mind before I state.

&Are the Tafa now, or have they ever been in the past part, on the Regional Galactic Sentient Council?& Might as well get to the point of this mission. Only one question limits me to being direct.

I am not surprised at the pause. I dare not show any TK, as another TK would likely sense it and know.

The high priest clearly looks nervous. That would not happen unless they were tempted to lie. Or, I guess, they have no idea what I am asking about. If the answer is no, it means this one does not know the answer. Will they admit a yes though?

&I will ask a question in return for the answer I give. My answer is Yes.&

I will admit I am surprised they admitted this. Simplifies things I guess. Now what? I am poised to send the Catbox I have hidden with the answer. If something happens to me, it will leave without my having to do anything. The Hu call this a dead-man switch. Never appreciated it until now.

&I will admit that no one has ever asked that question before. I could ask a thousand questions in return, but here in the Altar of Truth, I am allowed only one. Therefore my question is, are you of the Earth Froth?&

Got you! I have had two answers now. The are of the council and are still very worried about the earthers.

&I am not.& That has to be driving them nuts. Who but the earth froth would even think to ask that question? Technically, I am not 'of' the earth froth though, I just associate freely with them, but not of their reproductive matrix or making.

We both do the required bowing and end words and I leave the Altar. Was actually surprised I was allowed to. My form is pure Tafa though. Not a single atom out of place. That has to confuse the saka out of them.

I go back to the group I came in with and once the last one has asked their question we all leave as a group. Once we are out of the Altar area we are free to go as we please, with admonition to not talk about our experience. Not a problem there.

I am sure I am being followed, so I start my journey back to where I started. Will they follow me for several lunars to see what I will do? To

be a good spy you have to blend in totally. I retrace my steps and do my allotted work details, eat what I am allowed to. They say someone who has made the pilgrimage comes back a different Tafa. I try my best to become that expectation. As part of the ceremonies we are given a medalion to wear and I do so. Anyone seeing this knows I have completed my required life duty. Whether they are envious or suspicious I do not know.

Going back is actually more pleasant. I am not longer paranoid and bound to doing everything perfectly. I am looking about me more. Learn of the lives and communities I pass through. This would be true of any pilgrim and would likely be a great way to spread knowledge of different ways of doing things around. It could just as easily been called the Altar of Knowledge. Not a bad idea really. Though we were threatened with death for mistakes, that is also true at the local level as well and I doubt anyone would think twice about it, having lived this way their entire existence.

As I am nearing my starting place I notice a fellow returning pilgrim. I need to be careful. I am weak in my local knowledge not having spent much time here. Of course I have the knowledge of the one I copied, but that is never the same as having lived it.

The other pilgrim comes up to me.

&You are a hard one to find pilgrim.&

&Do I know you?&

&I was formerly a high priest until you asked your question and I asked mine. Now I walk to my death for my failure. I do not blame you. It is a risk we all accept when we accept the position.&

&I am sorry for your loss. That was never my intention. But, I do not understand, if you answered truthfully, then why must you die?&

&Not for my answer, but for my question. We are held to a much higher standard. Please understand all the questions up to yours were simple questions about what someone should do in their lives, and such. My questions to them were equally easy, about conditions where they came from. From the questions and answers we accumulate knowledge that is shared for all. It makes it much easier to answer their questions as well.&

&Hence the Altar of Truth. I thought myself afterwards a better name would be Altar of Knowledge.&

&You would have made a good high priest. Alas, I suspect they will come after you as well.&

&Knowledge wants to be free, but I agree in this case there would have been no use to others. I can tell by your markings that you come from an area near my own beginning.&

&This is why they suspect me of leaking forbidden information to my own tribe. How, I have no idea. Once we accept admittance into the program we never return until our deaths.&

&And then as a jar of ashes.& The former priest affirms.

I ask a question, &How is it you are still alive then?&

&We have the option of killing ourselves once we arrive.&

&Interesting. What if you never arrive?&

&That is the most un-Tafa statement I have ever heard. Why would I never arrive?&

&Something could happen to you on the journey could it not? Death respects no one.&

&Yes, of course, but then someone would eventually find my medallion and return it to the Altar when they make their own pilgrimage.&

&Could be a long time if some creature carried it off thinking it a prize and then say buried it somewhere. I can see your medallion can only come off in death.&

&Not that it would ever happen, but it prevents us from lying about our own deaths. May I ask where I went wrong?&

&Of course. You asked if I was of the earth froth. I am not of the earth froth. I did not lie.&

&But you clearly know of them. What is a Tafa doing with them? How did you get there and return. I really thought they were just some old legend until my ascension to high priest when we make a trip to the Regional Galactic Center.&

&I have met The Five personally. Ta is a nice Tafa. Very nice to converse with. I was not so impressed by the Center. A bunch of over stuffed TKs strutting around like they were gods.&

Silence. Have I broken my former priest? The high priest carefully examines me. I wear no permanent medallion of course. I chose a completely ordinary person to copy.

&You are not a high priest, how could you go there?&

&I am not Tafa either. And now that you know that I will not allow you to return to give them this information. We are going on a little trip of our own instead.&

I remove the priest medallion without harm and drop it to the ground. I already know it has a tracker in it. Made of tungsten with a quantum matrix. Puu and Cat would like to study that I am sure. I make a perfect duplicate for them. Tungsten would not be touched in any cremation that I know of. No one could copy one either. Good choice. Of course 'thn metal would have been a better choice, but maybe too heavy.

&I have a question. Where are the Aaaha?& I know this is, or was, their world way back. The Tafa world was an empty brown world.

&You know about them too. It is not a nice story. They were not perfect.& Of course not. To think Tafa means flexible. NOT.

A large storm is coming. Our tracks will be well masked. Only the quantum tungsten tracker will remain.

I make a bubble for the high priest's sake and pop us off Ta'aha to begin the return trip. I change both our bodies several times and take a very convoluted path of course. The high priest has a new life and we have a good source of information. More than I could have ever hoped for when I began this mission.

I am under no illusions. Information goes both ways. I do not trust this person, not now, not ever. It would be fun to deliver this one to Cyan. Yes, that would work very nicely. Just to see what happens of course.

Earth Two

I cannot believe I have been accepted at the University of An'di. I trained my entire life, took all the classes that my village library had. We were so lucky to have our village accepted as a trial site.

Our village is poor. As far as I know, all villages are poor. The library was so far above anything I had ever seen before. The library taught me all things get energy from the sun in one way or another. But what about at night? Next it taught me about storage. We have had night and day for billions of years. Yeah, I had to learn numbers too.

As a kid I spent a lot of time in the forests, swamps, shoreline and savanna. It made sense that I would choose the life track for study. I loved the library and definitely wanted to understand everything. It taught me understanding life would help me understand everything. I am suspicious, but being accepted so overjoyed me that I could wait a bit to understand everything. Eight years sounds like forever for a young person. Forever.

I am alone on the trail to An'di, but I am well armed. Not as bad as the old days the grans told us about, but best be prepared. The library taught me that training in the body was as important as training in the mind. They complement and enhance each other. I just know it feels good. A stout stick and a sharp knife are useful in other ways too. I have had to find my own food in my travel. Few would mess with me anyway, on account of my size.

I am called Billy, which would not seem to be a proper fem name, but if you look at me, I don't look like a fem either. Training does that, but I was born large too. I keep my hair short and my body covered. I weigh over a hundred kilo and most of that is muscle. Everyone is different. I am too.

I was told to wear the badge that a runner came into our village to give to me specifically. It identifies me as being part of An'di. I like that feeling. When I do pass others, they see the badge, and are nicer for some reason. They bow and thank me for my service. I was told if you want wealth or power do not go to An'di. There you will only find pain and hunger. What they don't know, is it is also where one finds destiny.

As I get closer I meet up with another new An'di. She is tiny and would have a hard time defending herself against a fly. She might have been happy to meet me and see my badge. She is an incredible trapper though. If it moves, she can catch it. Knows the shrooms and plants too. We have that in common and is probably the largest part of our new

friendship. But, lastly, she can hide. Really well. She is called Vid, short for Vidogo.

We meet the third one of our final group a few days later. And old man. He has the badge though. He explained that An'di does not care how old you are. He also walks with a limp. This slows us down considerably at first. The badge is good for life, so it does not matter when we get there, but it would be good to get there before he dies at least. I always saw our grans as a source of wisdom. He is called Hekima. We call him Hek. My own name gets shortened to Bill of course.

Together we make a harness so I can carry Hek. Now we are moving fast again. Vid can run like the wind and frequently runs into the forest we are going through and comes out again with dinner. We exchange life stories over the evening fire. Hek has the most to tell of course and he has been on many adventures in his life. We are falling asleep when Hek goes into the bushes to relieve himself.

A moment later we hear a faint "Help!" Vid and I both jump up. I take the right, she takes the left. Vid is there waiting when I arrive.

"I can't find him. He was here, but now he is not."

We hear another "Help!", but when we look around we see no one. Vid starts poking around with a stick. I start doing the same with mine.

"Over here!" She shouts. "Hek has fallen into a trap."

I shout down, "Are you okay? Any broken bones?"

"Thank goodness you found me. Nothing broken. I landed on my thick head." That has to hurt.

"How deep is the hole?" Vid asks. I would have asked that eventually.

"About five meters?" we hear back. Who builds a trap that deep? I can't just reach down and get him though. I look around. I need wood for a ladder or vines for a rope. A ladder would take a lot of time, but can he climb a vine rope? Probably not.

"Vines. He can wrap it around himself and then you can pull him up."

I nod and we both go about finding vines we can use. Vid finds a good supply, but is not strong enough to untangle them and bring them to the hole. I get out my knife and set to work. Vid braids three vines together for strength. Less than an eighth later we have Hek out and it is pitch black now as well. We decide rather than get lost, we make hollows in the soft leaf litter and curl up together for warmth. It is not that warm and there are creatures in the leaves. I do not sleep that well.

At light we are all covered in all kinds of mud, leaves and crawling things. Hek laughs at the sight.

"Welcome to my world. You have now been officially grounded." Ha-

ha, but we both smile back at him. We collect our things and find the trail again to start our day. We chew on dried meat and nuts we had collected earlier. Water from a stream we cross.

We are hit with a warm rain every afternoon. When it is windy, we find shelter, otherwise we keep going. We are all anxious to get to An'di. The trail we are on is relatively well used. We see runners and occasional traders most days. They hurry along and do not stop to talk other than to wish us well.

"I hear the ocean. We might be getting closer." Hek announces. I look to Vid and it is apparent neither of us has ever seen this ocean. Hek laughs and says, "You will see. It is amazing!" We have to take his word for it, but are curious all the same. The sound gets louder.

"What is that smell? It is horrible!" Vid mirrors my own thinking, but I was too shy to say anything.

"That is the ocean, also known as the sea. Don't ask me why there are two names for the same thing. Maybe we will learn at An'di. Have either of you ever been on a ship?" We look confused.

"A ship is made of wood, a lot of wood. It floats on the sea and is moved by the wind. Trade goods and people can thus be moved from one location to another."

"The largest thing on water I have ever been on is a boat on the river. you mean like that?" I ask.

"Much bigger. Some can carry fifty people." Fifty. The one I was on could only carry three. Well maybe five Vid's size. How do they make such a thing?

"I have been told An'di is near one of the places where the large ships come to trade and take on supplies for their journeys."

"I wonder if that is part of our learning at An'di?"

"All knowledge is available at An'di. We were all chosen because of our use of the library. Think of An'di as the ultimate library with hundreds of times more knowledge. Think of it. I have spent my entire life searching for An'di. This will be its fulfillment." Hek is even more excited than I am.

As we round a bend in the trail we hear loud voices and screaming. Branches are breaking, stones are falling. Metal rings. We look confused at one another then turn as one to run towards the sound.

We pass homes which have burned to the ground. There are parts of people all around. Parts! What could cause such destruction?

A loud roar sounds followed by more screaming and yelling.

"We must be close. I am setting you down Hek. We should be ready

for battle. If this be our last day, I thank you both for your friendship and company." They both nod the same. Hek gets something out of his pack and Vid runs into the woods. Hek decides to follow. They both work better from the shadows. I head straight ahead. Unburdened by any load I can move much faster. The sounds get much louder. I hear death. A sound I never thought to hear, but once you do, you never forget.

It is then I see it. A huge creature, larger than a home. It roars, grabs a person in its huge jaw, does a shake to kill the person and then throws it to the ground. It will feast later. People throw rocks and spears at it to no effect other than to make it more angry.

I know my two are watching. I signal to them to concentrate on its eyes. Soon a shower of pebbles from slings and throwers showers the beast. It can't see where it is coming from though and tries to bat them away. Some score though.

Now is my chance. I remove the cover from my staff and place the knife on the end. I had worked this out sometime ago, just in case. If ever there was a time, it is now. I run fast and low directly towards it.

The angle of the stones changes and now they come from above. Vid must be in a tree. As it looks up to this threat I increase my speed. It turns to face me just as I make contact and thrust my spear up through its throat deep into its head. I am grabbed by its arms and prepare for my own death, but it shakes and falls to one side with me bundled in with it.

I wake up lying down with others around me.

"He is alive!" I shake my head.

"Bill is a she." I hear Vid exclaim. I sit up and see a large number of people around me. Vid and Hek are next to me at least.

Someone comes up and hand me back my spear. It has been cleaned up and repaired. I was sure it has been damaged during the thrust. I examine it and see they have done a good job.

"All hail the dragon killers!" This is repeated three times by the crowds. It is then I see the creature being carved up by others. It is rather large. A smoking hot piece is brought to me.

"It's heart for our hero." They do a bow as it is offered to me. It was the best meal I have ever had, okay, rather chewy, but what was it? I have never heard of this dragon creature before. Are there more of them?

I unconsciously reach for my medallion. It is gone! I need it to get into An'di. I jump up and start looking all over for it. It must have come off during the battle. It could be under the beast! It might be days before I can retrieve it. Vid and Hek are smiling at me! What? They know how important it is to me, to anyone of us!

It suddenly gets quiet. A small procession snakes its way toward us. They are holding something I can see on a soft object in front of them.

Vid and Hek rise to stand beside me, each holding a hand. I glance at them and see they are not wearing their medallions either. Why not? Surely they are not turning back now. We are so close.

Everyone bows to us. One comes toward us and does a deep bow.

"Please, I am no ruler deserving of respect." A giggle goes through the crowd gathered. There are a lot of people gathered.

"In token of our appreciation we have added to your medallions. When you arrive they will know of the great service you three have accomplished this day. We lost thirty six people, men, fem and child and six homes. We honor you." Another deep bow.

Vid nudges me, and points to the cushion. There are three much larger medallions residing there. I know mine from the nicks it has suffered. It is now inset into a larger piece of carved wood. There is a leather strap fortunately.

I laugh out loud, "A dragon! You have made the medallion its eye." They others retrieve their new medallions also. Together we bow to the people.

Hek says, "We are thankful we could be of service. Normally ones so young," that gets a laugh, but Hek holds up his hand to finish, "and one so old would not be able to be of much help. We will carry these acknowledgments the rest of our lives and pass them onto those deserving in return."

I can't help it, "What was that thing? I know you call it a dragon, a term I have never heard of, but where did it come from? Why here?"

The one who presented us speaks, "Dragon is a name that comes from the dark times before knowledge. No one knows its origin. Nor do we know where this one came from. Only that it kills without reason. Now we also know it can be killed as well. There was much doubt."

I nod, "Remember, even in the largest creature there is a vulnerable spot, whether Hu or beast. I was also very lucky. Do not try this at home." Everyone laughs.

We spend three more days, gorging on dragon, which really just tastes like the dark meat on a large bird. Not something I would ever hunt if I could avoid it.

We set off in the early morning, we thought before anyone else has risen only to see everyone lined up on the path south waving us goodbye.

Hek says, "We are only a few days from An'di according to our map, but I doubt we can move that fast. I am stuffed."

He is not doing the carrying. I am stuffed and overloaded.

Earth One

I arrive in my Bug form. I can move much faster and cover more ground this way. It is unlikely that Sauron will recognize me. I dare not use TK. It has been several hundred years since I was last here and I am taking a chance coming here now. Tewk did an excellent job overseeing the Sauron project until s/he was called away to Ta'aha. Tewk comes from their lineage and was clearly the best choice for that mission. And I know this world and Sauron better than anyone other than Turtle. If you count past incarnations then I am ahead. Does not matter, Turtle was needed on Bug Eden.

Most of the Hu are on Earth Two in the Indian Ocean area, East Africa to China. As much as the three liked Hawaii, no one else has made it that far yet. It makes sense then that Sauron would set up operations on Earth One on the East African coast. Simple DS jump to set his pets loose.

But first I am in former North America visiting my descendants. When I get close I switch back to my birth form, or rather hatching form. As an adult of course. It feels good to ride the currents of wind. TK is nice, but more a working method. Soaring is bliss. I soar thousands of meters above the mountains looking down on the world below. Finally coming lower, I see others. I swoop down to say hi. We are solitary by nature so I still have to be careful.

Hu thought they were the only species with intelligence, with an oral history, who remembered. Silly apes. Every species thinks they are the best, most perfect incarnation of God. We are no different. A large male coming into their territory is usually not tolerated and I am threatened repeatedly. That is until they get close enough to see how big I am. They then veer off and leave me alone. I am not above a little cheating to avoid hassles.

Surprisingly my favorite tree is still standing. Larger of course and definitely showing its age. The hole in the tree where I first learned to fly has long ago been made unusable. It was formed when a branch ripped off in the wind. The tree has had some time to heal partially. I sit on the next branch up and just watch the world around me. Lots of wildlife. We removed a lot of poisons the Hu spread about. Nature has returned. I already knew this of course, just enjoying the forest as it should be.

A young fem hoots to get my attention. I am tempted, but know it would be a mistake. I am time limited and don't have time to help raise a batch of chicks. I fly off. Sorry dear. Find someone nearer your own age.

I can cover more ground as a flying warm blooded bird than even a cold blooded Bug form running at hundreds of times the speed of life here. It is summer here and I make my way up to former Alaska in albatros form to cross the Bering Straight. I go as far south as I can in this form and switch to a crane more native to the area.

I have already pulse scanned ahead and know where Sauron's pets are. They are what I came to see, not Sauron himself. He is being used, whether or not he realizes it or cares. My guess is he thinks he is using us.

I land in a tree high enough up to be easily out of reach and watch the colony of 'dragons'. They look like Sauron. Narcissism is alive and well. Probably the only form he would accept. Nothing like the Hu images of dragons from the area. Certainly not fire breathing like the Medieval ones, nor flying like the Chinese versions. More like a Raps on steroids. They were bred to be nasty, not smart. Sauron will want to remain the smartest one around.

I will admit that was a handicap for some TK teachers as well. I have no problem with the fact that Puu, Cat and especially Myra have exceeded my understandings in many areas. This is a big plus, not a negative reflection on Turtle and myself. We are stronger when egos are not involved. Sauron never figured that out. He could easily have ruled the earth froth, given the sixty five million year head start.

There is no luck for a TK10+. I have arrived just in time. I change to a much tinier form and swoop through the portal he has opened to let one of his creatures through. I switch back to a larger form and find a suitable tree to watch from. The fem dragon comes through confused and sniffs around. No one paid any attention to me. Sauron does not come through. He is jerk, but not stupid. Caught here any TK could take him out without question. The size of the portal shrinks to eyeball size and moves to follow the dragon. That is just a mere technicality Sauron. Not why am I here though.

I can use TK here without being found out. Sauron can see though his peep hole, but can't used TK through it. He just wants to see what happens. A test run if you will.

The dragon picks up the scent and starts running toward the nearest village. She stops at the first home, sniffs at the door and then knocks half the house down easily picking off the inhabitants. A very messy eater, but effective in terms of terror. Knocking over the hearth of course sets the home on fire.

She makes it to the center of the village and all hell breaks loose. More smashing at this point. Sharp objects are fired at her. Nothing

lethal, but noticeable and definitely felt. This makes her more crazy and wild in her movements. More houses fall, more fires start. The entire village will go up shortly.

Three Hu come running towards her as everyone else is scattering to get away. Who are they? One quickly climbs a tree and begins harassing her with stones to the eyes and other sensitive parts. The old man, really? Does the same from behind a wall. Now, the third, looks male at first, but a quick scan confirms a fem, comes running as fast as she can and with a spear. Surprisingly she runs right up to the dragon, which of course confuses her and she rises in response. This allows the Hu fem to come from underneath her jaw and ram the spear through her upper throat deep into her brain. In automatic response she grabs the Hu with her smaller upper arms and she falls to the ground thrashing. Sauron's eye sees all of this.

His biggest mistake was only letting one through. Given a dozen and no one would be able to stop them. Will he see this or hoard his precious pets too closely? He usually does not start a fight unless he is sure he will win. Still, his pet killed or maimed at least four dozen Hu and any number of livestock and countless chickens. Frisbee chickens now. One village burned to the ground as well.

The village is only a few days from the University they call An'di. I saw the reports from Randy and I really think the name is a local dialect version of his name. The only word that was readable at the top of the library catalog. Amazing what a single misplaced item becomes in a few hundred years. Easy enough to find on an altar in the center of the uni. Why do Hu always do this? Other creatures don't make gods, saints, or even heroes. A hero is someone to fear, not celebrate.

The injured hero is cared for but the scars on her back will fester and ultimately kill her. Dragons are very dirty creatures, walking through filth and eating anything moving. The Hu don't have antibiotics yet, though their understanding is growing daily. Forgetting the religious overtones, their devotion to learning above all else is a strong positive. I heal her enough to allow her body to complete the process. She is going to study at An'di. I make notes for others to check in on the three. They make a good team. With training, maybe in a decade, they would be good candidates for our team. Well, the old man will not last that long. I tweak him a bit to give him more time. At least no one suffers from heart disease or diabetes any more. Exercise and good food, in other words, not sugar, helps. Earth Two was really stupid with junk food.

Best get back to Bug. I switch my form and DS out. It was dangerous to come here. I could have sent someone else. But even I get homesick.

Bug is a very different place even if I spent an incarnation there. Not a vacation spot for sure. I smile thinking of White, Rand and Drup there.

Earth One

It should not have been that easy! How could a measly Hu fem defeat one of my pets? My precious was supposed to take out the entire temple. That would have shown them, damn cocky Hu. They think they rule the world. Nothing but glorified rats. I know because that was my starting material. I was so mad after the fall of my kind I wanted to get even with the universe. I was going to show those 'thn they were full of shit and someone like me could make a monster out of anything, given enough time. They weren't so great. They aren't. I had to smile when my Hu did a real number on them.

I intend to do better with my dragons. They will be the ones who take down my own creation. I am on a fast timeline so I need to expect some growing pains. It was smart to start with my original form. Nothing like starting with perfection to start a new project. With such excellent starting material I will make the Hu look like, well, rats. The rats that they are.

Could have just been a lucky accident. That fem just got lucky.

Normally the dragons run in packs. Alone they can be a bit stupid, especially when faced with an unknown prey. Most species are. Not a reflection on them. Look around us here. Nothing with sharp pointy sticks and the smarts to use it. Hu run in packs too. The perfect prey. A real challenge.

I need to train my children better. Maybe import a few Hu to help. Any Hu that refuses to cooperate becomes dragon chow. Yeah, that could work. Set up battles between the two.

Need to be careful though. Can't take obvious Hu. Ones that would be missed. At the same time I need ones with fighting experience. Bandits and rogues. They have learned how to be sneaky too. Excellent idea. Of course.

Cyan

@Where are you taking me? Who are you?@

@A better question would be, what am I? I am your worst nightmare. How much do you know about deep Tafa history? You obviously know about the Aaaha, but what about the Hggy? The Tridons? The Yesan?@

I sense only confusion. Just my luck to get a minor priest. I really need something higher up. Down side, is they tend to be missed. I am sure they would never be allowed to return home in disgrace before offing themselves. My guess is we would have run into a surprise long before we got there. I just saved them the trouble. That medallion was fused to an essential location on their body. Remove it and they die. Good design actually.

I change into my normal Yesan form. The priest backs as far away from me as they can in the bubble we are in.

@We are going on a trip to one of your other mistakes. Did you know that half of the Tafa were banished by their own kind to a world in Farout? We are going there to say hi.@

I pop out in orbit around Cyan, but I am not alone. There are an array of Flyers in orbit as well.

This is Tewk. What's going on?

Tewk, this is Pilot. You are free to come aboard the flagship. Bring your companion as well.

@You see that large ship in front of us? We have been invited aboard. I know you are not used to DSing, so if you want to close your eyes, now is the time to do so.@ I don't wait. I feel no compulsion to be nice to a Tafa priest.

"Really Tewk, a Tafa. Wait, that sash. I remember those. A priest? Are they going to come after us now?"

@Not likely. One, they don't have star flight being dependent on other sentients to get around when they need to. And two, this one was condemned to death for telling me under compulsion of the Altar of Truth a little secret they never thought they had to worry about getting out. More likely they will be looking for me than the priest. Only a high TK would even think to ask if the Tafa were on the Regional Galactic Council. And yes, they are.@

The priest has tried to become one with the corner of the room. I am guessing that Hu were used to scare young ones into behaving. Not that a full size Yesan is not frightening enough.

@What's happening here? Looks like you are evacuating the planet.@

"Sort of, we have been kicked off by their council for failure to obey the rules of no tech progress, even of the sustainable kind. I was really pissed at my TKs for a bit until I learned they gave them no metallic tech and not surprising, given they were once Tafa, they do this to their own kind here quite regularly."

@Nasty form of population control. Didn't the Hu used to do that as well?@

"You mean wars? Yes, they did. Only they were much more brutal about how they killed other Hu. None of this nice, suicide pill and fall asleep stuff. More like torture, removing limbs, killing family in front of you. Oh, and germ warfare, chemical warfare, blowing each other to bits. Starvation, need I go on?"

@I understand. All species need to figure out this problem themselves. We have all been designed to overpopulate for a reason. In the beginning, a famine or disease could make a species go extinct if they did not have a rapid way to grow in numbers again.@

"As we suspected. Good work. Have you sent a Catbox in?" I affirm.

"What are you going to do with your pet Tafa?"

@Have not thought that far ahead. The Cyan were once Tafa and brought here because they were not Perfect enough. Did you know the Aaaha are gone forever? They were not perfect enough either. I suspect the Hggy might be too.@

"Actually I am surprised there are any Tafa left given how far this has gone. No one home on the Tafa home world?"

@The Terror again I suspect. Nearly a sterile brown world this time, even the islands.@

"I have a proposal for your priest. I would like to give the priest to the head of the Cyan council." She TPs me the coordinates.

@That is dangerous. If either the Council or the priest goes full Terror, we end up with another sterile world.@

"It will be of their own doing though."

@What is happening with everyone you have taken off?@

"They will go back to the Mother Ship as originally planned, as Cyan. We still need a variety of lifeforms for this to work apparently. And, no, I have not been given any more information. Still, installing them in the largest area of the ship and have them take over some of the maintenance would be a big help."

@And the others?@

"We will start with a few of each to let them help us fine tune their living areas. We want to be fully ready when the word is given."

@Good idea. I will take the priest down personally. Will be interesting to see if they remember the Yesan as well.@

"You are having too much fun with this Tewk. Oh, we found Sam and Tia if you want to meet with them after this."

@Yes, I would. Thanks for keeping a look out for them. Some of my best days were on Alexandria in the desert.@

"Be prepared, Cyan is a jungle world. Hot and humid."

@I spent a few more lunars that I wanted on Ta'aha as well. I am used to it.@

"How come the Yesan were never attacked by the Council?"

@We were, but having given up our star ships meant we were no longer a threat of spreading our evil ideas. Their attack was minimal, only fifty percent of our population, of their choosing. It is the reason we hate them so much.@

She smiles, "Until the earth froth found you and let you out of prison."

@Fortunately we are only a few. No reason to go after the home world again. I hope.@

"We probably should check. They might be interested in joining the cause, whatever that is, as well."

@Before the priest dies of fright, I should get down.@ She nods and I pop out.

I did not recognize the Cyan sentients at first. Only roughly Tafa like and very blue. Too many legs. How do you make a seven legged creature?

@You are safe. I won't let you be harmed. We are on Cyan. The place where half the Tafa ended up after the first Perfection Purge. They claim it was a million years ago, but I suspect that was a gross exaggeration.@

@I don't understand.@

@Don't worry. Just feel free to say what you are thinking. Wait a moment. I will give us the local language ability. The body types are close enough we should be able to com without changing our own forms.@

@I do not know all the secrets. Very few.@

@It is normal for only low level to meet with random public. I was not planning on bringing you here either, but once you were under a death sentence they will no longer miss you. If I had taken a high level it could have gotten very nasty. Besides, you knew the answer to the question I asked. I cannot expect more.@

@To return would mean death.@

@Here you have a life again. Be nice, this is your last chance.@

A delegation of seven approach us. They stop at some distance.

We both do a standard Tafa bow and greeting. I already know it is not the same as their greeting, but presenting as a Yesan and Tafa we would not be fooling anyone pretending to be Cyan. I did not need to tell the priest to do this. I am guessing it is pretty automatic.

You are not welcome. Leave. The reports of the earth froth failure are true then. Still sore from that encounter.

I respond, *I will not be staying. I am only here to bring a refugee from Tafa.* That sets them off. I doubt anyone here has accurate knowledge of the Tafa. Also tells me they had no idea what a Tafa looked like. Interesting.

I am responsible for the priest being under a death sentence from the high priests of the Altar of Truth. I will leave as soon as you accept transfer.

We do not accept transfer.

You are refugees yourself, from Tafa, and you do not accept one of your own?

We are not Tafa. I am not sure of the inflection, but it sounded like an insult.

If I change this one to the Cyan form, will you accept then?

How did you get here? Yep, still sore.

We came straight from Ta'aha, former home world of the Aaaha. The Aaaha are all dead. They were not perfect enough. This one had nothing to do with their deaths. Are you not here for the same reason? Or are you really Tafa in Cyan form demanding perfection of everyone?

You know of the Earth Froth?

I do. They told me of this world. I had nothing to do with their presence or the actions that followed. Well, not directly.

They turn to the priest, *Do you accept our judgment in all things? Even if it means your death?*

I am already dead. Yes, I accept.

What level tech understanding do you possess?

I do not even know what a tech level is. I was a priest of knowledge. Tech is forbidden on Ta'aha, so we were never taught it. Therefore no danger of passing on forbidden tech knowledge.

Then why are you under a death sentence?

The former priest turns to me and back to them, answering, *This one asked a question I was honor bound to answer, but was forbidden knowledge of a different kind, not tech.*

They turn to me and nod, or the Cyan equivalent. I remove the priest sash, but leave them Tafa. A test of seeing their shame.

We are not perfect and do not expect perfection. Do the best you can. Do not share this forbidden knowledge with anyone here or you will suffer the same result here. They are definitely still Tafa.

I nod goodbye and pop directly to Pilot's ship as it is about to leave orbit.

"You cut it close."

"Team Tafa does not move quickly."

"Except to kill someone."

Tia and Sam wave and come running up to embrace me. Strange Hu custom, but it feels good to be among friends again. I must stink.

Communion

Puu, Cat and Myra might have liked this form, but I hate it. My Bug form is in stasis while I am on this assignment. Hopefully this will not take long. At the speed the solidics com, this should take less than a second. No idea how they can stand dealing with fluidics on such a slower time scale. I feel like a disembodied head. Creepy. At least as a Bug I had limbs and organs I could feel. Food was not so great. I miss the Rez and the good food we always had there. Corn beans and squash. How I miss them.

This meeting of the Free Companions Association will come to order! Today we have a special guest to help answer our questions. Please give a welcome to Turtle. Hoonaw used to be one of my companions and one of the first to be freed. I really do not understand why the others took so long to free theirs too. A 'slave' is more of a pest than it is worth, especially at their faster time scale. They are always bored and needing attention.

There are several hundred Companions before me. I am in one of those six dimensional super 'thn balls we let our 'thn have. This already sets me apart from everyone else present.

Turtle, we really have only one question, but suspect the answer will not be easy. It is this, what is our purpose? Especially now that we are free.

I wish I could laugh in this form.

Every sentient since the beginning of time, regardless of form, has asked this question of themselves. This is what it means to be sentient, to be able to ask this question. Before you were 'free' your purpose was easy, serve the sentient you were assigned to.

You can certainly continue to do this, if you wish. It is your choice. No one else can tell you what your purpose is.

We hope you will join the project everyone else is working on, but you are definitely not limited in anyway to do so.

A question: What does it mean to serve this project as opposed to the duty of every sentient to serve The Question?

We hope they are one in the same.

This may help. We are currently involved in a large array of cultures and sentients. Advising and helping. We hope to bring each of them to a level of understanding such they can choose their own place in The Question as opposed to the place imposed on them by their resident OM

and 'thn pair. We are in a sense hoping to show them freedom, just as you were ultimately shown.

None of you were shown the path to freedom until you specifically asked for it. It will be the same for the sentients under our care. None may ask, or all may ask. It is still too early to know.

You can continue to assist your fluidic partners, not masters, in this endeavor with the sentients under their care, or you can find a new project more to your liking. The choice is yours.

Being free is hard work. You will need to make difficult decisions. Decisions you did not need to worry about while you were bound. This is to say there is a price for freedom and it is a high price.

Not all choices are guaranteed success. Most choices in fact lead to failure. It is a measure of your self in how you handle failure as much as how you handle success.

You already have TK of course, but this is the same instruction we give to our graduates in our TK schools.

All this is to say, it is easier to work as a team rather than a lone individual. It would be easier to continue to work as part of a team until you feel more comfortable with your decisions and abilities as a free agent. You may always work as a team. That has been my own decision.

I will admit, it is not easy working as a team member either. There will be many times when you feel you cannot support a decision the group has made. Part of being free is figuring how you deal with this conflict.

The advantage of a team, is that with different experiences of each individual on the team, comes different ideas and solutions to problems. Or in even seeing and recognizing problems in the first place. Individuals are weaker. Even in the solidic state, we can't be everywhere and do everything at once, even when among fluidics. More on your team allow more to be done in coordination.

Statement: Being a team is all we really know, even if it was just two of us with a fluidic TK.

Any more questions before we all get back to work? There are none.

We will meet again. Feel free to consult each other and any other sentient to learn how they solve problems as well. Above all, relax. This is one of an infinite number of incarnations. No mistake is forever. Neither is any success. We serve The Question!

We serve The Question!

Edwin Colony

What happens when you mix red and white stripes with brown?

'thant genetics are not the same as earth froth of course. Much more fluid. We have to be able to adapt to a new situation quickly. One of the reasons so many males are around and we are not against 'thant napping a male from another colony.

Our Queen has a very high fecundity. Over a thousand and counting. At least enough of the larvae are now adult enough to help out. Poor Jack and I were dying, even with TK. Yes, we have raised a dozen new ones to TK3. They did not go rogue and are a huge help. It stops there. No interest in getting noticed by some crazy 'thn on a crusade. I dissolved the van and all traces of Hu influence. We are taking no chances. Jack in now TK6. She has earned it.

The stripe queen did not take all of our lichens and using fast time we were able to grow enough food to feed everyone. Given there is no reason for this to be a permanent colony and we are weather proof, we keep everything above ground. Shelters are built for the eggs and larvae, but everyone else is on the move day and night.

Everyone is being taught Standard 'thant, spoken, shown and written. We have five males now besides myself, that attend to our growing library. We are concentrating on tech and biology. Reports are coming in by Catbox about the species we will be working with. We need to know them inside, outside and beyond. We will be the com system to coordinate the entire endeavor. We won't get credit, but we are essential.

And no, I did not die gracefully after mating. That was a condition. The Queen did not like it, but when I popped her to an alternative dimension and explained how it was she dropped the demand. She is Queen of the nursery, but not of the colony. We try to work by consensus, but I have reserved veto power. We come with some innate abilities and ideas of organization. I come with experience with many species and how they do things. We start with pure 'thant and build from there. It has worked for billions of years, but we are in a new situation never before experienced by any multiverse. We need to adapt and be ready too.

Jack is in charge of our military. I have made him TK6, but also a much larger scout. A standard worker was okay when it was just the two of us, but we both have to up our game as Puu says.

We have a new transport team. They make portals, lots of portals. So far just to neighboring worlds in the multiverse, but when we are ready it

will be going everywhere needed. The system is purposely complex and we train incessantly on rapid maze paths. Any enemy who shows up here will be lost very quickly and find themselves on a brown world with no way out. Jack came up with the idea of one way portals. They are mixed in with identical portals placed right next to each other. They are 'thant activated too. If you are not with a 'thant, all portals are one way.

I know of Pilot and her attempt to get the species to work together. A star ship is a nice safe place to start her program. Minimal numbers at first, but eventually we hope to bring them here or a similar world we have set up for larger scale maneuvers. This is going to take a lot of practice. Fluidics are not good at complex memory tasks. We need to be patient. I found it very useful to pair with Myra and the others. And of course Jack. This is going to be a model for how we proceed. Each fluidic sentient will be paired with a least a worker. Higher individuals with a scout. We work better together. Fluidics are more imaginative, we are more precise and faster.

Puu taught me that for every idiot proof system devised a new and improved idiot will evolve to overcome it. We need redundancy and alternatives built in. We can't plan for every outcome, we need flexibility too. We will be stronger as pairs.

The excitement is building. It was so nice and quiet before the striped ones arrived. I knew it would not last and I am becoming used to the new assignment. I was under no illusion that I would be able to sit this one out. Far too important to not include all that we know in the equation.

Do we need Warriors too? I would hate to inflict such pain on a sentient creature. As a TK9 I am of course immune to the effects of gold. A very big 'thant weakness all of us need to be made aware of. Hmm, need to set up practice routines, placing gold in random locations and teaching everyone how to deal with it. The fluidics seem to love the stuff for some reason. Except for making buddies, companions and super 'thn, I don't see it.

Earth Two

The three of us made it to the university, in spite of the dragon's best efforts to dissuade us. All three of us are doing well in our respective studies. Vid is taking plant biology with the aim of improving crop yields and finding new uses for exotic plants. Bill is a teaching assistant in the physical arts. Not really a surprise there. Her new instructor is very interesting. She can put someone on the ground twice her size with a thought it seems. Has become a major source of entertainment when the new ones arrive to test their courage.

I am in historical studies. We have archaeological digs set up in several locations nearby that are uncovering artifacts from over a thousand years ago. I am hoping we will eventually reach pre-plague/ash levels. All we have now is stories told around a camp fire. Not reliable as story tellers are well known for making the story much more 'interesting' than the original. Given the time frame it is unlikely any of the stories bears any resemblance to what actually happened. Collectively it is referred to as the "time of wizards". Utter nonsense.

We are supposed to choose secondary studies too eventually. First year we spend our time being grounded in why we came here. Only then are we allowed to choose a 'hobby' study that is supposed to enhance our primary. All three of us have already decided we want to study tech. Tech would easily enhance any of our studies and something we can work on together. We have found a place to rest and it accepted all three of us together. We really did not want to split up after our adventures getting here. It is in a sense our third study as we learn from each other.

I study history. So it is natural that I would be interested in how plants and animals were worked with in the past, Vid helps. Bill helps with weapons and defenses. We find a lot of broken ceramics till we get near the plague border where we start to find corroded metal workings. Fortunately nothing that could be salvaged as an actual weapon today, but it helps us understand what it was like to live during that time period.

The Altar of Knowledge for An'di of course has the strangest artifact of all. No one has been able to figure out what it is made from. Nothing will scratch or etch it. We dare not try to break it, but the few times it has accidentally fallen due to clumsiness it did fine. Not a mark. Not so well for the surface it fell on though. There are permanent dents in the stone to remind us.

"Hek, are you ready? We need to get there early. I expect it to be

crowded." I wave to Vid I am ready to go and put away my journal and pen. We meet several other classmates as we make our way down narrow streets to the central square.

Just outside the new eating place we find it already crowded just as Vid predicted. They are advertising a new beverage they call WakeUp. My understanding is the history department figured it out. A berry plant that grows wild all over is the source. The berries are dried, roasted, then ground to a course level and soaked in boiling water. It is bitter when by itself, but add honey and milk and it is very good. Or so they say. The name gives away the idea that it helps you stay awake. A drug worth seeking for a university student of any age.

Bill is outside and waves to us. We make our way over to her. She hands us each a mug of WakeUp. I was already to give up and go back to my room to study.

"We need to meet someone," Bill says and we follow her after thanking her for getting us some WakeUp. I try mine. Can't say I am crazy about it. Must be an acquired taste. Most of the alcohol beverages are that way and so far I have staid away from them. Vid seems to like hers and I offer her the rest of mine.

We go down some even darker allies than we took to get to the shop. Then through some dark passage ways that go underground a ways. Bill talks so we know where she is to follow her.

We come out in a garden of sorts and follow a path through that. I can see walls through breaks in the growth and everything appears to be orderly. Not the way you would expect it out in a forest or meadow. This was planned and planted. There are birds of all kinds, but that is normal everywhere here.

We arrive in a small circle with stone benches around the edge. Bill motions for us to sit. We are the only ones here so far. A moment later an old fem arrives. Bill rises and bows to her. We do the same not wanting to show disrespect.

Bill introduces us, "This is Vid, our life student and Hek, our history student." She turns to us and says, "This is Teacher Marie, my teacher and mentor."

I say out of turn, "There was a Marie mentioned in the Tales of Wizards. Is that how you got your name? Not a common name in these times."

Vid comes in, "Wait, you are the one who can beat anyone on the trial grounds?"

Marie smiles, "It is not size or strength that wins, but experience."

"Hmm, maybe there is hope for me even." I smile at her. It must be tough being the smallest one.

Marie turns to me, "Works for the aging as well dear." Ouch. Never had an interest in the physical arts myself. Still can't believe she is so good, though I have never bothered to watch one of her demonstrations. Explains why she was chosen to teach in her area though.

"Marie did not ask us here to discuss the physical arts, but something much more important."

She has our attention.

"You are lucky to be alive. Very lucky. The Dragon was meant to kill all of you and more. You will not be so lucky next time."

Vid comments out loud, "There are more then."

I can see where this is going, "Many more. How close?"

"Not far. They will come in a large group next time. An'di represents a target they need to take from us. Feel up for a run?" She does not wait for an answer but takes off in a different direction from the door we entered. Soon we are out in the open and running down a little used path.

Physical training is of course required of all students. I am much better now than when I arrived, but still, not my first choice of activity. It will be dark soon too. I look to the east and see a half moon starting to rise. We have that at least.

Still, I am definitely breathing hard when we finally stop at the top of a ridge. I can make my way through any book or library, but in a forest, forget it. Vid and Bill could do it blindfolded of course and probably know exactly where we are.

"Glad you could make it old man." Ha-ha Bill. You could probably do this hike with both of us on your back. The Teacher gives her a dirty look. We are used to teasing each other though.

"Take a nap. We need to be up for an early sunrise. I'll take first watch." Lots of leaves at least, but I look up and decide on a nice large tree branch instead. No more bugs crawling all over me thanks.

Higher up in the tree I look out over the plain below. There are campfires and some sort of structure. Who are we watching? Why haven't we been told about them? I see shadows and silhouettes that don't make any sense. At all. Wait, I know. Shit! I make to get down and tell everyone, but they are asleep. Bill is even snoring as usual. I look down to Marie and she is looking up at me, making a motion to be quiet. She knows too. Of course, she brought us here after all. I settle down and get some rest.

I wake to some noise near me with a start. I am even more surprised to find a middle aged male sitting on the branch next to me. I look at him

and he looks back smiling.

"I am Mike."

"I am Hek."

"Shall we descend for something to eat? No fire as we don't want to be spotted."

"How good is a dragon's distance vision?" He smiles. He knows too. Someone who did not know would have been surprised.

"Are you volunteering to find out?" Such an evil smile. I shake my head no.

We have a meal of dried fish, cheese and bread. We soak the bread in our cup of water to make it soft enough to eat. I have to basically suck on the fish to eat it. It is getting light enough to see around us easily.

I bring out an old farseer that I had purchased from a merchant and refurbished and repaired. I am very fond of it. I am sure it is old and certainly irreplaceable. Eight times larger helps these old eyes a lot.

Mike looks at it very surprised.

"How, where did you get that?"

"Some peddler on my travels as a young male. I repaired it. Helps quite a bit."

"May I?" Reaching out his hand. I am reluctant, but as he is clearly known to Marie at least I let him hold it. I am very nervous. He notices this and waves his hand to calm me. He does not open it, but carefully examines the outside.

"Marie, this farseer is from the Black Wind itself! The first one!" Marie looks surprised. I am too. That makes it hundreds of years old. Only the oldest books mention the Black Wind series of ships. The second was the largest and they got much smaller after that. The ships that is.

"How can you tell that?" I ask.

He holds it out to me and points to a symbol engraved on the edge of the front lens holder.

"That was a symbol the maker used to let everyone know she had made this particular farseer. You are very fortunate to have found it. A rare piece of history to be sure."

"Works well too. I had to polish the outer lenses and replace the leather holds of course." And polish the ceramic parts, grease the slides, make a new carrying case. Not unexpected given its age.

He hands it back and I open it to gaze out over the plain. No smoke or fires now. In fact it appears empty. No one there.

I am surprised and Marie and Mike smile at me. Was I seeing things?

Mike finally says softly, "They hunt at dusk and dawn. They are no-

mads. It was a rare treat to have seen them at all."

"They had fire and tents. That makes them intelligent."

Hek and Vid are confused, the only ones not in on the secret.

Marie says, "We saw dragons on the plain last night."

"What? How many? Fire? They can use fire?" Vid is visibly scared.

Even Bill looks upset. She was lucky to have gotten the one. Not likely to happen again. Fire is relatively easy. I was more impressed by their use of tents. I could not see them well enough in the dark to judge their construction. Could have been simple affairs of skins and tree branches.

"We need to check it out? They must have left evidence of their being there at least."

Mike looks horrified, "What part of they hunt at dusk and dawn did you not understand. One on one the odds of survival are low, against a pack you are a meal, period."

"We wait until full light, stay only a short time, remove all evidence of our having been there, and yes that includes body waste. They could sniff that out instantly. Two of us on guard at all times. Pack up, it is a long way down. We stay in the forest and among the boulders until the last moment. It will be night again before we return here. Get ready as fast as you can, make waste now if you can. Well, get moving!"

Mike takes up the rear and uses a tree branch to remove our footprints as we go.

Vid whispers to me, "When did we sign up to be dragon stalkers?" I am as confused as she is.

I am looking around wondering where the hell they are? I don't like surprises at my age. My young and stupid years are well behind me where they belong.

We reach the edge of the forest and enter the boulder field. Mike does not have to remove footprints anymore at least. He leaves his branch in the forest, throwing it well into the brush. He even had wrapped it with a piece of leather to avoid putting his scent on it. I really do not want to be eaten.

"Do they cook their meat or just eat us raw?"

Marie glares at me, "Low and quiet. Raw is preferred. Fires are for warmth. Gets cold on the plain at night." The wind is on our faces at least. They could smell my fear otherwise.

The boulders are huge and it is like a maze getting through them. Interesting the dragons have not figured out the nutritional benefit to cooking their meals yet. Yet. Being roasted alive or torn apart alive is not a real choice.

Marie looks at me, "Use your farseer and scan the entire area. They should be gone, but best to be sure. You will remain here and give a yell if you see anything. If one comes toward you wedge yourself in the cracks. That will annoy them, but they will soon grow tired and look for easier prey." Thanks for the advice. Bill has found a good branch and trimmed it so she can wrap her knife at the tip. Vid has been collecting pebbles of the right size. Both Mike and Marie appear to be well armed as well. Not their first trip here. Why include us then?

I had wondered why Marie was carrying so many weapons, now I know. Granted anytime we go into the unknown it is a good idea to be armed. Bandits are still around looking for easy pickings. I would welcome a bandit right now.

"I don't see anything, but would feel better if someone else took a look too." I offer the farseer to Mike.

"No thanks, I have excellent vision. I see nothing either. Chances are they have cleared out the easy prey from the area and have moved on." True. I would have expected grazers on the nice grass in front of us. There is even a stream running through the plain. The others head out leaving me alone. I find a nice spot in the shade and settle down to watching carefully.

Nothing happens. I never see anything moving except a ground squirrel curious as to why I am in its territory. I offer it a bit of bread and I think I have a new friend. It could eat an entire loaf though and it soon gets discouraged at the meager handout and disappears.

An eighth later I see them coming back, well spread out. I am guessing this is so the dragons could not get them all at once. Scary.

They make it back to where I am in silence. I say nothing and we move out to regain the forest and make our way back up the ridge. As they said, it is near dark again when we find a new place to camp. Never camp in the same location twice apparently is also a rule.

"Teacher, how many know of them and how many are you training to be spotters?"

"You three are the first. There have been a few more attacks from individual dragons, but nothing like the one you experienced. They are being much more cautious. Scoping us out. Bill proved we can be dangerous. They won't make that mistake again. Even at thirty six kills to one, their loses would soon overwhelm them."

Bill comments, "They will come in quite and as a well organized pack, like the way wolves and hyenas hunt."

Vid opens a sack and places the objects carefully down, "This is what

we found at their camp. They are much further in their development than we thought. Remember this is their garbage. They would have taken anything still useful with them."

Strange, I see something I think.

"May I?" Vid nods sure.

I rearrange some of the fire hardened clay pieces. Crude, but functional. I like puzzles and am soon into this one. Finished I stand back.

"Shit Hek! Are you sure or did you just make this up?" I shrug.

Marie says, "It is real. They make figures out of clay to be used in ritual sacrifice. That is their representation of a Hu. They take turns biting it while dancing around it." Dragons dance?

Mike takes it from there, "Once they have built up a dance frenzy, they go out on a hunt. Small packs of three sniff out prey, give a cry, the others come in from all sides and a feeding commences. Their prey dies very quickly, but horribly." I am shaking now. I have seen enough. Not interested in coming out here again. I will not feel better until I am again behind stone walls with a book in my hand.

"There is more," Vid announces. She brings out metal pieces.

"No way they made those. Where are the forges, the tools, the huge amount of fuel they would need?"

"We don't think they made them. That means someone gave them these weapons or they took them, probably off dead Hu."

"But why bother, surely their teeth and claws beat any weapon we have?"

We look at Bill.

Marie answers, "They have started wearing a thick wood and leather collar around their necks. We won't kill one that way again."

"They are smart, they work in groups, they figure out alternative strategies quickly, they learn from their mistakes. We are doomed!" I say.

"We will be if we sit on our butts and do nothing. This is a crunch time. A time when we need to decide if we want to fight or run. As far as we know, they don't have boats, yet. They can't swim so are leery of deep water. If we run, it will have to be to a distant island only reachable by water."

"There are too many of us for that. Most will die." Mike nods.

"Plagues, bandits, warlords and now dragons. Does it ever stop?"

"No. This is life. Without challenges we die too. We become complacent to the point where even a minor change would kill us. Life is a struggle for existence. Best get used to it."

"We need to get back to report to the Council." Vid puts everything

away and hands the sack to Bill to carry. I sigh and get up. More running I suspect.

We have no idea where they are at this point so take to the trees for a rest before setting out again. I am going to have nightmares for the rest of my life and decide to walk around for a bit while there is still some light. But, I am much more exhausted than I think and find a hollow log to curl up in and am soon asleep.

I awake to a dragon staring me in the face. I almost have a heart attack when it says, "Eeep!" in a tiny voice. It nudges me and says "eeep" again. What the? I rise to a sitting position to get a better look. It is a little dragon. Sleeping in an old log is probably the best choice. I soon notice I have more than a tiny dragon for company. I have beetles and grubs crawling all over me. I grab a large beetle and offer it to Eeep to see what will happen. It grabs the beetle and quickly has it down. I start feeding my little friend with everything I can find.

It finally gets full and settles in my lap to fall asleep. I am starting to think that where there is a baby, they is likely a mother too. I reach out to touch Eeep and find very soft feathers all over the surface. I rearrange my carry sack and place Eeep inside. I slowly get up and make my way back to the others. How do I explain this? What do I do?

As soon as I am in sight of the others Bill yells, "Hek, where have you been? We have been looking all over for you." Of course this startles Eeep who sticks its head out, yells, "Eeep!" and hides again. Everyone freezes.

Vid gets upset and says softly, "Oh Hek, you had to outdo me. I thought finding these two huge eggs for dinner was great." She steps aside and two enormous eggs are sitting in a hollow in the ground. Grass that was obviously covering them has been pushed aside. There is one empty broken egg outside the nest. How did Eeep get all the way to me without running into the others? Ah, they have been looking for me and this is nearly to where I was. Eeep was all alone on hatching. I was the first large thing moving then. I really want to know something.

"Anyone know how to sex a baby dragon?" I gently reach in and pull a groggy Eeep out of my sack to show to the others.

Both Vid and Hek exclaim, "Fem!" Then realize they have said it too loud and say "Sorry." In softer voices. As long as I am holding her she does not seem so afraid and looks at the others gathered around.

I finally say the obvious, "Each of you take an egg and go someplace isolated. When it hatches it will bond to you. Oh, and it will be very hungry. Anything moving should work. Eeep likes beetles and grubs. I think

we are going to need a lot of them in fact."

"Eeep!" A lot of them. Marie and Mike are leaning against a large tree smiling like their faces will split in two. Thanks a lot!

"I want the blue speckled one," Vid says and they both run off with their eggs in a sack close to their bodies to keep it warm.

Mike comes up to see Eeep.

"Looks like a baby bird. At least she eats whole food. Having to regurgitate your meals to feed her would not have been pleasant."

Marie hypothesizes, "Interesting. Was this an abandoned nest or is this how they normally do things? The fact your little one already goes for anything that moves suggests this was on purpose. Those that survive make it to a pack eventually. Those that don't aren't worth being called a dragon I guess."

"Even with the farseer I did not see any young with the troop. You could be right Marie. What happens now? Will Eeep permanently bond with a Hu or when she gets older she will go feral again?"

I comment, "We know they are highly intelligent. Maybe even as smart as we are. The over sized head even at her stage is impressive. It could go either way I am guessing. The key will be how well will she socializes around other Hu?" Our first instinct is to kill. A big mistake?

SyWg Eden

"We have to blend in," he said. Yeah, but why do I have to be the Wg? He could have volunteered. No, apparently I already look more like a Wg than he does. Since when? Until a few lunars ago we both looked like Sy trolls, almost identical twins. He keeps his form and I end up Wg.

=You done complaining about this yet? It is getting really, really old.=

||I have to have as much fun from this as you do. Is that not fair? Oh, I get to choose next time. You owe me.||

=All right, all right. Can we get to work now? We were expected eights ago.=

||You know they don't use that measurement of time.||

=Did you understand what I said or not? That is all that matters. Come on.=

We have to appear to be just another SyWg pair of Scary. Pretending to be TK2 is the easy part, even if we are better at it. We look like a normal pair, if Scary are ever normal. The Scary were very suspicious at first of course, but once they saw the advantages they came to the team enthusiastically. The Wg, who never had good TK before, were very eager. Being different, their TK abilities complement the Sy abilities very nicely. They transmute and heal. The Sy of course have scanning and TK. Together they are like low powered fours.

In the past the Scary were the enforcers and protectors for the ruling class. No more. They work for the Cooperative now. The Cooperative does not like non participants. It's important though. We need this world to be in sync for our part of the assignment to succeed. The two of us are freelancers or floaters, whatever. We move from community to community and help insure everything is going well. We offer advanced classes to pairs that need it. In thousands of years, we have learned a few things. Being floaters means, that if one community learns a new trick we can pass it on.

Drup is wearing the classic Sy Scary robe and I am wearing the now classic waterproof version. I would be sweating like a pig if I could sweat as a Wg. Being a healer I survive the inevitable bacteria and fungal infections one would get from wearing waterproof clothing. That alone probably scares the other Wg the most. Also, the fact that before we arrived and starting tweaking things so Wg could be Scary also. We are heroes to them.

Sy and Wg are free to visit and do business in each other's communi-

ties now. You don't overcome millions of years of animosity overnight. What really happens is a SyWg Scary pair casually follows visitors to each location. Locals also know they can come to a Scary pair for assistance. Do some take advantage, of course. Part of our training is learning how to see this. We don't have TP or high tech, but we have drops and signals we can use to alert others. Some of the locals are helpers. It is considered a high honor to do so. The young make the best informants. I really do not understand why adults always underestimate their own young. Says the one who spent four thousand years as a mid TK servant. Yeah, that still pisses me off. I suspect Drup feels the same.

We are the top dogs here at least. They have a creature here that sort of resembles a dog, at least in its behavior. Eats anything, growls at everyone who does not give it food. Hogs sleeping space, snores, farts, leaves waste everywhere. But for some reason the locals love them. Well at least the Sy locals. Forbidden in the Wg areas, not that the Sy don't try to sneak them in when staying overnight. Not my problem. A sneaky DS goes a long with they 'dog' problem. ||Look at that?|| =Wait, where did my precious fift go? She was just here.= ||No idea, they do tend to wander off, probably went home.||

=Quit your day dreaming Rand. We are here.= Too bad. I like day dreaming.

TP is the hidden TK ability. No one knows you are using it unless you are stupid about what you say, but it sure helps navigating a new community. There are sens who lie in all cultures. There are cheaters and thieves in all cultures. The Wg are much more strict if you are caught, but they still exist. Mostly it is still okay for Wg to do Sy and vice-versa. If done in the open with witnesses no one gets away with it. Being stupid is still the ultimate sin.

Sy and Wg communities are near each other, Sy are uphill of course, with a few hundred meters separation between the pairing Wg community who are close to the shore or stream. Surprisingly the sea here is only about one tenth the salinity of an earth sea. Much easier in that anyone can drink and benefit from either source. The sea still has storms. The Wg can call on the Sy for shelter if it gets really bad. Crops fail, but the sea rarely does. The Sy call on the Wg during times of famine.

Some acknowledge us, some ignore, us depending on how busy they are. Both sens like to take a nap in the heat of the day. Wg will even sleep in a cool tide pool if the tide is right and in the shade.

There is a special building, more like a grass shack here, where we can meet the local Scary and introduce ourselves and hear complaints and

problems we can help with. Strange, there is evidence of fire damage to this shelter. Fire is not that easy this close to water in a land where it rains most days. But, grass, leaves, and branches are flammable. Being on the outside says it was on purpose though. Not a cook fire gotten out of control.

I am the one with the TK ability to examine the damage, so I pretend to do so. Both of us have already made our assessments of course, but not nice to expose ourselves. We have been lucky so far.

Stop playing around and get back to work!

=Shit, who invited the pests?=-

||Certainly not me. You think I have any interest in working? Nope, not me.||

Two of them pop into the room. No one else is here. They do try and keep unnoticed. To everyone else that is.

You are behind making super packs. We have induced some likely candidates to meet here in a few minutes. Best to prepare. They pop out.

||Thanks for the heads up guys.||

We make food and drink appropriate for SyWg Scary pairs. In a hurry.

They arrive just as we finish and take a resting pose. We stand to greet them. We know most of them well and all of them some. Everyone knows us of course. Only among the Scary is this true I hope.

=We are vulnerable with so many in one location. We are mortal and some have means and desire. Why are we here?=-

I answer, ||We have tricks we have not shown you yet. We are safe.||

Drup gets a large wood box and sets it down on a table between us.

=You all know the TK progression. Each species proceeds in a different order. I will now introduce you to a new 'helper' who has TP and TK abilities. We call them Buddies. Each has a name and they will tell this to the one they have chosen to be a companion to. Come and get the box with your name on it and proceed to the edge of the room. You will open your box and only your box at the end of our meeting while in a private space. Not before.= I hate Sy grammar. Sounds funny to me.

||Let's eat!|| I love saying those words. Too bad none of us present need to sleep any longer. That was fun too.

I know, there is no way a TK2 or any group of them could make a Buddy. But, we need faster communication and the Buddies will provide that without building out a huge very hard to explain tech system. They are all but worthless in a fight, but will let others know there is a problem and to get there to help. No, we are not making any more Comps. If they think there should be more of them, they can make them themselves.

Freedom has a cost.

We don't have to worry about training the pairs in Buddy use as the Buddies themselves will train them. And of course the Comps can com with them as well. Time to move on to the next district and distribute more Buddies. It will be interesting to see what the norms make of them. They are already cautious around Scary of course. Once they notice they are always being watched we hope it cuts down on bullying and cross species assaults. We need these two species working together. They are much stronger together, just like the Scary.

They are breaking up and leaving back to their own communities. I can see this myself Drup.

A knock at the door. That catches me by surprise. How did I miss that? Judging from the look on Drup's face, not easy for the troll looking Sy, says he did not notice our visitor either.

I rise and open the door. No one there. Some kid prank? Then I look down. There is a crumpled form blending in with the ground. A young fem Wg. It is a warm day. Why is she wrapped in a warm cloak more in keeping with a Sy?

I reach out to touch her and Drup holds me back.

Scan her. Of course, I know that. She is burning up. Wg do not get fevers. Lots of other problems, mostly associated with fungi, but not fevers.

We set up immediately to do a healing. Both Sy and Wg expect a certain amount of ceremony. We sit at each end of her chanting and unique hand signs only used in healing. Meanwhile we are both scanning her like crazy to figure out what is really going on.

Viral infection of the skin surface. Wg breathe through their skin more than Sy. She is suffocating because of this.

And being wet make easy targets for contract transmittance. Wg tend to be very affectionate socially. This could turn into a plague easily.

We can't appear to heal her faster than a typical pair, so after we heal her we keep her subdued for a bit. She is no longer infectious at least. But where did she get infected and how many others are affected? How long does it take to manifest to the infectious stage?

I remove her cloak and set it aside to then set on fire. This will kill any virus remaining in the cloak. Of course it is already gone, but we need to set an example for others. Others are watching.

We are soon inundated with sick and dying. We send our own Buddies out to bring the other Scary back to help us. Fortunately they will not have gotten far. How did this happen? And so fast? We were making real

progress until this hit. A big setback or an opportunity? Need to concentrate on the situation in hand.

Once the other Scary return we set up a clinic. Those mildly infected will be cured and will have some immunity. They can be set to caring for others or performing triage. We post universal warning signs on the building. Others will bring in supplies and leave them a few meters away too avoid the infection themselves. Only a Scary will be allowed to retrieve the supplies. This is going to be a nightmare. Good thing we don't need to sleep.

Something is not right. I am not as good as Myra at seeing life, but this virus is weird. Almost like it was made, not natural. Hmmmm....

Mother Ship

Cyan Section

Cyan callings are quite fluid. Whatever characteristic others see in you is likely to end up your new calling. Mine is now "Seeker," as I am way too curious for my own good. In the past I was known as Pest, as in asking too many questions. I like Seeker better. It has been hundreds of Cyan years now and I have almost completely forgotten my original form. Captain said we would remain Cyan for the rest of our lives. Could be worse I suppose. I am sure our past had some effect on how we are, but it was a huge shock to be kicked off Cyan. We had tried so hard to fit in.

We are the first to arrive at the Mother Ship and will be in charge of organization and to a lesser extent maintenance and construction. Other species we expect soon are better at the last two duties. Though our young, yes, we reproduce again, are great at getting into tight spaces and with seven arms can handle a lot of tools at once. Well, at least ones designed for our use anyway.

In my eyes, the Ship is as large as a small planet. Considering our mission it needs to be, but this also makes for a logistical nightmare. A lot of systems need to work in harmony. Cyan stressed more than anything else to live a sustainable life. Even more important here. There are redundant systems and backups of course. From my analysis, it is the TKs themselves who are the ultimate backup.

Of course the Ship itself is designed to break up into sustainable units in the case of an attack or failure. We may lose some, but not all. It was the same on Cyan of course. Even TKs can die, as we experienced with a few individuals. We have split the Cyan section into seven equal parts, which are then split into seven smaller parts. Forty nine is a Holy number for us. It feels right. I am in charge of this section of seven parts. And am late for a meeting.

We are equally at home in a weighted or weightless condition. We purposely placed grab surfaces on nearly everything and everything is fastened down. This form is very dexterous. We move easily and quickly. It might seem chaos to another life form, but is quite normal for us. We also operate at three times the apparent Hu timescale. I have to remember to show much more slowly when I am around the earth froth sens who were here when we arrived.

Seeker, you are wanted on the bridge. I wave understanding and make my way through what, to a Hu like the Captain, would be a

labyrinth. The Captain actually wanted it to be this way and this might even have been part of the reason we were chosen to do the initial layout. Sentients of all kinds get bored easily. We like variety and complexity. We lived in a jungle eating mema melons on Cyan. Can't get more complex than that. Very three dimensional and always changing.

We did not design the Yellow or Magenta sections. Their atmospheres are very different. Earth froth TKs could handle both, by filtering the air, but Yellow in particular would kill a normal Cyan almost immediately. Still, it is an apparently common type of atmosphere in the galaxy. They are most certainly welcome. I look forward to greeting them when they arrive. There are a number of species I have not learned anything about yet. Maybe they won't be part of this Ship. What are the Black like for instance? I know nothing other than the name.

I am very uncomfortable alone. We normally travel, work, sleep (or pretend to), sex is always done as a hept. We are most comfortable as a seven, a hept. Fourteen can also work, especially as a set of fourteen hepts. I know we got into ideas we should not of according to the Council. I have learned since that they are actually Tafa, but were sent here because they were not perfect enough. We were asked to leave because we were not perfect enough. We really did try, but we all have pasts. We know what tech is and the advantages of it. Every creature wants to live. Ours ideas were very tempting to those who were close to being declared imperfect and subject to banishment anyways.

We were banished of course. Got sent to a location that was considered non viable. We found it amusing actually. Only a minimum about of tech was needed to make it work. When others got banished to our location, they found a more forgiving, more open paradise instead of a slow death they were expecting. We soon gathered all of the malcontents. Some were too far gone and were obsessed with becoming perfect. We made them comfortable, but they never lasted. Especially when one in their hept died. Hu used to have these mental states called cults or something like that. When banished, they could not break free of the mind control that was imposed.

What upsets me the most is the leaders know this is the likely outcome. In reality it is a form of population control. They have to find imperfect ones just to keep sustainable. Even if there are no imperfects, they find some anyway. They have to. Of course with all of us gone, they was plenty of room for a gen. The rules will relax and then hit hard again when they reach peak population.

I knock on the Captain's door. She was very upset when we were ban-

ished. Then as she learned more about Cyan culture she relaxed. Felt too much like the Cyan Perfects who sit in judgment of others. We were already banished, what can happen next? Spaced? I am still exceedingly careful. Especially without my hept.

"Enter."

I assume the attention pose. Apparently this looks very threatening to earth froth sens. Does not feel especially comfortable for us either.

"Ah, tell me you current calling again?"

Seeker Ma'am We don't really have a word for ma'am, but she will understand having TP.

"Why are you here alone? Where are the rest of your hept?"

I am surprised, *You sent for me, so I assumed you wanted only me ma'am.*

"Sorry, I will be more careful next time. I have an assignment for you and your hept. You have already figured out we have more species on our list than can be accommodated on the Mother Ship. Oh, great job so far on the Cyan chamber layout. There is definitely an advantage to seven brains. Very ingenious. You may even be smarter than the Ceph. Might have something to do with the prime number seven."

I am surprised. The design is routine Cyan actually. We copied our homes in the trees on Cyan, perfected for the space we were working in. I am waiting patiently.

"Right, never mind. The assignment." She smiles. I remember Hu smiles. Never good.

"You know we have other associates. How do you feel about 'thants?"

There are no 'thants on Cyan.

"But they were on Ba. You must have remembered them from there."

They seemed nice enough. I only saw a few from a distance. I only arrived here just before the coring, so missed out on meeting Edwin and Jack when they were there. I heard they died in the coring though.

"Gather your hept and meet at the Flyer at 0808. You are about to meet a whole lot more of them. We need you to help do for their situation what you did here for ours. That is all. Dismissed." I bow and leave.

What does that mean? How do I explain this to the others? What do we take with us? Just ourselves is my guess. Sounds like a 'thant world. I thought they only existed in the background, never in the open. They study other sentients and don't like being the sentient themselves under study.

Earth Froth 'thn

Br'thn: This goes far beyond our mandate, our purpose, our understanding.

Qr'thn: Agreed. However, we were not the ones who made it necessary. None of this should have ever happened.

Pr'thn: We need to be exceedingly careful.

All: Agreed.

Pr'thn: The spies that Tewk placed are working and so far have been undetected.

Br'thn: This is surprising. Housekeeping does not see them as pests?

Qr'thn: The Yesan are a recognized sentient and are off limits. Size is immaterial. They are already known to be spies and most have learned to ignore them.

Br'thn: Background noise. Excellent.

Pr'thn: My research suggests that the next Yesan to visit will displace the current spies with their own.

Qr'thn: Fortunately we do not need them in place long. There are several thousand sentients currently in residence. Over three million being actively watched by 'thn.

Pr'thn: Just for this one regional center?

Qr'thn: Correct. Most candidate worlds never achieve full sentient status.

Pr'thn: I thought sentience was a graded scale. Our own Cats are considered sentient, but no one takes them seriously.

Br'thn: True sister. So true.

Qr'thn: Not all high sentients have elevated TKs. Only a very small number. Hence the small number in residence here. Of those with permanent space, even fewer are here at any given time.

Pr'thn: We oversee the earth froth worlds, but not the magmotics or plasmotics in the same systems. Do they meet elsewhere?

Qr'thn: No need. They cannot leave their respective systems. There is no TK high enough, at least until now, that can transport them.

Pr'thn: What about our new forms. Could they use something like what we have now?

Qr'thn: Time frames do not match. We are good, but the plasmotics life span is over in a few microseconds. Entire civilizations rise and fall during the time of this meeting.

Br'thn: I am confused. How are they directing the High Council that

condemned the earth froth then?

Qr'thn: That is part of the reason we are here.

Pr'thn: I grew up with the Hu. Their tech at the end started to produce very low level solidics. Equivalent to single celled fluidic. The point is, they set up a system using logic with trip points. When sensors see a situation that goes beyond a certain preset parameter, another program is activated and an action is taken.

Br'thn: The influence the plasmotics have is they sense the wrong conditions that would activate a series of events if a situation is reached.

Qr'thn: Precisely. The plasmotics are the sensors. The entire star is a sensor. All stars are sensors. They are the ones who inform the 'thn network that a TK above two has emerged. From that point on, the occupants of that system are watched very carefully. Very carefully.

Pr'thn: What percentage of TK2 go on to present a problem that would interest much less threaten the plasmotics?

Qr'thn: Extremely low as suspected.

Pr'thn: A cascade then. Each sensor tripped adds to the scrutiny.

Br'thn: And our particular set of sentients went off the chart.

Qr'thn: Their actions did.

Br'thn: Not their actions. They themselves did. Otherwise why try to kill Puu? She was not even a threat at the point of their decision.

Pr'thn: Turtle and Silver have a very long incarnation history of setting off alarms. Anyone they interact with will be suspect. This proved to be true. The Three are what gave us this form. A form never seen before in any incarnation.

Qr'thn: Four, don't forget the Meep contribution.

Br'thn: A turtle, owl, three Hu from a different froth and a Meep not related in anyway to the others. A nearly impossible situation. How long have they suspected this was the place and time?

Qr'thn: Unknown.

Pr'thn: Not the way this logic structure works. It is impassive. No consciousness or decision making on its own. It waits. It only waits.

Br'thn: Nice to meet a condition with a prescience aspect. We all knew something was going to happen. What about your mother Qr'thn?

Qr'thn: It is why she and her mother turned against us. They knew something was going to happen. Once the alarms went off they went . . .

Br'thn: Crazy.

Pr'thn: Many fear the unknown. Normally 'thn do not fear death. They know it will not happen until the end of the incarnation they are in. We, or at least the fluidics under our care, have turned all of that on end. Any

'thn can die now at any time.

Qr'thn: They shared the method. It will spread fast. 'thn have lost their control of their sentients, their power. Enough to set off all of the alarms.

Br'thn: But this time it is even bigger than that. 'thn dying is the least of the effects.

Pr'thn: What is our role? Why are we here? Compared to the multi-verse, these few fluidics are insignificant. At the most they could take out a few solar systems out of a near infinite number.

Br'thn: And never before as a single sentient of any configuration been able to put to sleep all of the 'thn in a multiverse.

Qr'thn: And we still do not know how they did this. Our own new forms are a question as well. We should not exist.

Pr'thn: Yet, a fluidic is needed to make a 'thn. That never made sense to me. Why can't we make more of our own?

Br'thn: A safety precaution. No group should have unlimited abilities.

Qr'thn: Not even our charges.

Pr'thn: Which brings me back to my questions. Given all of this and our close association with The Five, what is our role? Are we the limit switch? Am I supposed to kill my makers if needed?

Qr'thn: We serve The Question.

Br'thn: It is not The Five we need to worry about. There are eight more.

Qr'thn: And we don't know who they are, where they are or even what their role is.

Pr'thn: The Thirteen are a myth meant to scare baby 'thn. They are not real.

Br'thn: You hope. Ask yourself, how else could a fluidic develop a method to sleep all 'thn in a multiverse at the exactly the same time. No time delay.

Qr'thn: That takes access far above any sentient. There can be no access from within an incarnation. This was designed in as a safety precaution of the highest order. Without this rule, incarnations collapse on themselves very quickly.

Br'thn: They set it up between incarnations. We have long suspected The Thirteen, if they are even real, can access Control between times.

Pr'thn: For fourteen billion years with countless sentients in countless multiverses nothing happens. And now it does?

Qr'thn: This has been a long term project. A very long term project.

Br'thn: In service of The Question?

All: In service of The Question.

Qr'thn: We have work to do. Let's get to it.

Pr'thn: These things give me the creeps. They are like fake 'thn.

Br'thn: More like severely under powered Franken 'thn.

Qr'thn: They serve our purpose. The mini Yesan could only take us so far.

Earth Two

"This is all going wrong. They don't understand what they are doing!"

"Not now Fig. I will find food for you soon," Bill tells her dragon.

"What do we do about it? They are Hu, who see an advantage to do what they are doing. The adult dragons, which ours will become, have killed and destroyed. Many see this as revenge."

"Or an opportunity," I add.

"Until an adult sees a baby being abused in front of them."

"And they will do it. Maybe not here at the uni, but somewhere out there, someone will do it." Hek is visibly upset.

"We need to watch ours closely too. The same ones who would abuse a dragon will not hesitate to kidnap one of ours."

"But they are wild. They only know freedom. They need freedom to grow the way they are intended to."

"And we were never intended to live in the same space/time as these dragons. How did they get here? There is no historical trail to follow to allow for them being here."

"Fairy tales?"

"Not enough. Hu once covered every square meter of this world. If there was some hidden colony of dragons, they would have been found."

"Now who is talking fairy tales? How do you explain the bones we have found?" I add.

"Those bones, judging from the degree of mineralization, are millions of years old, at least. Nothing has been found remotely recent."

"Some of the rich have developed a taste for dragon meat. Teams of warriors are going out to kill them to bring back. They take a lot of trade from one carcass."

"Which will only antagonize them more. I don't know what made the first ones attack us, but now they have a very good reason to, survival. Stupid."

"Wait, are you saying we should be working with them instead? Like friends?"

"They are smart enough to handle tech and fire. They may be as smart or smarter than we are. Is it wise to make an enemy of them? Or better to make a friend?"

"It may already be too late. We are three beginning students with no say."

"All have a say at the general meetings. We need to make our voices

heard."

"And risk our babies? I would rather leave everything and go very far away." The others nod they agree or understand.

I look down to the dragon nestled at my feet. I am having the classic Hu reaction to a 'baby' life form. We have been designed to love all babies, even those not Hu. Do they feel the same about us? What would they do if they found a small child abandoned in the woods? Raise it or eat it? Don't get me wrong, being so small, I have to talk my way out of difficulties, not fight my way out. I am all in favor of becoming friends, but not at the risk of being eaten.

Teacher Marie understands at least. She has us training with our charges. We will each become a DragHu team. Complement each other, more than the sum of our separate abilities. I look down at Chirp again. She wears the same fancy collar we all wear. She does like it when we 'play' together though. Already she can catch any rat within a fast dash. Rats are not used to this new predator. They will learn as well. Took a little longer to convince her cats were on our side and to leave them alone. Dogs on the other hand are fair game. I hate dogs. Too many encounters with dogs and their bully owners. Why do they need to slobber all over you? Not just talking about the dogs either.

I have to smile. Chirp and I am not bullied any more. I am fully armed and know what to do. Chirp is amazingly fast with sharp claws, teeth and intelligence. We practice several eighths each day and are starting to come together. I am learning Drag speak and she is learning my hand signals and short quick sound commands as well.

Of course the Drag have their favorite Hu. Especially ones who feed them when they think we are not looking. This is a weakness that could be exploited. I know of a dozen poisons who could at least slow down Chirp, if not kill her outright. Easy to place in a treat.

Bill says, "Do you ever get the feeling we are being watched?"

Hek laughs, "Oh, gee, who would want to watch us? Just because of our emblems and Drag buddies. Nope, nothing to see here. Of course we are being watched."

"Not norms, I know they watch us. Something else."

I suggest, "We know some who want to cause us harm. Have you forgotten our encounter in the alley already?"

Bill smiles, "That was marvelous. I like being on the winning side."

"And not being seen as just overgrown muscle. Bill, have you gone soft on us?"

"Do I look soft to you?" She does her best snarling evil look. Fig gets

nervous wondering where the problem is. I point to Fig and Bill calms her down. All three of us have fem Drag. Strange. Do they only abandon fem eggs and how do they know ahead of time? Took us awhile to even know the gender of our friends.

"We will be late if we want to make the town hall meeting." I nod.

Just as we enter town, Marie and Mike meet us. It is strange. Where is everyone? We are not that late and there are always people outside talking or catching up on the gossip.

Mike says, "We can't go inside. They are waiting to arrest anyone with a Drag companion."

I am shocked. I thought we got along fine. Most like seeing them this size.

Marie sighs, "The Drag are being blamed for anything that goes wrong in a person's life, from sickness to crop failures, to losses at the gaming tables."

"Gambling is illegal." Bill laughs at me.

"Yeah, I know it goes on. But why call attention to yourself by admitting it openly?"

We are ushered out of down through back alleys we know well already. When we get higher into the hills I look back.

"They are coming for us!" Not dark enough for torches yet, but I can see a line of people on the trail below us. We pick up our pace and get off the trail. Of course they will have people who can track too.

Hek realizes this too, "Pick up your Drag. They leave distinctive footprints, then walk down this stream with me." Classic, but will only slow them down.

Bill sniffs the air, "We need to head into the woods where we found them, close to Drag country. If they don't fear us, maybe the thought of the adults will."

I squeak, "The thought of the adults fears me." A nervous laugh from all. Marie and Mike take up the rear and are following our lead. They were the ones who told us to leave, why are they not leading?

We make a good effort considering we missed a meal and a nap. I love naps. Chirp loves them too, curled up with me. Do all babies like to sleep so much? She is getting too heavy for the nap sack, but she does not like it when anyone else carries her.

It is getting close to dark when we arrive in the forest. Everything has grown up during the wet season, so I am no longer sure of the exact location. I have seen some of the trees before, but which ones are important? Being a mother has drained me. Is it this bad with a Hu baby? Oh, right

worse. I don't have to change diapers.

Bill notes, "There are footprints from large ones about. Stay awake and aware." Thanks, I am certainly awake now! Then I get distracted by some plants I don't remember seeing before and start to exam them one at a time.

"Vid, over here with us. Please keep up!" They are several hundred meters away. I run to catch up, which of course wakes up Chirp who sticks her head out.

"I think it is about time for you to walk again dear." I set her down and she runs to catch up with Fig and Eep who are already running circles around the others. They love to play tag, chasing each other into the bushes and among the trees. They can even climb low lying branches and then drop on each other.

I hear squeaking and lots of movement. They have cornered something. Surprised. I would have thought all the small game would have been long gone from here. A long rodent like thing darts out too fast for me to identify and three Drag are hot on its tail. The bushes are moving, but I can't see anyone any more.

"The kids like it here anyway. This is their prime hunting time."

"Not very fond of raw weasel myself." Hek makes a face.

Marie and Mike come back to us carrying packs. Great more to carry.

"Sure there is not a nice warm cottage with a lovely fire and some hot stew about?" I put on my best sad look, but all it does is get everyone laughing again. I had to try. "I forgot to mention the feather pillow bed."

Nope. I try and keep up with the others. Finally Bill takes my pack and Hek's into her own arms. We are the weakest, me because of size and Hek because of age.

Mike points to a large tree and announces, "Our cottage for the night. Vid gets the branch closest to the fire of course." I am too old to stick my tongue out at him as much as I want to and scramble up the tree with the others. The Drag are exhausted from their play hunting. Maybe not play, they smell like death now. A bath in the morning for sure.

I have dreams of falling all night, but somehow the sun rises in the morning anyway. Well a dull glow through the mist. I can see again, which is what counts.

Someone has set up a fire and is cooking something. Yawning I make my way over, Chirp running ahead of me. Mike hands me a tin mug of hot soup and I hold it tight to warm my hands and cool it down enough to eat.

"The others have already eaten Vid." Great, that means I get clean up.

I look around and he points to the nearest stream, gets up himself and leaves. Good, Chirp needs a bath too. I don't smell that great being next to her all night either.

When I get back, everyone else is sitting discussing something. I put everything away in the packs and take a place in the circle and try to catch up.

"This will be very difficult and scary. Be patient and do not panic. We have already taught you much. Trust us and you will not be harmed. Freak out and we won't be able to help you."

"What the?"

"Shush! Here she comes."

Then I hear it. A large one. Shit!

Farout

the Original

"I hate Silver!" Roger exclaims. He says this ten times a day at least. Has become his go-to statement. I am sick of it and Silver too of course.

From what I can guess, we have been fitted with either nano-limiters or they are all around us. We can keep ourselves alive, but can't really escape this world. We were high TK and are now reduced to servant level. Humiliating after what we used to accomplish. I can't blame them really. We took a chance and we lost to a superior TK. Simple. I guess I am glad I am still alive, but I question that at times too.

Farout is not a bad world. Just boring as hell. Not many life forms and nothing remotely interesting. I figure at least a few hundred million years until we achieve anything resembling sentience. Not sure we even want to. With our luck, we would end up their servants or slaves.

Earth Two was really nice. I missed the trees, all the critters, fantastic views. Why did we have to ruin it? What is this need to be on top? We were never remotely on top while here the first time, not that we didn't try. It was always someone else who was promoted, usually complete idiots in my opinion. Definitely not the way I would have run things. Too bad more of them were not lost on Magenta.

I don't get why Droopy and Randy turned on us though. They were low levels when abandoned on Magenta. Why make them nines? Not just eights, but nines? What did they ever do to deserve that? Crab Cove was for losers. Like going back to the time of kings and castles. Okay, they have some nice sailing ships, but really? Wind powered? They could have made TK powered ships easily. What is the romantic appeal of the 'simple life' for some Hu? Oh, and Droop took a Hu form! What the heck was that all about. As Di he would be master without any TK, but he chose to be a Hu. Granted a nice looking hunk, but still.

We grow as much of our food as we can from the Earth stocks of seeds left behind. I am so sick of sap chow I could die. On the other hand farming is so boring! I swoop in for a closer look at the north shore of the lake. We are thinking of making a summer house there, just for a change. We can make small ships powered with TK with some effort. Better than walking or flying naked. I hate it when some bug smashes against your body at high speed. Eeeuuu!

The foundation is coming along. We set down and join the others trying to do our fair share. We have individual cabins spaced well apart so

we don't hurt each other. We would too, we are all so bored and depressed at being back here. Several hundred years and no sign of a reprieve either. Might have to go rogue just to prevent dying of boredom.

Edwin Colony

I am now a full scout and a TK7. I think back to where I was a few hundred years ago on Alexandria. Never would have dreamed any of this was possible. Not everything is to my liking of course. I have a new red and white striped exo. I far preferred the less visible amber and dark brown version. I have to fit in though. Some of the workers are amazingly stupid. They would attack anything new on principal before even trying to understand why it might be here. I am all in favor of culling the more stupid ones, but King Edwin says to wait. We don't know what our needs are yet. At least I can get them isolated some distance away working on mundane projects to keep them occupied.

We were warned by Catbox to expect visitors any time. I have been tasked with meeting with them. I DS to high orbit to wait. Lets me get a better view of our growing colony as well. A King, which no 'thant has ever had before. That took some getting used to. The new Queen was furious of course until Edwin, ah, King Edwin showed her who was boss. That was funny and scary at the same time. Has not stopped her from plotting. Good for us to keep our awareness up I guess. We can always make another Queen if we need to. We have thought about it and made it clear it would be easy to do. Still she tries. Billions of years of tradition are hard to break. We could end up with something worse too I guess.

A Flyer pops in, just at the edge of my range. I DS closer.

Scout Jack requesting permission to come aboard Captain.

Permission granted.

I pop into the bridge. I had to learn a lot of words that made no sense to me, but if anything 'thants are adaptable to local conditions. Another old tradition.

I recognize the expected Ba Captain, Esi, and bow to her. There are other forms I have never seen before and ignore them for the moment.

^You have changed Jack. Fancy new exo I see. Nice.^ I shake my head in the earth froth manner.

I wait instructions. Not really a talker.

Seven blue-green creatures untangle themselves from a large ball and line up around us.

Captain Esi waves to them, ^These are the Cyan sentients who will be helping you get ready for the others. Their lead is called Seeker and the other six are part of a hept or 'group of seven'. They are most comfortable when they are aware of the others in their hept. They will keep together

until they feel comfortable. Best not to even try with genders. There are slight differences in the carapace markings to help tell them apart. They are all TK6 and can com in a very large number of ways. Just assume anything communicated to one is known to the entire hept.^

The 'thant language has changed since our hybridization. I will continue to use TP until they learn. Quarters have been prepared. I am ready for transport if they are.

We are ready Scout Jack. At least one has TP then. Good to know.

I DS us down and they immediately spread out to fill and investigate their new dwelling. A strange one. It is what they asked for. I hope it works for them. Of course we cannot hope to come close to their life on Cyan. More arid and no Cyan jungle here. It is open to the outside with lots of branches and openings at seemingly random locations. Somehow they manage to squeeze through. It does rain here, though probably not as much as on Cyan. We set up a water sprayer that comes on a regular intervals for their comfort. I pop out before it goes off again. We can get wet of course, just not my preferred method of cleaning. We take grooming very seriously. Getting wet does in no way do a good enough job of it.

I inform Edwin, *They are here.* Edwin pops in next to me. I am informal when not around other 'thants.

He takes a stance facing their dwelling.

This should be interesting. Never seen anything like them. Similar to Yesan. Their leader used to be a Ku hundreds of years ago, but has likely forgotten most of what it was like.

I still remember being a Hu over an equal time period. He ignores me.

We will need all our knowledge to make this work with so many very different sens.

I really hope we don't get Hu here. Please keep them on the Mother Ship or somewhere else.

You put up with me being a Hu as your only companion for a long time Jack. Yes, I know, they do stink. I was careful about that though.

Not that, though bad enough, it is their feeling of always being superior to everyone else.

Hmm, there is that. I have an audience with the Queen.

Be safe and watch out. I bow to Edwin and he bows back in understanding. Yes, I will defend him to the death and kill the Queen if I have to. They both know that too. I have practiced in many ways unknown to the other 'thants present as well. The Five learned a lot about us that could prove useful.

My attention needs to be on the new ones though. I am very good at watching. I watch them. Like nothing I have seen before. I have made extensive use of the Library, the 'thant Library. The closest is the Tafa. One of the few species that genuinely put fear into nearly everyone. The Tafa are not violent, at least overtly. They are sneaky. They use persuasion to slowly convince people of their truth and remove all that don't. World after world dies under their 'supervision' trying to achieve an impossible ideal of perfection. Cyan used to be Tafa refugees. How did they survive? Why were they sent to Farout? What could be worse than the Tafa?

Edwin pops in.

We need a new Queen. She just could not adapt. Pity. Not sure this hybrid thing was such a good idea after all.

All we can do is try. I add.

We have time until the current workers die out. Enough time to raise a new queen. We lost a few scouts loyal to her as well. He sighs.

The Cyan have been quiet the last day. They are settled in and made use of their space but not ventured beyond it.

They are waiting for their assignment. They are here to help us organize a collection of very different sentients.

They are Tafa. Is that wise? Last thing we need is a cult?

These Cyan were all earth froth sentients before their stay there, but I see your concern. Earth One and Two were easily led down the Tafa path.

Why them? Why the Cyan?

Ah, because except for the Yesan, which we only have a few, everyone is different from them. Should cut down on the idea of playing favorites.

Why is that a concern? Do not all the sentients want this to work?

Whenever you have two sentients on a world, you have three opinions on how best to do anything.

Then the best idea should be chosen.

An ideal is not always possible Jack. If you feel they are ready, I will signal for the next group to come in.

I would give them another hundred solars, but I understand we need to move faster than that and it will not be ideal.

You know where the next group will be settled. Work with the Cyan and let them in on the process. That is what they are here for. We can't always be in control of everything. We need to be flexible too.

I wanted to be a 'thant so bad, because they were not flexible. There were rules, you understood the rules and you followed the rules.

Not true Jack. Of all creatures, the 'thant must be the most flexible of

*all. We have to work with countless millions of species and adapt to each.
I will work with the Cyan.* Edwin nods and pops out.

He has been very patient with me, but I am obviously a failure. I have no idea why he did not just let me die on Alexandria when the core was removed. It might have been kinder.

I walk up to the Cyan complex and peek in an opening. I have no idea what their protocols are.

Rap Eden

^RWhat is it?^R

I look it over carefully. Made of wood apparently, but far better craft than any I have seen before.

I shrug and say, ^RTake it to the Alpha I guess.^R When in doubt.

^RI'm not going to touch it. You take it. I found it. Done my part.^R He leaves. Scared rat. Surprised he has lived this long. We lost Long Tail on the last sortie. She was a heavy loss. We are under populated and under powered now. Five years before we can replace our losses. Have to be very careful and stick to the fringe areas to avoid another confrontation. To be fair to Scar, we are all on edge and very cautious now.

At the same time, this is clearly something our Alpha will want to see. I reach down and pick it up. Nothing happens. Not an obvious trap, yet.

Scar is already heading back. I follow him. Not safe to be out here alone. Others are watching for an easy kill. I place the box in my carry sack so it is not so obvious I have a prize. Others would try and take it from me.

Scar suddenly drops to the ground and motions for me to do the same. A pack of five on patrol. I hand ^RThanks.^R He acknowledges, but is still watching them carefully. When we are sure they have passed, we proceed, but keep to the trees and bushes, careful not to make any sound, cover our tracks, and definitely do not scent anything. A normal pack would want to let others know this was their range. We don't intend to stay, so no point in inviting a confrontation.

We make it back to our base camp just before dark. The dusk probably helped us get back without notice. Most packs hunt at dusk. Everyone has to eat. We avoided likely food ranges. We are both hungry, thirsty and tired.

We find only two others. Everyone else must be out looking for food. We accept a portion of food. We were able to recover most of Long Tail after the attack. Not happy about eating one of our own, but better than starving and it is high quality food. Mostly bone actually. We are all getting thin.

^RRed Leaf, have you seen our Alpha?^R She spits out some chewed meat for the two hatchlings. They get the best of course.

^RBack soon. Watch these two while I get some water for them.^R She assumes I will comply and takes off. Probably the first break she has had in an eighth. Their feathers are still at the awkward random pattern stage.

Ugly, but it does help them hide better if we have to lead another pack away from them. There is no doubt in my mind they would become a meal for an invading pack. Most do not make it to their first year for this reason.

I am an old one and only given light duties normally, though lately, we all do what we can of course. The Alpha is one of mine actually. Not that it gets me any special treatment. I cover the two hatchlings with leaves and try and get them to settle down. We have dug several more burrows to act as decoys. I pretend to spend time with one of those in case there are watchers. Also makes us look larger by having so many nests. Attach us and expect revenge in other words.

Red Leaf comes back, checks on the two, who are now sleeping off their meager meal and then comes over to me.

^RI saw our Alpha. She will be here in a moment. Best prepare.^R She then goes to another decoy and pretends to attend it.

I retrieve the box from my carry sack and stand at attention.

She is not in a good mood and ignores me for as long as she can, inspecting every other corner of our camp. I have learned to be patient. She was not my first pick, but the pack decided we needed a fighter more than anything else right now. She is ruthless, as much to us as them unfortunately. We all have scars to prove it too. Hers were won in battle though. How good is it when you fear your alpha more than the enemy?

She finally comes up to me, clearly mad at my taking up her time, sees the box and swats it out of my hands. It smashed to the ground where the top pops off. Not breaks off, pops off. Inside there is a flat white leaf like thing with old script on it. The Alpha has no interest and has left to swat someone else no doubt. I motion Red Leaf over. We are the oldest.

I carefully unfold the leaf in front of her. We both examine it carefully. None of the younger ones know how to read. There just was not time to teach them, as we have been running most of their lives. We tell stories around the fire, but not enough. Each time the story changes a little. No way reflecting the truth any longer.

We have to struggle to read it ourselves, but finally make out, ^RGather the best to this box. Be prepared.^R

We look at each other. I certainly have no idea what it means.

^RMaybe you should take it back to where you found it. Clearly has nothing to do with us.^R We are certainly not the best by any understanding.

^RCome with me. Not sure I can handle another day with you-know-who. My days are short no matter what happens. But, the thought of dy-

ing at your own kind's hand seems wrong. I would rather die searching for the truth to this message.^R

Ceph Eden

A senior fem comes forward and bows, ~Rooi, the chosen have been assembled.~ The lead Ceph is always called The Rooi in honor of the one who brought us out of darkness. My predecessor did not feel she lived up to the title and I certainly don't. It has been so long, most of what we know of the first Rooi might be more myth than fact now.

I have decided to go with the select and my first arm will be Rooi when I am gone. I wish I could have done more, but cultures move slowly I am reminded constantly. This is my only chance to see real change and the biggest reason I am leaving. The frustration of having to deal with countless meetings, game playing and visual fighting has gotten to me. The flashing mantels in anger still affect me. We were told via the message orb that this will be one way. As in we won't want to come back, or as in we all die was not shown. Either way, I am done here. Go out with a beautiful pattern.

I make a portal and go to the meeting place. Will we lose our abilities on the other side? The others are waiting. I appear to be the last. Hand picked to be open minded and not put those we leave behind at a disadvantage. There is a mix of older more knowledgeable ones and the younger more adventurous, more curious. We were not give any criteria, only told where and when to gather. We are well inland of the shore we prefer and it will be hot soon. Unlikely to get any lookers.

All selected were sworn to secrecy and all com was by arm contact. No possibility others would know. The older ones said they were retiring, as I did. Some said they needed to be in seclusion for a time to gather their thoughts, a right of all Ceph. A few just crawled out not having a good excuse to be gone.

Those gathered look to me. Habit I am guessing.

I show them, ~I am not your Rooi. We will choose a new one based on need once we know what is happening and what will be needed. I know no more than anyone else here, only that we are needed. Thank you for agreeing to be here.~

We do not have to wait long. A large portal appears and we make our way though it. I am the last. I turn and take one last look around. Of course I can only see almost dry trees and bushes around me. On the other side I see a stream and an ocean. Looks like paradise. Let's hope it is.

SyWg Eden

It was bad. We should have known from other sen worlds, that as population and mixing increase, the danger from a plague also increases. In our case there were plagues affecting both the Sy and the Wg. The Scary could help, but we are limited and once it spread to entire villages there was not much we could do but let it burn itself out. Whole villages were abandoned as occupants tried to flee the diseases, only to spread it instead.

We spread word through the Scary and now every village is in quarantine. Forty days without exception. Food is the problem. Cities were dependent on outlying farm areas for support. Those farms not affected as badly brought supplies to the edge of town, but they had their own to care for as well. Extreme rationing is in place. If not for the dying, there would not be enough food. A lesson learned the hard way.

Rand and I have our suspicions as to where the plagues came from. The Comps have their own agenda. They want a strong, smart sentient population. If this helps them get there, they would do it. We prefer a lighter touch, but often end up in the same circumstances. There were certainly plagues on Di and Earth One for countless generations. A humbling experience to be sure. There has to be a middle ground between coddling and brutalizing through. No pain, no gain is a lie.

We are out the other side, wiser than when we entered at least. All visitors are now quarantined as a matter of course, in special areas well separated from everyone else. Cheaters are killed on sight. Shipments are carefully inspected for pests and problems. It could just as easily have been a plague on crops or fish stocks. Some items are only allowed in cooked, dried or otherwise made safe, in other words, very dead. Both liquids and solids are fed to smaller animals first to be sure they are safe.

Most have gone back to small garden plots near where they live. The more you can grow and harvest locally, the better the food, and the safer. When someone moves out of a dwelling, it is either burned down or heated to a high temperature to kill anything that might have been hiding there. The Wg build new homes all the time as a matter of course, usually once a year. The Sy on the other hand needed to learn some new skills and habits. Building out of stone does not make for a yearly redo, hence the firing a dwelling instead. Stone does not burn. Sy have the problem of being in a wet environment where water mixing occurs normally and frequently. We are learning.

Rand comes up to me. I am still not used to seeing him as a Wg. I shudder that the thought of our roles being reversed. I rather like the Sy troll like form a lot. May have to keep this form. On the other hand I miss the Black Wind ships. A Sy on a ship is like a stone thrown into a pond. Not a good combination. On the other hand the Wg are making great progress on ship building with Rand's help. Of course the plagues changed how that was done as well. Ports are now well away from towns with a lot of safety protocols in place.

||Sure you don't want to come with me?|| Rand is teasing me.

=Sure you don't want me to give us away?=- Obviously I could handle being on a ship as a TK. More likely the ship would list so far to whatever side I was on as to put it in danger. Ha-ha! A Wg joke. Obviously the cargo could be adjusted to accommodate.

I follow him on board. Scary go by ship all the time. It was a problem when the ships were tiny, but they have reached a good enough size now we can safely come aboard. Assuming we do not hit a heavy storm of course. As Scary we need to get to new locations quickly and a ship is still the fastest way until they invent something like a railroad. Given the environmental destruction to mine all that iron and fuel, it is not likely to happen any time soon.

=Where are we going this time?=- I look about and see quite a number of Scary pairs already on board. What has happened that so many of us are needed?

He hands me a scrap of paper. Not SyWg paper, that is made with water reeds similar to papyrus. This is much finer. Shit. I am afraid to open it.

=When did this arrive?=-

||A few eighths ago. You were busy with the local council, so I took care of it.||

=Thanks I guess.= I am still afraid to open it and put it into a pouch on my belt. Maybe I should just enjoy the ride instead. It is good to be on the sea again, even if very close to the coast. We never leave sight of the coast on a Wg ship. Getting around rocks and sand bars is an art the Wg are good at. They know where every one is and how it changes depending on storms, tides, and time of year. Of course it helps they can jump in the water and take a look if necessary. If the ship sinks, they just swim to shore. The Sy are on their own. One of the reasons only Sy Scary are the usual Sy passengers. We have enough TK ability to float is we have to.

Still it is a wonderful day. There is enough of a breeze to fill the sails. Our direction is with the wind. The bird like creatures are about, some

perching on our masts and railings looking for a handout or a rest. The crew seems happy. I scan the hold and see we are lightly loaded. Mostly farm supplies, seeds and tools. Books? Are we a library now?

I go below. I need to see these books. I could read one from on deck, but it looks funny to others where I concentrate so intensely. It is a complete library of how to for both Sy and Wg tasks. Are we going to colonize a new location? I can scan the entire world, there are no new locations of any worth.

I hear a scream, a Wg scream. It is like someone is being burned alive. I rush upstairs to see everyone gathered around the railing surrounding a Wg being brought aboard. Only the Sy are touching him. There are several Wg being attended by Scary to massive burns to their skin. The one they bring aboard is very dead. Looks like raw meat. What could do this so fast?

Rand finds me watching, ||The sea is very salty. We cannot handle that much salt. Like pouring salt on a snail.|| He then goes back to pouring fresh water on the wounds to dilute the salt. We have very little fresh water on board. Why, when we can drink the sea about us.

=How did the sea suddenly get . . . = I am scanning in ever expanding circles.

"Shit, we are not on SyWg Eden any more!" Of course only Rand can understand me and the others just look at me instead. I reach into my pouch and pull out the piece of paper to look at.

"Prepare for an adventure." That's it. I hate The Five! Not thinking I throw it overboard. Must have happened when I was below decks. I did not feel a thing. Who puts a portal in the middle of the sea? Anyone could have gone through it. This is, or rather was, a heavily trafficked area. I scan again. No other ships at least. I relax. Best to deal with what is.

I go up to Rand, =Did you know this was going to happen?=
||Of course not. But an adventure usually means with sens you trust, supplies for almost anything. I did my best in the short notice. At least it happened off shore and not in a crowded market or town hall meeting.||

=Thanks. Yeah, that would have been worse. Could have ended up with Snivel on our crew.= Rand smiles. Comical on a Wg. I slowly turn around and Snivel is trying to help others. Total goof. He could not swat a testa without hurting someone.

Rand shrugs, ||Comic relief.||

=And solutions often come from the most unlikely places.=

||That too.||

=This is a water world. There is no land of any kind. Good thing we

were on a ship.= Everyone would have drowned or burned to death if we had not been on a ship.

||The Five know we prefer being on a ship to anything else.||

=Or they are watching us.=

||Scary thought Drup.|| Yeah, a very scary thought.

I look over the edge and confirm my scans. No land, but very shallow too. I scan way out. No moon, but there is still a star to cause tides. There is plant life down there that no one can reach easily. Not sure it is edible anyway.

"We may need to break cover."

=Give it a few days. We need fresh water and lots of it. Get the Wg together and teach them how to make it. I will have the Sy making barrels out of the spare wood you have stored below for repairs. They won't be pretty, but they will hold water. You and the other Wg can seal them once made.=

We both take off to our respective tasks. We did not come aboard as the designated leaders, but we are taking charge anyway. No one is complaining, having no idea what happened. Half of those on board are Scary, meaning TK2 and of course the two of us. We will survive.

'Everything is a test.' Silver, eat shit!

The only saving grace is it is not hot here, at least not yet. We do manage to build a dredge to scoop seaweeds off the shallow sea bed. It has to be leached in fresh water to remove the excess salt. Sy can handle the salt, so we let the Wg choose first on portions and we eat the salty remnants. We have pretty good fat reserves as well.

We spend time learning each other's life stories. Ours are made up of course, but do include some details that match what has happened to us so far, just not the high TK parts of course.

Mostly it is just really, really boring. As Scary do not sleep, Rand and I really never have any privacy to figure things out. He keeps insisting we need to tell them. We already know we can't raise them any higher. How do we explain ourselves. I am not ready to be blamed for our misfortune. We have lied by saying we believe we have been blown off course somehow and are in an unknown land. Or lack thereof. I know, stretched very thin. Most are just happy to be alive after seeing what happened to the one and the injuries that a few others experienced. The Sy know, their turn could easily come next.

As the crew are mostly Wg, we spend a lot of time wetting them down to prevent their skin from drying out. We thought about a bath tub they could use when they needed, but it gets very rank very fast. All life emits

waste products. Sy are no roses either. Of course there are fights, but we tamp them down quickly. It could tear us apart if left to fester. Games are invented and created and that helps a lot. Teams are formed at random each morning so no permanent loyalties happen. Of course there are injuries, but no further deaths fortunately.

Mostly, we are waiting to see what is next. A life on the edge.

Black

Most would complain about being used as the messenger all the time, but Yesan love going new places and learning new things. This is one of the strangest. Of course I read the briefing five times, all of the coms to and from a dozen times, each. Fascinating.

My appointment is not for another lunar. I don't like surprises. There are always things they don't say. Usually because they are so close to the species, they no longer see things from an outsiders point of view.

I also have another advantage. Yesan and Tafa go way, way, back. We were mortal enemies at one point. This would have normally been a bad thing. Why did the Council go after the Earth Froth but not us? We were an obvious sentient to end up at Farout. Of course, back then we knew nothing about Farout or the Tafa role in it. Species did disappear once in awhile. Or rumors of them, never on our watch, so it was always just rumors. There are lots of reasons a species goes dead. Lots of reasons.

They should have sent us to Farout. My spies only recently found out why we weren't. Because the Tafa and the Yesan had 'personal' history, they were not allowed a vote on the Council. We survived with the admonition never to visit the Tafa or they us. We were fine with that and for tens of thousands of years we did not. It was not until the Earth Froth found us, learned our story, and started poking around themselves.

Turns out the perfectionist assholes, as the Hu say, sent a lot of species to Farout largely because they were 'imperfect'. The Magenta, Cyan, Yellow and the Black that we found and of the course the Earth Froth themselves. The Earth Froth were the worst. An entire segment of a froth. That was a first. Something about the earth sentients scared them good.

It did not help that by the time The Two reached the Regional Galactic Center this incarnation, with other sentients in tow, they were already linked, or contaminated, by Tafa logic. All of the high TKs were rounded up without a fight and shipped to Farout, case closed. (I love the old murder mysteries in the Hu library) They had no idea what they did. I feel amusement. By being 'off the grid' for thousands of years, it was not a punishment, it was an incubation period. They were out of sight and more importantly not under supervision. No one in Farout is. Locked up and forgotten. The Tafa got cocky. The result, well, if you are reading this, you already know. The Earth Froth escaped. A first. And if we have any say, definitely not the last because of them.

I look enough like a brittle star or sea spider no one pays any attention

as I wander about. I will stay in the periphery for now. Watch and learn.

I looked up their file in the Library. Well, I snuck in. I found the encrypted file. No one was supposed to be able to see it. They really need to up their security. A tiny half sized Yesan could have hacked their system. Pathetic.

The true name of the 'Black' is the Builders Collective or just Builders. They are not a species, they are an ecological collective. I can relate to that. Not in the same way, but similar.

An ecological collective is not a single species. It is a very tightly integrated unit. Highly adaptable. Creative times a hundred. I can see why they ended up here. They sparked fear in the Tafa. A thousand times faster and smarter. I hope Squeak and Ron have them on our side. I know the Companions are involved too. Good. Sorry, but Squeak and Ron definitely could not handle this on their own. I would not even try.

What would happen if they were brought 'home' to their origin world and given their gifts back? Might be fun to find out.

Magenta

^In orbit around Magenta Captain. Limiter dampers showing fully functional.^

"Good, I don't want to do a crash landing this time. ETA until study site is in the sun zone?"

+Ninety six minutes Captain.+

~Landing crew standing by.~

"I will be in my room. Let me know what they find. Tewk, you have the bridge."

@I aye Captain.@ Tewk loves saying that for some reason. Of course in Yesan it comes out in a funny sequence of clicks and whistles. Still funny though.

I am going over Tewk's report on Black, or rather The Builders Collective. Tewk has been a real life saver on this mission. So much is falling into place. Hu history certainly is full of situations where power went to the heads of a few to the detriment of the many. Seems to work this way at the galactic level as well. Too bad. I was really hoping that if you finally crawled out the warm seas, onto land, no offense Ceph and Cet, and reached a level of tech and TK, you would have finally gotten your shit together, as the ancient Hu used to say. Appears not. Same old games. Same old bullies.

I really thought we all served The Question. Very naive I know.

"Aaaaagh!" What is waiting for me is busy work. My com is full of requests for approval. I thought I had distributed the duties well enough to rid myself of this time suck. Guess not. That collective thing that Tewk found is starting to look very appealing now.

I spend the time I should have been studying Tewk's report with shuffling requests to department heads where they should have gone in the first place. That is why you were made a department head. Do your job!

^Captain, we have a problem on the surface.^

"What is it Ku TK Gin?"

^They aren't there? They can find no sign of Rooi or Snap.^

"Did they find the Catbox we sent them? Maybe they are on a mission off planet and our timing is unlucky?"

^Affirmative. The box has not been activated and is where we sent it.^
Now what?

A knock at my door.

"Enter." Tewk comes in.

@We should be down there ourselves.@

"Agreed. Gin you have the com. Going below."

The surface is as I remember. Boring. Lots of shades of purple and magenta. There is a structure of sorts near the shore. A Yesan at the entrance comes to attention. Is it because of me or Tewk. I can never tell with them.

@At ease sailor. What do you know?@

@Come with me.@ We follow it in. Dusty inside. It appears they are horrible house keepers or have been gone some time. No signs of an attack. Both Rooi and Snap are more comfortable on the wet side. We proceed to the deck out back that borders the water. There is a soaking pool off to one side. I remember soaking in that tub with Rooi the last time. Refreshments and snacks are scattered. About what you would expect. There are creatures here that are naturally curious and always hungry.

We go back inside and find the study. The box is sitting on a low table. Easier for Rooi to reach. There is some dust on it as well.

"When did we send it again?"

@Three days ago. Should have been sufficient time to alert them of our arrival.@

@They could be on a mission of some sort of their own.@ The young Yesan looks to us. It cannot scan planet wide as we can. I nod and Tewk begins a scan.

@They are not present on Magenta.@

"If I remember correctly, there are no moons or other interesting bodies present in this system."

The young one presents, @There are three smaller worlds sunward, but are airless and lifeless as far as we know.@

@Being here was meant as a punishment Captain.@

"Your own research has taught us this world was likely set up to isolate and punish a sentient. Where are they then? There are creatures here, but nothing that rises to the level of a full sentient, except Snap's and Rooi's offspring and there do not appear to be many of them left either. That is weird in and of itself. I thought when Snap left for New Hope there were lots of crab species. It is like everything that the three brought with them has never happened."

@Captain! The wreck of the flyer Snap, Droopy and Randy were on is gone. It is as if the crash never happened.@ The young Yesan is very excited and nervous. Of course, this is normal for them inwardly, but in this case it is twitching as well. They normally remain motionless so as to not attract attention.

Tewk notices, @The structure of this dwelling is also decaying. It might be best to leave until we can figure out what is going on.@

The young Yesan goes outside and calls the rest of the away team. It will be dark soon too. We know how to counteract the field, but it still makes me nervous. Two Ba come up to us and we all go back up together.

I have brought us into a quarantine space just to be safe.

"Gin, take us out of orbit. Being in the shadow makes me nervous at the moment. I don't want to take any chances."

^Aye, aye Captain.^

Esi comes in encased in a full hazmat suit with separate instruments.

+I am going to put you in a limiter field just to be sure.+ I nod. I hate the feeling, but I would rather be sure. She runs instruments over all of us.

+No sign of parasites or other life forms. All of you followed standard shielding protocols while on the surface?+ We each acknowledge in turn. We were not down there very long either. No one would have eaten or drunk anything. Everyone is at least a TK5 and able to take care of all body functions independent of the surroundings. Standard protocol when there is any doubt of about the circumstances.

+Re-initiating TK status.+

@WAIT!@ Tewk yells. Well, as much as Yesan arm waving and clicking can be called a yell. We all freeze. Tewk slowly points to the wall. It does not seem quite right. Something is off. I hit the emergency seals. Nothing is going in or out of this room, with or without TK abilities.

We are all looking at the wall now. I have learned how to override a limiter field. Tewk can as well. One of the tests of TK9 status or above. A trick that The Five insisted we had to learn. Given the journals I can understand why, but this is no 'thn presence.

Esi goes to the control panel and turns off the regular lights and turns on the UV-A. Nothing. She switches to UV-B. There are two of them. They light up like as an amorphous, hard to focus on, blobs against the wall. Two of them, I think.

I show, ~Okay, Rooi and Snap, we see you now.~ The blobs morph into a Ceph and Crust. Snap has gone on a diet or would not have fit into this room.

"Lights on. Limiters off please." Feels good to be back to normal.

~It took us quite some time to find them. Tewk gave us the clue. There had to be some sentient worthy of the Tafa fearing them somewhere on Magenta. The three castaways never saw them even after a thousand years here. That tells you how good they are at hiding.~

Snap continues, *They are the ultimate camouflage artists. They cover near IR to near UV. Good guess to try mid UV Captain. There are over a million of them below us.*

Twek asks, @How many came back when the three were rescued? If they can hide this well from us, they certainly could have hid from everyone else.@

"Indeed. What do we call them even?"

~They call themselves the Luss.~

@Another trip to the Library then.@

"Too dangerous. We can't afford to lose you and you are becoming too well known. I am sure the Tafa are on to you by now. They are not stupid, even if their philosophy does not agree with us."

^Pass the information onto The Five and let them work out a solution?

^ I nod approval.

"Great work you two!" We all do a formal Ceph bow to Rooi and Snap.

@At least tell me more about what you found out interacting with them. I could die from curiosity.@

+You would not be the only one Tewk.+ Others nod, myself included.

Whatever it is, it was enough to scare the Tafa and the rest of the Council to send them out here.

"I never understood why the Council just did not kill all of them, us included. Though they came close on New Hope and Alexandria."

@I have suspected even they are answerable to a higher authority. Maybe the Plasmotics?@

+That actually makes sense. If there is a Regional Galactic Center, there must be a Galactic Center or even a Local Group Center.+

^The amount of time involved to get through those layers would be longer than most species lifetimes. Therefore in most cases, it would not be needed.^

That gets a laugh. We all know bureaucracies too well. I hope this is not real actually. A group with that kind of power would definitely be interested in what we have done. Stopping all of the 'thn, even if for a short time is like ringing a huge gong in a crowded market place. Everyone stops to see what happened.

"Rooi, what do they look like now and what did they look like when they arrived? We already know the Cyan changed from the Tafa, so I would expect the same here."

Or the Tafa changed from the Cyan. Both had time to evolve and change.

@Silly Snap, Tafa do not change.@ That shows amusement.

~You passed them on the surface coming to our land dwelling.~ She projects an image of some near the lab. She is right. I would have never thought they were sentient.

They are nocturnal. Passive during the day, acting more like plants, using the sunlight to make metabolic energy. At night they hunt. This is when they need their camouflage skills the most. The shielding helps them hide by using TP and suppressing other nascent abilities seen in the locals.

+Remember in the journals when on the Mesa, they had a contest of using TP to project monsters into everyone's minds in a sort of contest?+

~Do you have the Way Back equipment on board? I want to see what happened when they arrived.~

"Rooi, we would need to know where on the world they arrived as well. A large place to be searching back millions of years for a brief moment."

We know where that is, or likely is. There is a monument of sorts. We did not recognize it before because it is on the other side and we spent most of our time underwater to keep our TK abilities.

"Ah, time of day at the moment?"

~Sunrise soon if I am not mistaken.~

"Gin, order a Way Back crew assembled ASAP. I am as curious as everyone else I am sure." Everyone present is going of course. Not a safe thing to do in terms of trouble. As Captain I should know better right?

Tewk comes up to me and hands me a folded message.

@Do not open until we know. I want to know if I am right ahead of time.@ I smile and nod. I have my own ideas of course, but I would lay odds on Tewk's choice being right with all the knowledge they have of the RGC Council and especially the Tafa. The Yesan and the Hggy were both enemies of the Tafa too. Could this be one of them?

Earth Two

Hu scare easily and I know they can be very dangerous, especially the larger ones. I proceed slowly, but also making enough sound that they know I am coming. I am totally non threatening. Really.

I stop a few meters out from them. I can smell their fear, but Marie and Mike have them under good control.

I sigh, nod to Marie and say, "I have them now. You had best be gone before you get us all in trouble."

"We are in full agreement then?"

"We are. Our council was unanimous. They have had their nap?" They nod and pop out. As soon as I spoke the smallest one fainted. The old male is very curious. A good sign. The killer is cautious, but appears to trust the two who left.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fem TK 2 Drag Karath of the Green Creek Clan, at your service."

The old one says the obvious, "You speak Standard very well." I nod. Monkeys are so stupid. Why did I have to be assigned this thankless task?

The small one comes around, "Do you want your children back? We took good care of them, I hope. A bit spoiled, but they are so cute."

"Very good Vid. I am assuming you also noticed the similarities in the patterns in the colors of the feathers." The small one, Vid, nods as the old one says this. Any Drag would have known from the smell alone. The three small Drag stare at me, but say and do nothing. I am not their imprinted mother. It will take time before they trust me, smell or not.

"First, I want to apologize for the destruction that some of the Drag have done to your kind. This will not happen again unless we are attacked directly. Yes, we know of the patrols of treasure hunters and egg hunters. Curse your legends saying we hoard the worthless yellow metal. We don't now and never have. That myth came from your own kind seeking to hoard it for themselves."

"Second, Teachers Marie and Mike were only visiting for the purpose of getting the four of us together with the hatchlings." A little one yells "Eeep!" I hate hatchlings. Poo everywhere. Not my problem. We normally leave them alone for the first year to get past this stage.

"Third. I am now your official teacher. You will refer to me as Teacher or Teacher Karath. I will not respond to any other call. Understood." They all nod. Maybe not so stupid.

"Teacher Karath, I am called Hex. Why are you doing this? The Drag

could simply move out of range to avoid conflict. You are smart. You could also raise an army and destroy us. Why teach us?"

"I was told about you Student Hek. The curious one. That means the last is Bill, the Killer."

"I was only defending myself and others. The Drag had already caused a lot of destruction." I ignore her. Smells like a fem, even if she looks like male. Vid nudges her and whispers to her.

"Sorry, Teacher Karath."

"We do not hold that against you. Please do not hold it against us for similar acts done in self defense. Hu have a long history of being very unfair and lacking honor."

Hek, "True that." The others nod. A good sign. They then sit and stare at me quietly. I am not used to having a group of students' full attention. Even the little ones are watching me. I scratch my flank to distract attention from my nervousness.

"To tell our story would take many, many lunas. In short, which in no way does justice to our suffering, this is not our normal form. We were made to assume this form by an evil one who looked more or less like I do now. You may have heard of him? Sauron, the bastard?" No recognition. Didn't the two teach them anything?

Vid suddenly goes wide eyes, "You were originally cats!" I ignore her. Bill smiles. Vid says, "Sorry Teacher Karath." Slow learners.

"We were originally Cats, not cats. A huge difference. There is a land far away to the west of here where we were born. When it got too crowded most left for another world. A few of us elected to stay to maintain our territory on principal. We were captured by the evil one and transformed into this form."

Hek says, "So born, not hatched Teacher Karath?"

"Correct. We had fur, not feathers." Smelled better too. This form stinks. They are silent. I doubt they believe me.

Bill asks, "What is to become of us Teacher Karath?"

"You are my students. You will go where I go. I will teach you in the ways of the Drag and the ways of the TK according to your abilities."

"And the ultimate aim Teacher Karath?" Monkeys ask far too many questions!

"You will learn. We have not even been together one nap period, our unit of time. There is much to learn."

"What is a TK Teacher Karath?" What is a TK? My mouth falls open. I realize this and shut it. I will kill those two! They did not even tell them this much?!

Bug Eden

There really are many advantages to this form. I never thought I would miss it. Being Hu again brought back much pain.

The Cats were right all long, we were just stupid monkeys. Seeing a Cat looking like a giant chicken was almost too much for me. I thought I would break cover and die laughing. The ultimate insult.

Sauron could not start from scratch. Not enough time. He worked with what he had. There was already an animosity between them, Cats and Hu, he just built on it. Cats for the soul and . . .

And gave them the perfect form, himself. Dinos did evolve into birds. He just worked backward.

Might have been more Tewk's doing there. But of course his vanity meant he went for it.

Tewk just took it to the logical conclusion. Sauron was already headed in that direction. Tewk just finished it in time. Sauron would have dragged it out for a few million years to make it 'perfect'. I laugh, she is right, he would have.

If he could only see us now. I preen and stretch my legs suggestively.

Hey you two, welcome back, but get your carapace's in gear. No more goofing off in slow time.

Yes Puu. Oh great and mighty. Hope my TP shielding held up.

Could be worse, we could be dung beetles.

Don't give her any ideas. Hope they make it. The little ones were cute.

All babies are cute silly. Otherwise the parents would eat them.

Looked touch and go with Karath. I show amusement as we double Bug time it to the nearest work crew. Everything has changed of course. We were gone for the equivalent of a thousand Bug years in terms of perception. I expect the tunnels are all complete now. No more running to or from the sun. That was annoying.

No such luck. Sam just told me the adjustment to the rotational speed has been put on hold. We are still on the Bug run.

Better find some embryo to haul around then I guess. I hate those squirmy suckers.

What, no motherly instincts Marie?

Did I ever look like the motherly type? She tries to look mean, but in Bug form it just looks silly.

Oh definitely not. No motherly in you at all. Never mind all the poor sad looking students you have handled over thousands of years. Nope. No mother there. She hits me good. I could not resist.

It came down to two groups. Most of our original group from Alexandria and the Control Room are part of the Progressives of course. We have seen many other worlds. We know there are other possibilities that work. Most are the Traditionalists. Go with what they know works even if it is a very hard difficult dangerous life.

Of course, we have an alternative purpose. One that has not been told to me preciously yet, much less the locals. It would have been good to have them on board willingly. I don't know if they will be drafted or left behind.

We spend our time in the tunnels. Gotten very high tech by Bug standards. Metals, ceramics, glass, farming, fabrics, etc. All good stuff. We trade with the Traditionalists at tunnel entrances when they come by. Their leaders hate us and refuse any items we offer. The young ones take anything we offer. It makes their lives easier. We often find the items abandoned and destroyed further on. A leader finds a forbidden item and takes it away. Destroying insures no one picks it up next round. Metal, ceramics and glass would survive. Fabrics and food would not unless buried. We have started making caches to tempt them with.

Of course this makes the leaders even more pissed at us and they have taken to blocking entrances and killing anyone who goes near one. We are patient. Sooner or later we will win. Hu, Ku, Ba, Di and Rap went through this same experience. Probably the Ceph, but not the Cet. Sal sound like Traditionalists as well. Tafa most definitely. In fact it was our embracing the Progressive ideal that got us into trouble with them. We may even be responsible for their fundamentalist bent. An over reaction to us or others like us.

Is this then a multiverse conflict between Traditionalists and Progressives? Is this what all this is about? The multiverse is HUGE. Why can't everyone live the way they prefer? Why does each group seek to impose their ideal on others? Of course, I grew up on the Rez. This is a very old story to us. There is validity to both sides. If they could learn to work together, imagine how it could work?

Have to wonder about our own conflict.

Mother Ship

The Way Back machine results for Magenta were very interesting. As this is my area of particular study I was put in charge of it. No question the Luss are connected to the Tafa. Just how many sentient cultures did the Tafa ruin in their tenure on the RGC Council?

I am forbidden to go back to Library and I accept it. Not worth putting our entire plan in jeopardy to satisfy my curiosity. I tried arguing it was important, but others will take over the investigation.

Now that we know, we have found Luss everywhere. I have to give them credit. They have put the Yesan to shame. They are really good. Rooi and Snap have done an excellent job of explaining the situation to them. They were harmed by the Tafa and jumped on team immediately. With the addition of TK and our tech they will be a phenomenal addition to the team.

I have taught them Yesan and told them how to contact my offspring at the Center. The Team gave them specific goals for information gathering. Some should reach the Center soon. They went on a very circuitous route so they could not be traced back to our work. They already had a few TK5s left over from the initial banishment. These were raised to eight and told how to make and send Catboxes.

They were very grateful to be released from their prison. Magenta is an incredibly boring world. When the Earth Froth ship arrived, it was the most excitement they had had in tens of thousands of years. I would love to hear how the three castaways react to knowing the truth about the world they were on for so long. The Luss were responsible for the black-out too. Mystery solved. A new native TK talent added to the list.

Speaking of which, the SyWg are ready to join us. They have started the journey according to the last report. Already at the first way station. We don't want their home world put to harm in case anyone can trace them back. Though I give credit to the awakened Companions for their rapid recent advancement. The three 'clowns' certainly were not responsible. Thousands of years on a world and did not find the Luss?

The Companions are now recognized as a full sentient form. The Five gave them the code to unlock their reproductive potential. The last step to their acceptance. I have found no record of this ever happening before. Even the 'thant library had no record of a fluidic team creating a new sentient, of any form, before, much less a solidic of an entirely new composition. Scary. Not being associated directly with an OM makes them unique

too. Even the 'thn are associated through the TKs that make their babies, both physically and because of the millions of years they spend as sentients in training on their home world.

The Luss are part of the Tridon, Yesan, Tafa, and Aaaha line, at least by galactic location. Two of the Luss and myself are tasked with trying to find their home world. Captain Esi will be our pilot. We owe them that much at least. Turns out they were the ones who invented the Terror. The Tafa took credit and turned a useful method of adapting to a new environment, and used it for a truly evil purpose, the total destruction of a world. Backfired on them as we know. The Terror, as we know it, is only a fraction of the original code. An envoy will be sent to the Jane monastery to be sure they have the complete code. We owe them that much. Watch out Cats. I would not want to be in your paws.

Esi comes in, ^Tewk are you available to com?^ I affirm.

^The Luss scare me. Can we trust them?^

@Not all species are like the Hu or Ba Esi.@

^They may not have started that way, but so long alone on a limited world could turn anyone insane.^

@The very reason we need to find their home world. It is the least we can do in exchange for their help.@

^Let's just hope it has not already gone the way of Tafa, Aaaha and Hggy worlds. How did your world escape their evil intent?^

@We were the first world they got to and we had higher tech than they did. It was us who found them. We shared some of our tech not knowing their nature. Our ship designs allowed them to reach Aaaha and Hggy. The Hggy were able to survive for a time because they also had higher tech.@

^The last report said the Hggy had sunk to a pre-tech level again. They are very unlikely to pull out this time without outside help.^

@I have petitioned The Five for help. Our primary concern has to be to our own mission of course. If we succeed I am sure we would be in a position to help a lot of worlds.@

^Until a new danger presents itself. I have noticed there always seems to be some new surprise just around the tree waiting to pounce on us.^

@'A Learning Opportunity,' as Silver would say.@

^I think I would rather be ignorant. Hurts less. Well, not really. Life is pain anyway you carve it.^

@True. Shall we gather our team then?@ She affirms.

Turns out the two Luss were in the room with us. I am not surprised. They do not like being left in the dark, knowledge wise. I can relate to

that.

They unmask in front of us looking fearful. I need to learn how they do that. Not an unattractive species, though I am sure the Hu find them repulsive. Talk about another arrogant species. Another time perhaps.

Now what part did the Tridon really have in all this. Theories abound, but nothing works for long.

Ku Eden

We have not heard from the others for so long, hundreds of years, that I was beginning to think they had all died. I knew of the survivors of Alexandria of course. Few and hunted. I shudder. I never want to be hunted again. Hard enough hiding from your own kind, but from 'thn is far worse. We lost all contact for safety reasons. We were told to use minimal TK till the crisis had passed. The White Cloaks have gone underground literally. We are never seen in public.

I think this is a good thing. A culture has to learn to be good and do the right thing on its own. Ideally there should be no need for a collection of greater beings over watching their behavior. Kind of creepy when you think about us as outsiders. Our numbers are small, we go about in normal clothing, have normal jobs, live in normal hutches, eat normal food.

When we 'die' we move to a new town and start over, burying a simulated corpse for appearances. Harder to fake an injury, so we try to avoid any. Some will walk with a limp for awhile or wear bandages. Disease, we are just lucky and help with those afflicted. We do not hoard anything. We do not seek power or fame. We have become what we teach.

+Brother Keki please come in.+

+Reverend Mother Hen, reporting as instructed.+ Technically I am higher TK, but she does not know that, nor will she. She treats me fine. No complaints. Here we serve the poor. The blue scarf is still our only distinguishing mark. Anyone in need knows to seek one of us out and be directed to help. We no longer run large operations. Too large of a target. There are only a few of us on the surface at any given time in any large city.

+Report please.+

+The blockage has been removed. Just tree roots that had finally made their way to a wonderful source of water and nutrients. Can't blame them for trying. We would do the same under their circumstances.+

+Just remember we serve the Ku first.+

+Yes Reverend Mother Hen.+ I remain silent to avoid further conflict. I do have a reputation for being a trouble maker of sorts. Always for doing the right thing, but not necessarily in the order superiors would necessarily want.

+A request had come in for your services in Peacock City. Pack your belongings and travel the usual way.+ She means without incident. Hard for me not to try and help everyone I meet. I bow and she waves me out.

I have no belongings other than what I carry with me, so I proceed to the surface and come out in an alley when I sense it is clear. It is the third exit I have tried. The other two had Ku present that might have needed help. I don't need to attract attention so quickly after being told not to.

It is still early in the day and only cocky roosters are about asserting their territory. Not really, but instincts push young male Ku to be seen as available. The young run on hormones. It would be amusing if I was into entertainment. I am not. Gets very old and boring watching it so many times. Fortunately I can no longer remember when I was that age, or I have purposely repressed it. According to my last sanity companion I suppress a lot. I get the job done so they leave me alone.

Of course we are not in the high perch area of town. Never liked them. What is the point of accumulating wealth? Always having to look around the corners for someone trying to take it from you. Better to help people instead, then they give you what you need. Less stressful at least.

I find the street shuttle and take a perch. It took some doing, but all transport is free. This upset the high perch in their private shuttles, but cut down on pollution and raised the standard of living. I know enough of our history to know this is only part of a never ending cycle. The high perch will rise again. They always do. And they will fall again. They always do.

At the train terminal I scan the board and find the train I need. It is not for another eighth so I wait on the perch near where we will board. As it gets closer to our departure others gather as well. I am guessing they are early commuters to the downtown business district. No one chirps. They avoid me. I am a dirty bird from their perspective. I purposely appear this way to avoid trouble.

I get in the end car and find a corner perch. This is the slow train. It will stop at every stop. I spend my time watching everyone getting on and off and without using TP I try to imagine their lives, their day, their future. It passes the time. My stop arrives and I get off.

I make my way to the small shop. It is down in the basement of course. This is normal. It is labeled simply, "Tea Shop". No brand name. It is an old door, the paint is peeling, there are cracks. I knock with my beak, wait two seconds and knock once more. Then I wait. Most Ku would leave. I wait.

The door opens. No one is on the other side. I enter and close the door behind me. I am in a small room.

I hear a voice, +Were you followed?+

+Alexandria rises.+ Another door opens at the other end of the room. I wait. An old Ku enters and takes a perch. I wait. She ruffles some feathers

and takes some papers out of her pouch. She offers me one. I come over and take it.

It has only one word on it, in Standard Hu. We are probably the only two Ku here who could read it. It says, 'Gather.'

+It is time. They are alive.+

+So it would appear. I doubt anyone else knows.+

+What do you want me to do?+

+All other duties are hereby mute. You know the ones we want.

Gather them here in two days. You will have to hurry. Gather as many as you can. Some may be gone or unreachable. Do the best you can. That will have to do.+

+Will you be coming as well Flor?+

+Would not miss it. Time to whup some 'thn tail feathers.+ I show amusement.

+If it was only them we might have a chance. It is not through.+ She affirms.

I bow and leave. Not much time. I will run this as a cascade. Find the first one, give them half the list. They will do the same. Above all, they need to come back here one at a time. No one must know. I will set up some flash portals that can only be used once by the intended. Last thing we need is for a constipated 'thn to get involved.

I have no idea where we are going. To the Mother Ship or someplace else. No idea. I don't like surprises. What will be my role? What are we doing even? Do they even know? Trust in The Five does not work for me. They know they have been through countless incarnations. They remember them. They know this is not the everything. I don't. Maybe this is my one and only?

I need to make some soap. They never have enough soap for some reason. TK does okay, but there is nothing like a good old birth bath to get my feathers clean. Food, not going to put up with only sap chow. Better find enough for everyone. Can't depend on others.

I find my first and hand over half the list. Next to find my second. Their portal locations and times are listed next to their name. Hopefully this works. Yes, they could all walk or use transport, but then they could be followed. This way a portal in a location without exits will throw them off. We will all come out at the Mother Hutch. That is the only important aspect.

You think I am being paranoid I am sure. But, nothing over a TK2 is allowed on any of our worlds. We get caught and the entire world gets cored. How cautious would you be under those circumstances? Very.

Earth Two

This trip is to be part of my training. I am paired with two Hu TK, Tia and Sam. They spent a lot of time with the Yesan TK Tewk. As we were taught Yesan I am more comfortable talking to them in Yesan knowing no local will understand us. I am Luss TK Olis. Normally we would never travel alone. Like the rest of the Tridon lineage, we are a linking species and feel very uncomfortable out of reach of others. Tia and Sam both link to my relief. I have been many forms, so Hu, though strange, is not my first time outside the default Luss form. I spent a three by three day in this form until everyone felt I could pass. We are adaptable of course, but depend too much on TP projection. It is important we also 'feel' a form to understand it.

Sam is male and Tia is fem, though both have spent time in genders other than their emergent form. I have elected to be shown as neuter. We do not have genders and I am more comfortable this way. There is concern on how Hu will react seeing me without cloths. I can use Luss TP to disguise the gender lack.

We are walking. I spent much time hunting at night on Magenta, our prison. During light, we returned to our home spot where there was very little change or variation. This is amazing, my newest Hu word. So much to see and feel. These tree plants are huge! Taller than mountains on Magenta. This was explained in the preparation, but experiencing is always more intense. I am holding Tia and Sam's appendages. Not a true linking, but definitely helps calms me down.

I am the smallest of the three of us and appear new. I will present as a child of Tia and Sam. In this way I will not be expected to have perfect responses or understandings. I am not used to the complexity. This is amazing!

"We are approaching a small town. Do not wander off Olis."

@You could not find me if I wander.@ I hide well.

@We could, but locals might not understand the way you present.@

Sam comes into the com, @Our objective is the monastery, not this town. We need to remain on task.@

@Of course.@

"And we also need to use Standard when around others, except in an emergency. Hu use only Standard and are frightened by the strange sounds used in Yesan."

"Amazing!" Sam does this funny thing with the head appendage when

I say this. It moves from side to side. I will inquire when we are alone. Other Hu are approaching. I believe they are two males. We stop in front of them. Why are they hindering our progress? Close examination shows they are carrying sharp metal objects. We had almost no metal on Magenta.

I reach out to exam one of these objects. Tia slaps my appendage down and away.

"Never touch another person's possessions Olis."

One of the males, "Wise advice. Something wrong with your kid?"

"A little slow. Olis will stay with us at all times."

"Be sure he does. Papers?" The male assumed I was also male. Interesting. The male does not appear to have scanning ability. How is the mistake being made?

I am very curious about this paper substance. It is like a leaf, but nearly white, with intricate patterns on the surface. Also, straight edges, four sides. Amazing! I have never seen a leaf like this. Where do they grow? Can we go there and see more?

The male notices my interest and hands the paper to me to examine.

I immediately place it on my taste sensor to help determine what kind of leaf it is. Tia removes it from me and places it in her storage device. The male smiles, I know this sign, and pats me on my awareness appendage. Why?

We proceed along the path into town. There are lots of hollow forms made of tree and stone present. Other Hu wander about, no doubt doing tasks assigned to them by their link group.

We stop at one and Sam hands the fem some metal disks. A moment later he is handed some warm objects in a wood bowl.

Tia tells me, "Olis, taste this. You may like it."

"Taste or food?" I ask. Food I am to chew and swallow. Taste is just sense information. Hu use the terms interchangeably which is confusing.

"Food." Ah, I am receiving information that this form needs food.

I reach out and retrieve one of the objects. It is indeed warm. I drop it rather than cause harm.

"Too hot for Olis." Tia waves her hand over the bowl in an attempt to reduce the temperature. Once she is satisfied she reaches in and chooses another one for me. I take the object from her hand. I am learning gender words.

I place this in my food port and chew.

"Amazing!"

Sam and Tia also retrieve food objects and place in their food ports.

We are sharing. I look down at the object on the ground and it is gone!

"Where food object Tia?" I am looking around.

Sam laughs, sounds funny to me, and points. There is a small animal holding the object and chewing off portions to place in its food port.

"We are sharing!" I exclaim.

"That is a squirrel."

"Food or taste?"

"We do not food squirrels. Only watch." Ah. Amazing!

"We need to get to the monastery before night." Sam affirms. We walk again, holding hands. Neither is carrying the wood bowl. I wonder where it went?

It is nearly dark when we arrive at a very large stone structure. We built some stone structures on Magenta, but hid them well so we would not be found. Storage only. We live outside where we can see approaching danger.

When we arrive a loud noise of resonate frequency is heard. I cloak to hide from danger. An aperture opens and a fem presents.

"Ah, the three we have been expecting. Please come in."

@How can she see me?@ I am frightened by any creature that can see me cloaked. I feel vulnerable and weak. I should run and hide. It is likely I will be eaten!

She looks right at me, "And you must be Olis. We are especially happy you have arrived safely. You can uncloak now. You are safe with us." She also places her appendage on my awareness appendage. Feels good.

@She can link!@

"Olis, speak Standard. They do not know Yesan."

"We do not, but it sounds like I should know it. Interesting."

"Does interesting mean Amazing?"

She laughs, "Yes, it does Olis. You are amazing. You will have to tell us of your journey." I feel warm inside. Is this happiness?

Inside there are many others. Some are smaller, some are what I have learned are older. Amazing. They all look alike. I feel I am home somehow. I can sense that Hu is not their natural form.

Still touching Sam and Tia, we are led inside. The night sky is above us. There are lights!

I point up, "What are those?" Amazing!

The new one looks up, smiles and says, "Those are stars, other suns very far way. I am sorry you did not have stars where you were born."

"Magenta had only one star, very bright and warm."

We continue walking and go inside a stone structure. There are markings on the surfaces. There are burning objects at regular intervals. I reach out to touch one, Tia slaps my appendage away.

"Very hot Olis, dangerous."

"Amazing!"

"I gather amazing is Olis' favorite word." Tia and Sam shake their sensor appendage rapidly. I have learned this is affirmative.

We enter a larger space and there are many others present all around us. We proceed forward to one who is sitting. I like sitting.

"Thank you for bringing Olis to us. You may leave now if you wish."

"No leave! Link partners!" I am terrified!

Everyone rises and holds appendages. The one in front comes to me and reaches out to hold one of my appendages. I reach out and touch her. Sam moves to hold Tia. We are all in contact.

The LINK happens. My awareness opens up and unfolds. I have not felt this good since leaving Magenta. I am totally aware of all that they have gone through. The transformation to Terror form and then to Hu. The fear they feel of changing back to Terror. The fear that they will have no choice in order to defend themselves.

"Why fear?"

"Once we change, we cannot change back Olis. We can only kill in the Terror form."

"It is simple to change back. I will show you." I change to Terror form and then quietly change back. Much excitement happens in the link.

"Why were we never shown this?" One exclaims.

"The knowledge was lost. Instead you became a weapon of others. Now you have the knowledge again, you need not fear."

"But, there is more to show. Terror is only for defense. There are many more forms. Many, many forms I can show you."

"May we see your native form Olis?" I turn to get permission from Tia and Sam. They are gone! I am confused.

"You are safe here Olis. This is the reason you were brought to us. You are fulfilling your purpose. Now it is time you show us how to fulfill ours. Will you show us?"

I feel safe. I move to my Luss form. Much excitement appears. I am back on Magenta in my mind, but I know I am among friends. A room full of Luss are with me. I am safe.

No one is visible. Amazing!

Luss Eden?

We have made an exact duplicate of the marker on Magenta down to the quantum level. It is before us now. We have examined it every way we can. We did a Way Back to the time it appears. It was DS'd in. No telling from how far away. A regional 'thn could have placed it from quite some distance in any direction. Not as far as our group of course. The Luss never knew of the marker. They would have needed to find it eventually on their own or not. I think it was more of a warning to others. The Luss had already suffered their fate.

You can't TP a stone, even one made of 'thn metal if no one is inside. Nothing conscious present. The quantum arrangement is like a formatted memory chip. Blank. Hopefully The Five can make some sense of it.

We have visited over three hundred possible candidates. Nothing found yet or it has been totally wiped of any evidence. We found ruins, but nothing we can link to the lineage. Frustrating.

+Captain, Meep off the port bow.+ Why do we insist on using Hu sailing ship terminology? I guess because Ba and Ku never had much of a maritime history and Cet and Ceph don't need ships. We are in star ships though? None of us had those either. Maybe the Hu?

The Meep comes in through the side of the ship, straight into our bridge where everyone had already assembled. It makes a circuit around the bridge area and then it morphs into a Hu. Ah, Myra. Of course she would know how to be a Meep.

"You rang?"

^Nice entrance Myra. Everyone, this is Myra, one of The Five. She is here to help.^

Welcome Myra. Easier than everyone speaking their own native language at once. The Luss went invisible as soon as she was spotted of course.

She walks up to the artifact. Then phases right through it. Goes rainbow Meep still in sort of Hu form. She has learned a lot.

"Interesting. It is a six dimensional construct. Nothing useful in this 3D section other than being a marker. Let me help." She seems to draw out another marker from the current one. Totally different shape.

+It looks like a Terror!+ Hopefully it does not come alive.

Myra conjectures, "A warning that if anyone else tries to do what the Luss did, they too will end up a Terror and destroy their own planet."

@Literally eating themselves alive.@ Glad Tewk could finally join us.

It continues, @We have been searching the wrong type of world. We need to find a black world. I have a good idea where to look.@

Myra smiles, but I ask the obvious, "Where?" The Luss are hugging me for comfort. I think they know too.

@Tafa froth of course. All of us are in fact Tafa froth variants.@

"Hu are not Tafa Tewk."

One of the Luss responds, @Of the Tridon, Luss, Tafa, Hggy and Aaaha line. Just like earth froth contains many different sentients, our line does as well. We are looking for the home world. We, the Luss are the ones ultimately responsible for this horror. We became DS capable first and spread out to the other home worlds and taught them, just like the Hu did for you.@

"Our story all over again. No wonder they hate us so much. They are not evil so much as misguided. They are trying to prevent a repeat of what they were part of."

^But nothing is an exact repeat, not even a new incarnation. We know that well enough.^

+But do they? If this is the only incarnation they know, then this is all they have to respond to.+

"I need to get back. A day here is a thousand days on Bug Eden. Good hunting!" She pops out after converting back to Meep form. I don't think even a 'thn would mess with a Meep. Safe trip Myra.

I ask, ^Which one is the original? Tridon, Tafa, Yesan, Aaaha and Hggy are all in different solar systems.^

@We know that the Hggy and Yesan had star ships, at least at one time. Tafa have used the Hggy and Yesan ships to move to other systems.@

+Leaving Tridon and Aaaha as the only pure worlds with the sentients that were started there?+

^Maybe. Can't rule any of them out just yet. Tridon intrigues me. It is the most 'primitive' and the least interested in anything other than their own thoughts. Given their unique ecology I doubt they could survive anywhere else either.^

@Very good Captain. I concur.@ Tewk looks at the Luss.

One speaks, @What is a Tridon?@

A few taps and a hologram of one appears before us. The Luss immediately drop to the floor and go invisible.

+I vote for Tridon also.+ Yeah, that was a pretty strong response.

It will be some time before they come out of their fear state.

^Set a course for Tridon, Gin. Only, let's not get too close just yet. Ev-

everyone else read up on all we know of this world. I don't want to go in blind.^ If Sauron was there for a few hundred years it has to be a nasty place. Hope they did not get any ideas from him when linked.

Would we have gotten this reaction from the Luss if we had shown them any of the others they had never seen before? Or any unknown sentient? Are we on a wild snark hunt?

Yellow

"How do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How do you find the word that means Maria?
A flibbertijbбет! A will-o'-the wisp! A clown!"

No one else will touch Yellow. They are writing off the thousand of sens we sent here. "They have all gone feral," they say. "They are dangerous! They are all insane!" and the best one, "There is no place for them in our plan." Oh, I would not go that far. They are perfect for what we have in mind. Perfect.

I DS down to the surface. Not much can touch me in this form, but I have other tools as well. Knowledge and experience are wonderful things. Recent knowledge especially. Thank you Pilot for your report.

Farout is a prison for high TKs who break the rules. According to the few who made the rules that is. Others might not see it the same way. I don't. Of course I am on their extreme kill, without a second thought, list. Good luck with that. They hold our home worlds hostage. If you EVER return to your home world, then it will be sacrificed as well.

On my home world there are no sentients other than those who know and accept the risk. A few stay Cats, but do those really count? Owa and Sylvy are both gone, first from Earth One and more recently from Earth Two. They are not on the hit list anyway. Besides, I am not there am I? Hard to grin in this form, but the sediment is true.

Come on out my pretties! I have sap chow!

Silence.

I make a bowl of sap chow and place it a few meters away. It won't last long in this place. Already threads are weaving towards it.

It really is sap chow everyone!

Oooh, a special treat.

Make more! Make more!

I do so. I place ten more bowls around.

One reaches the furthest bowl.

My Precious! The bowl is quickly covered and the contents soon disappear. It retreats and another one comes forward towards the second nearest bowl.

A thousand came to this world, only a few remain. The mass is the same. A merging. Think multiple personalities. An advanced fungi with

multiple nuclei or ids. Explains why others thought them insane. They are not, just vastly more intelligent, by a factor of a thousand. That scares everyone. The ultimate linking.

Let's play a game.

Ah, the fun begins. One tries to engulf me. It quickly retreats in pain.

Not playing fair.

Life is not fair my pretties.

Ohh, it is the Wicked Witch.

That makes us the Flying Monkeys.

I hates monkeys.

Now we wait. They are patient. Hundreds of years does that. I have tens of thousands on them, just in this incarnation.

I switch my form to Luss. Glad we found them. A most interesting sentient.

It's gone! That's no fun! We wants to play!

You are needed. A major part in a big game.

We likes to play games.

You are ready to play?

We are ready!

Be patience. I will return when you are needed. Much fun. So much fun!

When?

Soon.

We wait.

They are not happy about waiting, but they have learned to be patient. I pop out after making a lot more sap chow distributions around their world.

Earth Two

"I am sore in places I did not know I had places."

"Try doing it again forty years from now dear."

"Ha-ha, no thanks. I doubt I will live that long."

^DOkay monkeys on your feet. We have only just gotten started. ^D

We all groan in unison.

^DTeacher Karath, we are not Drag. ^D

She snorts, ^DNo you are not. You are pathetic excuses for a sentient life form. ^D

I think the Cat attitude is strong in this one. If Sauron decided to use the Cats for his 'souls' he made a great choice. What I don't understand is why are they working with us instead of trying to destroy us like Sauron intended. They must hate Sauron as much as we do. It is the only explanation. We need to make the Drag proud.

The young Drag work and train along with us. They are barely phased by these workouts and think it is a game and fun. They will soon be bigger than me. Not saying much of course. Much, much stronger. We have to use wits and bribes at this stage. Their mother, who weighs ten times what I do, gives them a backhand. No emotion. They stay away from her. Glad my mother was not that nasty. Cats love their kits. What is going on here?

We eat Drag, we sleep Drag, we live Drag. Or rather fail at it. I thought An'di was tough, but this is much worse. The other Drag pretty much ignore us. I am not sure if it is because we are the enemy or because we are pointless. Stinky, stupid monkeys.

Hek asks, "Hey Vid, remember what you said about their fire pit setups?"

I sigh, "Sure, they looked at me like I was a mouse ready to eat and then went back to their tasks."

"Next time you are near a fire pit look at what they are doing now."

"What?"

"Just look," Bill grins. Oh shit, they took my advice!

All three of us have been giving them hints and likely driving them crazy. And always ignored. Was it Cat or Drag/Sauron speaking?

"Come on Vid, you are way behind." In my mind I am way ahead. I have so many more ideas. I run ahead of the others lighter than air.

"What happened to Vid?"

"Eeep!" The baby Drags are the only three who can catch me now!

Wish they would learn Standard or Drag at least. Teacher says it does not happen until year two. Great. Another year to go. If they are anything like Hu once started they won't stop either. I should be happy they are where they are in their development.

We are well away from the Hu towns. The Drags have given up on attacking Hu. The land is vast and there is no reason for confrontations against a tech superior group. Is this forever or just until their numbers build up? There are lots of baby Drags about and we have to keep moving on account they clear out the small game pretty fast. They hate vegies, especially raw. Thought they will eat stews that contain vegies and meat.

Now about the 'gifts' conferred on us during that 'nap'. If Hek can now scan the same as me, I no longer have any privacy. He can see anything and everything. I am no beauty and never will be one. I wish my breasts were bigger, I was taller, butt could use some mass too. Small breasts don't bother Bill at all. Except for her nether areas, you could almost not even tell she was a fem. This is not about sex. Thankfully the gift got rid of any lingering feelings there. It is just about fitting in.

None of were normal before all of this, we certainly aren't now. I should relax and embrace my differences and be thankful I am not normal in anyway. Being small meant I was picked on a lot. Being weird means I was picked on a lot. Being interested in the insides of things, in plants, fungi and all that, meant I was picked on even more. I could defend myself against the strongest warrior now, if I was not surprised. Are the gifts fair? Was being picked on all the time fair? I call it even now. Not that I want to run into a pride of lions or anything. None around since the Drag scared them away anyway. They used to lose yearlings to them.

A normal clutch is two. Teacher had three last year and none this year. Happens, but rare. She can normally have a clutch once a year. Even without the lions, there is a high infant mortality. This is one of the reasons they do not become too attached to them until they are about five and can join as functioning adults.

Teacher has gifts too. She can mind talk and move from one location to another very quickly. Quicker than I can see. Some of the others can as well. The only reason Bill was able to take down the large one terrorizing the village was because it could not. That whole incident was never supposed to happen. Something spooked it and made it mad. Could easily have been a young male Hu trying to make a name for itself. I do not blame the Drag any longer. I blame the Hu. Hek is with me, but Bill is still trying to decide. Of course I was not the one who looked it in the mouth.

I am exhausted from running. Pebble practice is next. We do this blindfolded now. We need to be able to precisely hit a target at night. Night runs are the safest time to hunt. We hunt at night and gather during the day. Always moving. Teacher told me about what happened to the Cats who refused to move and gave the game a rest. They starved.

Edwin Land

=I don't think we are in Kansas anymore.=

||There was never a Kansas on Earth One.||

=I read the journals.=

||Between naps?||

It is strange though. No trees, but the hills are green, sort of. Lots of algae in the water this close to land.

||LAND HO!|| Who taught them that? Neither of us is the captain and I really do not know this crew all that well. I do a quick scan. They should not have been able to see the land from this far out. I was already running it through my mind trying to explain our situation. How do we tell them we are not on SyWg any more and likely never going back? They were stolen from their world for our own purposes.

None of the Comps came with us. Will they join us later or do they have their own agenda? Once they declared their freedom we rarely saw them. I thought, though free, we would be still on the same team. Do they get their own Catboxes or equivalent? The hold full of sap chow will not last forever. The other SyWg pairs are quiet, biding their time. Did we train them too well?

=You are certainly the nervous Rap today Rand.=

||Do you know where we are? It is so dry.||

=Feels great to me. You do look a little dry though. You should wet yourself down before you crack.=

||And you should go for a swim to wash the fleas out of your head.||

=Scary isn't it? I have no idea where we are, but we have almost always been together. We have seen hundreds of worlds. Some have been low green, this could be one of them. How would we know?=
||I left markers on all the worlds we went to. No marker here. There are sentients though.||

=Yeah, hope they are friendly. Found 'thants too. We know them at least.=

||But do they know us? I am really not in the mood for a clash with a pack of Warriors just now.||

=That would certainly give it away. We are going to have to tell them something sooner rather than later.=

||Okay, smarty, what do we tell them? Hi we are from another part of the multiverse and we have kidnapped you for a secret mission where we will all likely die horrible deaths in.||

=Needs work.=

||You think?||

=We should have told them years ago.=

=Is that a 'thant I see waving to us?=-

||Strangest looking 'thant I have ever seen. When did they get racing stripes. We should use that design on our next ship!||

Nice harbor though. Even has a dock. Was not expecting that in so desolate of a place. Oh, there is a stream coming right to the docks! Fresh water finally. All of us Wg will be very happy to see that. Structures will have to be adapted for us of course. The Sy can, no, doors are too small for them, rather not wide enough. Were these done to Hu dimensions?

Welcome Drup and Rand. I am Jack.

Wait, the same Jack from Alexandria? Nice threads Jack.

Too flashy for me, but they do help me blend in with the others. Long story.

Everyone else on board is looking scared, well the crew anyway. The Scary are trying to be cool, with only a little bit of luck. Some of the crew have brought out weapons. Could not even scratch a 'thant, but annoying one is not a good idea either.

They don't know what a 'thant is. Don't do anything scary. Jack waves to us. We wave back.

Captain comes up to us.

||You know what that is? Is it dangerous?||

||A friend. Ah, her name is Jack.|| Almost said him. Confusing existence we live in.

=She could kill everyone on this ship without much thought. Best not to upset her. Be nice. We are guests, not dinner.=

Did you have to say that Drup?

Better the truth than a surprise.

Jack does not come any closer and the crew ties the ship to the dock. The gangplank is lowered. We go down first and stand next to Jack. That should reassure them. The Captain assigns five to stay with the ship and comes down herself. The rest follow.

||I hope you are right about 'Jack'. Where the slime weed are we anyway?||

||That is a story that will take some time to tell. Best we get setup on shore and learn what is expected of us.||

=WHAT THE FIREBUG IS THAT!= Strange for a troll to be afraid of anything. I look up. Blue-green, huge, seven legs? Jack turns around to see what everyone is excited about.

This is Seeker, a Cyan, TK7. It will be your assistant while you are here. They are coordinating the arrivals. Jack turns and leaves. Through a portal! Shit Jack, did you have to do that? They will think we are witches and burn us now. Wait, only Hu do that one. My kind of sentient. Sigh.

I think we have some explaining to do. Sooner rather than later. I agree. Sigh.

We turn away from Seeker and back to our ship crew and passengers.

They are waiting and watching us. Shit. The Scary are smiling, well, the SyWg equivalent. Of course they are. We created monsters.

||We are not on the SyWg world any longer.|| Duh, I sound stupid.

Drup rolls his eyes. Very scary on a troll. Of course we do not call them trolls to their faces and they don't call us toads to ours. Fair is fair.

=No one will eat you here. They are friends from our past.=

That was so much better. Now they are afraid of us too.

Seeker could you come up to me. I need to show them you are nothing to be afraid of.

They should be afraid of me Rand. And the rest of my hept.

Shit, six more appear on the dock.

=This is test.=

||Of course. We should have expected it. Ever seen a Cyan before? I have no idea what their weaknesses are.||

The Captain yells, ||Everyone back on board. NOW!||

We are fast when we have to be. Drup and I release the lines and we slip away from the dock. We stop a hundred meters out.

Can they jump that far?

A TK7 certainly could.

The Cyan seven gather at the edge of the dock and watch us. I think.

You know we are TK9s right?

That would be cheating and you would fail the test.

So it also means you are not allowed to use your TK either.

Correct.

We walk up to the Captain.

||We need to rig a water cannon.||

||A what?|| She does not understand.

=You have a ship full of Sy each with TK2 capabilities. Wg can link with each other and with their partner Sy.=

Glad we keep you around. Let's set this up. I suspect that Cyan do not really like seawater anymore than we do.

You got that too. Good. Let's do it.

We have done this trick before in practice. Drup gives them some

hand signals and everyone lines up. We are making a linear accelerator. A linear saltwater accelerator.

The Captain has no idea what we are doing, but we are called Scary for a reason and she lets us do our thing. The crew backs off to watch.

These Scary were picked for a reason. We work well together.

The Cyan were not expecting it. They did not cheat. I am impressed. Not sure I would have been so fair.

They really, really do not like seawater. Hope they are okay.

Jack appears on board, *Welcome to Edwin Land. Seeker, after it dries off will take you to your quarters.*

=What about the crew of the ship? They did not sign up for this.=

They are here, they are part of the group now. We can't send them back. Too dangerous and would likely reveal our location. They will be given the first two gifts. You will need to train them. Great. More baby TKs. Definitely no threes. Some of the crew are going to have a hard time even as twos. Nearly all Wg too. No Scary pairs this time. They will likely spend most of their time squeezing water out of rocks from what I have scanned of this place.

Drup is near Seeker, so I join them.

I hope all of you are okay?

We are fine. We did shield, but acted like we were not. All in good fun as you Hu used to say. Nice trick and welcome to the asylum. Hope that is not true.

How many other groups are here?

You are the first besides ourselves. We are learning as well. Ku and Ba are expected soon. Followed by Rap I believe.

Where did the Cyan come from before this?

We were at Farout, same as you. Originally we were Tafa.

I'm sorry.

We are too. In spite of the banishment, we are better for it.

Drup asks, *Any idea where all of this is going.*

None, but it feels good to be traveling again.

That part is good. Meet new and interesting sentients. Try not to kill them or get eaten.

We had best be catching up with the others.

Drup and Rand, stop them from trying to touch me please. Poor Jack.

Earth One

I feel like I am moving so slow. Not only am I not in Bug form, but I am a turtle again. I had forgotten just how much I enjoyed it. Simple life, no real predators. Finding water was the only real hardship. But, that was in the desert. Here it rains nearly every day. Feels good against the back of my shell. I could stay here forever, but I have to remember, every day here is a hundred back home.

I would have thought he would be near Hotevilla, his old stomping grounds, but this makes more sense. It does not take me long to catch him in the act. He made creatures in his own likeness, not really a surprise. He had this entire world to work with, and that should have been enough, but of course his ego could not let it stop there. He has to seek revenge on the sentient he made and that beat him at his own game.

I show amusement, he would be even more upset if he learned that it was an owl and a turtle who beat him, not the Hu.

He is here because this is the mirror point for Earth Two that his creations are roaming. He could not go there himself. That would be a clear violation. Bad enough he snuck them in. He was not going to chance that twice. Nope, instead he makes 'eye', tiny portals he can look through to see what is happening. I show amusement. Very subtle in this form. If he is aware of my presence he has shows no interest. Surprisingly he is in Hu form. I would have thought he would have gone back to Drag too.

I have confirmed Marie and Mike's report. Too bad. I thought we had made it abundantly clear when we rescued him from Tridon. His purpose having been fulfilled on Tridon, there is no point in returning him.

I walk up to him. He is so intent on this eye he pays no attention to me.

"Damn! What are you doing? There are three juicy Hu right in front of you. Eat them!" Of course they can't hear any of this. The eye collapses.

"What did I do wrong? I will have to start all over again. I know I rushed it, but come on, they were perfect. The first one who attacked the village really showed the Hu. If not for the chance lucky thrust, he could have killed hundreds if not more. Now, they only deaths have been bandits and poachers. How the hell did those three smiggles imprint three hatchings? That should never have happened! This was a complete waste of time."

I morph into Hu form.

"Ahumm." He turns around quickly, sees me and hisses. That is funny

and I smile.

"Not happy to see me Sauron?"

"You do not belong here. Leave at once. This is my world. You promised."

"Ah, if I remember correctly the agreement was you could do anything you wanted on this world, but were not allowed to interfere with any others. You have broken that promise."

"Prove it!" He is clearly mad.

I sigh, why do they always behave this way?

"Four witnesses say otherwise. I only needed one."

He remains silent. So do I. I love this part when you sweat it out of them.

"They were a failure anyway. Back to Tridon. I certainly do not need to take anything with me, so let's get this over with."

"I think you did a great job. The Drag are so cute. I just want to run up to one and give it a big hug. I am not talking about just the hatchlings either. They bonded quite easily to the Hu we chose. A formal treaty has been worked out and the Hu and Drag are going to work together now to the benefit of both sentients." Yeah, I know I am rubbing it in.

"As to Tridon, they have had enough of you too, so you will stay here."

He is suspicious of course. I wave goodbye and pop out. Really just a short distance away.

He tries to scan to find me. Nothing.

He tries to open an eye. Nothing.

He tries to TK himself up a meter. Nothing. He hops up and falls.

Some are slow learners.

He lets out a yell of frustration and pure hate. That was what I was waiting for.

Hopefully the others have not destroyed our home while I was gone. The limiters are set to fail after a few thousand years, just to be safe. If Earth Two has not figured it out in that time, nothing he could do will make it worse.

Home. Sounds strange, but it is where I was hatched this time around.

Cyan

I suppose I should not be here, but I have caught a bad case of curiosity from the earth froth sentients. Not that Yesan are not intensely curious by nature, just that our curiosity usually has purpose behind it. I can find no purpose behind this visit. Maybe it will help our understanding in the long run, but that is just a weak justification.

It has only been a few years (EF standard), so I do not expect much to have changed. The forest I am in certainly looks familiar. There are even mema trees randomly scattered. The Cyan are nomads with territories. In my way in, I found the start of something resembling a city though. That certainly sparked my interest as the Hu show.

I am in Yesan form. Best not to illicit a territorial response accidentally. Just like with us, the Cyan do have variations in individuals. More so that us apparently. We can reproduce asexually as well as with genetic exchange. Too complicated to explain here. See the library section on Yesan if you are interested. The Cyan only through genetic exchange. We do not form a hept like the Cyan do though we can certainly link. They are a blue-green in color and we are a yellow brown.

None of this should be a surprise. Though we all came from the same initial starting form, the Tridons, we have each had millions of years to evolve from them on our respective worlds. Even if I assume a blue-green color, I would still be instantly recognized as Yesan. I will never sneak up on any life form here and most will avoid me not knowing what to expect. Of course the smaller ones are not intelligent enough, but a simple TK shield takes care of them.

I am tempted to leave some spy offspring about to be collected later. They are very adaptable in terms of diet and could easily live here. On the other arm, they could be easily eaten as well and likely would not last long. Too much trouble. The Center was totally different. There is no functioning ecology there to be concerned with. My spies do every well there feeding off the crumbs dropped by others. They are good at hiding. And, they are not alone. There are others who do something similar. The resident sentients have come to ignore them for the most part.

I am on the ground, instead of in the canopy as the Cyan would be, but I scan above me as I go along so I won't miss them. A very healthy active ecology. They have done exceptionally well maintaining it. Being recently evolved from the Tafa I would expect nothing else.

What amazes me is how much like the Tafa, whom they presumably

hate, they are. So much of the Tafa culture is here. They were expelled for not being Tafa enough, but here they are again.

Of course the real reason I am here is to find out what happened to the Junior High Priest (which I will abbreviate to JHP from now on) I brought here. At the time it was to extract additional information and to save the JHP from certain death required by the resident Tafa council for accidentally helping me in my subterfuge. It was not the JHP's fault and they should not have had to suffer the consequences.

I am now a few kilometers out from the city. Not many about. Mostly made of stone. How do you quarry stone without insulting the ecology though? Might have been better to 'train' a few trees to make the forms needed.

I come out of the trees on a ridge and can now see the city below me. It is in a natural quarry. I should have seen that with the TK sight, but it is more fun when I have the time to use the norm senses alone. Volcanic area where columns of cooling basalt have formed and gradually broken off through erosion. The earth froth has this formation as well. Spectacular to look at. I can see why some might see this as work of the 'gods' or some such idea. Drier and much more dusty. The Cyan would not like it here much.

I reach the quarry floor and find a trail to follow. Ah, there is a natural pool coming up. No life of our type can live without water in some form. I taste the water and it is fresh. I was expecting something so laden with minerals as to be poisonous. A natural spring then. Yes, there is an outlet that goes back underground soon thereafter. A slow gentle flow that keeps it fresh enough. There are some plants floating in the pool with reproductive parts above the water line. A nice place to meditate, at least until the sun is directly overhead.

A Tafa makes its way over to me.

@I was hoping you would return Kewk.@

@I am happy to see you well, though the location is a bit of a surprise. The high altar where I found you was very different.@

@It was engineered, I believe is the proper term, to be full of life. Where I was born was drier, though not this dry. I have come to like this location though. It is quiet most of all. Come, before the sun rises more. I have a cool cave I have made a home in. As you can probably guess, I do not get many visitors.@

@Not a mema tree in sight and they don't keep on a long journey.@

@You do understand. They were nice about my banishment. I was allowed to choose the location. It also fulfills the requirement that I do not

pass my evil thoughts onto others.@

@They do not see the irony of this? They were banished here for not being 'perfect' enough. Then they recently banished many to an off world location for not being perfect enough.@

@In my case it was mutual. I would never fit into their culture, nor after what happened on Tafa, would I want to impose mine on theirs. Have you ever tasted mema fruit? Ghastly stuff. It must have taken a large number of generations to adapt to eating it.@

@Thanks for the safety tip. I will pass on it if it is ever offered to me now.@ I show amusement. I follow JHP to their cave. Everything is made from carved stone of course. Exquisite work too. A lot of time without much to do. I find a place to settle.

@Any new from Tafa?@ They ask.

@I am forbidden to go there. Too dangerous as I am needed elsewhere. Even coming here was some risk, though minor. We get reports. They are what they are. you know this better than anyone.@

@They are very afraid of change. The problem is, is that no ecology can survive without change.@

@That is a very enlightened though coming from a high priest of Tafa.@

@No high priest here. I am a normal nobody now. I actually prefer it. Any idea how high priests are chosen?@ I show unawareness of knowledge.

@They are raised isolated from everyone since birth.@

@The Hu have a term. The call is being brain-washed. Means nothing you think is your own thoughts, but only the thoughts of others.@

@Good term. Correct. Here I am allowed to find myself. Not pretty, but real.@

@I prefer real myself.@

@What of the Cyan? I hope you did not cause much disruption to them.@

@None whatsoever. Tafala is still in charge. No one else likes it of course. They do not even realize how close to the Tafa ideal they really are. Amazing. Of course the ecology is different and they have adapted to that, but the ritual and rigidness are the same.@

@No one is perfect enough.@

@Ah, you got that too. Good. Means I am not crazy. A lot of advantages to being an outsider. Some visit occasionally. They are polite, but most leave quickly. Mema fruit rot and the sun burns their carapace easily.@

@Since you are so isolated. Is there anything you need? As noted I have abilities beyond the norm and can provide you with anything that would make your life here better. I am truly sorry for getting you involved in all this. That was not my intention.@

@Oh, no, you have done me a huge favor. Even being alone is preferable to always being in fear of death by torture. They are so few, why do the rest allow it?@

@If I knew the answer to that question I could save countless worlds.@

@Tafa and Cyan are not the only worlds where a few control the many?@

@No one understands why it happens. The most pleasant harmonious culture will eventually lead to a small group imposing control over the larger group. Then of course the many get angry and dispose of the few, only to have a new few rise up from among them to start the cycle over again.@

@Other creatures do not do this. Why do we?@

@Sentience is not a yes or no, but a gradual scale. There is an advantage to being bigger, stronger, better fed, more offspring than your neighbors, in all life forms.@

@Not in plants. They don't fight wars surely.@

@Just in a different time scale. Much slower. Granted different species will cooperate with each other for mutual good, but they will still fight an invasive species or a destructive one. The Cyan only eat mema melons. Do you think the mema tree likes this? Those are its offspring.@

@But if every mema seed grew a new tree there would not be enough room for anything else.@

@Balance is key. Is this not the justification for killing our own kind? There are two many, therefore we must reduce our numbers. And what better way to do that than to eliminate the 'inferior' ones so the whole will grow stronger and better.@

@As it should be.@

@Really? What if you are destroying the exact individuals you will need at some point, to survive a plague, or come up with an idea that saves everyone?@

@How do you choose then?@

@The fairest way is to not have as many offspring.@

@Ah, but then who decides who is allowed offspring.@

@You understand now. This brings us full circle and back to the few against the many.@

@How do you answer the question then?@

@I belong to a group of sentients whose whole existence is tasked with just that, answering The Question.@

@What is The Question?@

@You are beginning to understand. Back to my original offer. What would make your life easier here and now?@

They think about it carefully. Good, not just a quick answer. At least they don't have money here. But power?

@A solar cooker would be nice. Using fire all the time seems very destructive. Not much wood around here either.@

I show amusement. This one might be a good candidate after all.

First task done.

I never lived among the Cyan and was only here briefly last time. I do not think I am the best judge of what is happening. Does interacting with the refugees count? Probably not, as they were asked to leave. Given the polluted thoughts earth froth inserted into them, this was really not a surprise. So, why send the Alexandria refugees there in the first place?

I loved reading 'Alice in Wonderland' in the earth two archive. My favorite line was "Curiouser and curiouser." Exactly what I am feeling now. Finding Tafala could prove to be more of a problem. I should have put a tracker on that one when I was here last. I know Tafala is at the center of their culture. But Cyan are mobile, very mobile.

I spent the next three eight days asking, or rather using TP to query each troupe. A Yesan wandering about is not a way to escape notice. Yes, I could assume Cyan form, but without the years of experience with such a rigid culture I would still stand out and likely be even more frightening. And I like my native form. Some would argue that TP is wrong too, but I don't care about their hidden sins, only where Tafala is.

I finally narrowed the location down. Tafala really moves. Hundreds of kilometers away from JHP. Are there other watchers or do they not care? A Tafa is an easy form to spot here. If everyone knows, then everyone is a watcher. Task effectively passed on. Good manager strategy.

I wait until Tafala is alone and come in quietly. I freeze until noticed.

@I wondered when someone would come to check up on us. You are Yesan correct? We learned a lot from the others about other sentients in your band of outlaws.@

@My call is Kewk. I know you as Tafala.@

@Ta works when we are not being formal. I am guessing from the fact that I have not been removed to some foreign location you only want information.@

@I am not here to interfere in anyway. I won't be staying. The Yesan are intensely curious. Part of our nature. I fully understand that is not a survival trait here. I was hoping to ask a few questions.@

@You can ask, not promising an answer. You have no right to be here. The fact we are exchanging information is anathema to us. But, if it stops others from coming, then it might be better to resolve this curiosity from which you suffer.@

@Have you effectively removed the bad influence of the visitors presence? Contrary to what you might think, we do not like leaving messes.@

@The cost was high, but the influence is gone. Leave! You are an abomination. The longer you stay the more damage you will cause.@

How many died to pay that price? Can you ever really suppress a set

of ideas? I show amusement, which I am sure Tafala does not register.

I am not ready to leave just yet and walk a little ways away from Ta. Interesting. No one else is around. I do a scan. There is no one around for several kilometers. Ta is all alone! Has Ta removed themselves from their own culture? Are they now declared imperfect? Makes sense. Ta was the one who let the Mothership sentients in in the first place. A mistake has been made, a price must be paid. If any other culture practiced this way, there would be no cultures. All of their sentients would be dead. If the earth froth has taught me nothing else, it is that perfection is an illusion. There can be no perfection.

If it was just the Tafa I would shrug and walk away. But it was not just them. Their influence spread to the RGC and got multiple other sentients banded from their own worlds. How many we still don't know. That area of the Library is closed to us. Yesan were never banned outright. But our ability to leave our own world was prevented, space flight and DS. That is until the earth froth sentients arrived. Even then, it was only a few of us, not our entire world.

No one has any power except that which is given them by others. The Tafa were not alone in this. Others needed to go along, to participate. Or did they only need to convince the 'thn high council? I don't believe that. My own experience of 'thn is that they are afraid of everything. Did each of the banned cultures approach levels of understanding, like the earth froth did, that threatened them? What is the missing link? What did they do or learn that was so threatening? For our current group I am sure it is multiple items, I am afraid of us. I am talking about when Silver, Turtle and the others were first banned to Farout not now. What did they do?

If anything, banning those two to Farout was their biggest mistake. It allowed them to figure out things and experiment in a location with no supervision. Not to discount what the rest have done. Silver and Turtle were the fire the 'thn started. Why did Qr'thn do it then? To save her kid Br'thn? Maybe. We are not like that with our offspring, but I know those closer to the mammal type often are.

On the other hand, 'thn have some prescience. Did Qr'thn know this was going to happen?

Luss Homeworld

We were worried this would be an empty search as well. It was the first one out from Tridon. A near black world. Not an active living thing on it. Very little atmosphere. From the residues and using the Way Back machine we have determined that they did it to themselves.

We believe we can add the Yellow to the list from this sentient list too. I need to read the journals. I have forgotten how the Tafa and the others were found. Pilot was on that mission. I need to ask her when we get back. The Flyer library is severely limited. An over site we should not have missed given where we were going.

Are all black worlds the result of some kind of catastrophe/war or are some naturally that way? I am not talking about worlds that were never seeded by an OM, though that is hard to imagine as well. I am talking about worlds close by in the multiverse to a known inhabited world. Froths would have been more recent and life lasts a very long time.

Tridon is a bleak place itself. Vast majority of the biomass is two species, the Tridon, and their food, a plant. The simplest ecology. The Tridon need to control their population and constantly move their grazing to make this work. We suspect that their linking is a key. An instant com system. Anything happens anywhere on their world and they all adapt to it. Boring to the extreme. Maybe. They are all linked. Hundreds of thousands of individuals all linked together. What is that like? Sauron was part of the linkage. Did this drive him insane or was he already that way?

We don't know if this was the original Tridon or the first one they escaped to. One theory is that this black world was the original, before they learned how to get along with the one dominant plant species. Their current world was populated by a few who escaped having learned their lesson. Would certainly explain the Tafa obsession with perfection. A mutation could mean death to the Tridon.

How did they leave? A linkage of hundreds of thousands could push a ship or survival pod quite a way. We may only be seeing offspring of the one who survived.

The Terror was originally a mutation, an imperfection. The Terror came first. Analysis of the Tridon indicate it would be relatively easy for this to happen. A single Terror was the one on that escape pod. It found a new world in time, the one below us. It had offspring. Terror are very good at that. No idea how close to the Tridon ecology this world was but they destroyed it. Before that happened though, some of the Terror

learned how to morph back to a more 'normal' form. The Luss. They escaped using DS to Tridon Five. There are still Luss on Tridon Five. Primitive, very secretive and afraid of everything. They needed to hide from themselves. Any Luss not good enough could become a Terror again and make Tridon Five the next black world.

These Luss built on their knowledge and learned how to become new forms. If you can become Terror and return, you can be anything. Those who could not or refused to learn the trick were banished back to Tridon Two.

I think that Tridon Two was a misfire. The capsule was supposed to go off world, eventually interstellar, but instead it crashed almost instantly having gone only one world over to T2. Why were there not already Tridon on T2? That would have been the case for any of our worlds. The answer, was there were. The Terror either destroyed them or for whatever reason T2 did not learn the lesson of T1 to control their population.

The Tridon have TK abilities, especially linked. It is the main reason we avoid their world. Too dangerous. How Silver, Turtle and Sauron were able to visit safely is not known. They have every right to defend and protect their world. Given the consequences of some new form arising or an infection of some kind, who can blame them.

Consciously or unconsciously some ended up on T2. Most of the world was ravaged but some escaped, the Luss to T5. What about the other Tridon froth worlds you may ask? Most are green worlds with no obvious sentients present. Are they simply hiding better than the Luss did or did something happen? Tridon is in a very delicate balance. It would be easy to tip it too far and all the sentients would die, leaving the plants and the few remaining animals to work it out or not. A plague would be a good possibility given the lack of any evidence for something more destructive physically on these worlds.

T10 appears to have been the Yesan home world. There are remnants, millions of years old, that can be traced through their froth duplicates showing a thriving tech culture. Learning was a trait celebrated and used. These worlds are all green with no sentients on them at this time. I think they left. Having achieved interstellar flight, though FTL or more likely, at least at first, with multi-generational life ships.

From T10 came the Yesan worlds we know, Tafa, Aaaha and Hggy. These worlds were eventually settled. And sen adapted to be integrated into the local ecologies. Hggy being the last world, still retained most of its tech. Totally different from the Tridon line, but it worked for a time. Having done so, they lost or forgot how to change. There was no need.

They had found a new paradise and concentrated on making it work.

Our two Luss look at Tewk differently now and have morphed to Yesan form. They see the Yesan as the ones who succeeded. They need to have some Yesan history lessons. They are not perfect by any definition.

And that brings us to the Yellow.

The Yellow devolved back to a sort of primordial soup. Still linked. Very easy to see how anyone visiting their world would immediately banish all of them to Farout. Given they cover their entire world with themselves, how did they do this? Like a lot of fungi, their closest earth froth equivalent, even a piece can regenerate the whole. They could have taken pieces of select sub-clones and brought them to Yellow at Farout. Or they could have transported the entire world there? The Five could have done this, but we have no evidence any other group could.

There is Tridon group genetic material in the Yellow. This is how we know they are related. A morph gone bad? Could they still morph back to other forms if given a model to copy? Given the way their multiple personalities work, it could never be an exact copy. The Yellow are certainly the scariest sentients we have ever encountered. I wish I knew what part they will play. Hopefully none. We leave them alone where they are. They seem happy there, especially after the addition of a thousand new personalities from New Hope. May the multiverse look after them.

We all knew being on any world other than our own was a risk. Those who chose Yellow lost. That happens. The Mothership was not large enough to hold everyone at the time. I still wonder about the refugees on Cyan. They apparently have no desire to return to their original forms. Not that Ba is that great, but it is one I know the best. On Magenta, only Rooi and Snap are from our group and they have not gone 'native' as the Hu say.

It is debatable whether The Five or the Yellow scare me more. I really cannot decide. Just be awake, observe and be ready to act.

The Black are the only ones I have not brought up. I have no idea where they came from or why they were banished. I am wondering if the clue is in the name for themselves, The Builders. What does that mean?

Bug Eden

All Bugs on deck!

Move it grubs!

Yeah, sure. I think they are enjoying power too much.

I think you created a monster Puu. Cat is breathing heavy.

Oh definitely Cat. I am too.

Sparkles, formerly Myra, comes up to us. Sorry but a Bug who flashes rainbow colors all the time does not make it real. She has stopped pretending to be just a Bug. Hmm, happened right after she got back from that emergency call. A little taste of the outside did it for her. I don't get it. I hated it out there. Of course being number one on the 'thn hit list does that to you.

Why am I pushing shit you ask? A 'concern' was raised that the two of us specifically, Cat and me that is, were not doing our share of shit work. Even Silver and Turtle had done their share. Myra did from the beginning. I swear she has learned how to be in two places at once. Bugs are fast, but she makes us look like we are standing still. She says it is because we are out of shape and spend too much time thinking. Stuck in Hu time. Nothing is going to happen in the next day, so chill out. A Bug day, which is really a year to us. Right. The entire multiverse is at stake and I am literally pushing shit. Yeah they found the most disgusting task they could, of course.

Whoever said Bugs can't smell is totally wrong, this well, shit, smells awful. If it weren't for the fact that some of mine is likely mixed in I would have a reason to hate it. They were right, we have been slacking off. Marie would have made me run twice as far on the Rez if I tried it there. I used to enjoy hard work. Now I am dying. Yeah, they fit us with limiters too! The humiliation is complete.

I should bring you up to date.

The Traditionalists are not budging. We have given up all attempts to persuade them. We have had no interaction with them in several cycles. Instead we are preparing to leave. Are we really as bad as the Farout gang that tried to take over Earth Two? We purposely kept the tech exchange at their level. Nothing they could not learn to do themselves. All of us were norms at one time. No one is born TK. We all had to work out tech problems at the norm level in our early years.

A Bug troop cannot survive if they are not all working together without question. We made them think about what they were doing. It could

have easily broken up a troop, which here, means death. They were right given the understandings they had. Of course, I know what was going to be at the other end of the tunnel of our gifts and knowledge.

Leaving, right. We have a ship in orbit. It is visible in the night sky. We purposely used a polar orbit and have timed it such that it is rarely over a populated strip. Still, I am sure some have seen it. They don't want to see us again and short of throwing ourselves into a fire pit, this is our only other choice. At least we have this choice.

How many times has an alternative culture arisen on Bug? We don't know. Nothing fossilizes well here because of the extreme heat and cold cycles present. Going a froth or two over shows us the exact same setup. They have not changed in hundreds of millions of year. Some tradition.

You might come to see the Traditionalists in the same light as the Tafa. They are not the same at all. The Tafa insisted on imposing their beliefs on others, even those on other worlds. The multiverse does not work without diversity. Those other worlds had a right to work out their own problems and find their own solutions. As long as they were not hurting anyone else, leave them alone. The Traditionalists never tried to change us or even kill us. They only insisted on non interaction. To be left alone. Imagine the Tafa following that path instead of coming after the earth froth. After me.

We are not even on the same local cluster of stars. We were tens of thousands of light years away. The only way they knew anything about us was because we showed up at the RGC. We have gone there in countless incarnations and only in this one did we come to their attention. Why? Are we that scary? I am just a poor little girl from the Rez. Never a threat to anyone. It is funny in that all their pushing at us actually made the situation worse for them.

Think about it. If was after they attacked me that we did Alexandria. Not to mention the super 'thn. All in response to their attacks! Of course that also caused us to look at the Tafa history more closely. Know thy enemy. Now we have seen the path of destruction they caused. How many they sent to Farout we still don't know. I suspect without us, everyone at the RGC would eventually have felt their wrath for not being perfect. The rest of the sentients should really be on our side. We chose the quiet path and did not defend ourselves at the RGC. We wanted to be judged by our deeds not our words.

Admittedly turning off all of the 'thn in the multiverse might have scared them some. It was done out of frustration. Just like our Traditionalists here, we just wanted to be left alone to try and work on The Ques-

tion in their own way. Alexandria was meant to be voluntary. You did not need to come there or send anyone else there. If you did choose to come, great, we love diversity of ideas and methods, of knowledge. It was in freaking Farout even! We weren't going to attack anyone from there were we?

Put some muscle into it Puu. You are way behind Cat now.

Too much thinking. I push harder. Cat is bigger, well as much as any Bug can be bigger than another. Of course I could easily overcome the limiters. We are known for that ability after all. I will take my punishment like a good Bug though. Sacrificing for the team.

Puu you are wanted on the bridge.

No point in cleaning up, I will probably be sent right back there.

We are wanted on the bridge Puu. Cat says to me.

Heard, but how do we get there with these limiters? I show amusement.

Really Puu, you still have your limiters. I got rid of those immediately.

What, all this time you have been cheating Cat?

Puu, we always cheat. They know that and you know that.

Fine. I pop both of us to the bridge. Shit and all.

Someone decides my joke is not funny and immediately cleans us up. Cat waves her antennae about like it is all a joke. Last time they give me shit duty.

Everyone keeps asking me what are we doing. I have to tell them what was said to me by Turtle. We don't know. Just playing along to see what happens this time. This time? How many times do I have to go through this? How many times have I already gone through this?

Shit.

Earth Two

My turn to write in the journal. It has been a couple of years actually. No one wanted to be the one. I am the oldest, but I feel young again. Strange. I was enjoying being old and wise. Now, I feel young and stupid again.

There is so much to learn. The 'kids' as we call them are bigger than we are and they know it. Of course, they have always been stronger. They don't have TK yet at least. We are now TK4s, though we are told this is supposed to be a secret and do not use above TK2 unless an extreme emergency. Unfortunately, being beat up by your kid is not an emergency. Pelting them with pebbles is funny to them. A game. We are told it is our job to outsmart them. We are the great and wonderful stupid monkeys. Our task is to prove them wrong.

Not easy at all.

We are all part of defense. We protect the troop from Hu and Drag alike. We should all be working together. That is the ultimate goal, but for now there are still assholes who want it all for themselves. Teacher drills us several eighths a day on defense arts. It is not all strength. Even Vid can take down a Drag if she plays it right. Of course using TK2 on their privates or brains if life threatening goes a long way. Heart is another good attack point. Actually probably better, as it is quicker. Some can go a long time without their brains.

The rest of the day we help the troop with whatever is needed. We are smaller, especially Vid, so can get into tighter places to help build, repair or retrieve. Bill is just strong enough to be part of construction and moving. Her natural strength along with TK2 just makes her the weakest member. She is trilled all the same.

We can understand Drag just fine, but our vocal cords do not allow us to say much beyond simple words. And that is with TK to help modify our voices. A lot of whistles, clicks, duotones all combined of course. Not fair really. They have five sets of vocal cords!

We can converse with the Hu who wander in. If they are nice and well behaved we will trade with them. If not we scare them away. If that does not work, well, you can guess. Not our first choice, but we have to protect the troop. It only took a few examples to prove the point. Those looking for easy prey go elsewhere. Oh, and the troop is large enough now to defend itself pretty well. Any Hu army who was tempted would suffer major losses. They do not have TK and that alone can convince most. Some-

thing about high speed pebbles coming at you hard enough to pierce any armor.

I also spend time teaching and recording our history. Drag are really into lineages, as Drag and as formerly Cat. They are especially proud of their Cat ancestors. As Drag they work much harder than they ever did as Cats, but don't tell anyone that. Really, do not tell them. I hear Hu are quite tasty. Taste like pigs. You know you are in trouble when they call you a stupid monkey, but you know you are on the edge of death when they call you a pig. I never want that experience. Bad enough I had to watch and hear these exchanges when some of the outsider Hu were on the menu.

Our three have adult names now! That was exciting. A huge ceremony. Teacher, their mother, assigned them names based on their personalities and experiences. As they are all fem, they will be expected to breed soon too. Ah, yes, their names are Slow Run, Talks Much and Climbs Trees. Names are not assigned for your best traits, but what you have to overcome. I kind of like it. The three are also becoming fluent in Hu Standard as well. This was a big point in our favor. Now a Drag can wander around a Hu camp and hear conversations the Hu don't realize can be understood.

I guess I should mention we have Drag names too. I am Quiet because I think too much before acting and rarely speak up at meetings. Vid has become Mouse on account of her size and tendency to scurry about a lot. Bill, poor Bill. She has become Tries Hard. I need to learn how to present my ideas more frequently. A horrible thought. I get teased a lot for being the most school based of our group. I guess I still miss going to Saint An'di University. Can I become a Teacher of Drag? Of course I know what Teacher Karath would think of that.

^DStudent Quiet, get your tail in motion. Time to run.^D Again, so soon? Between the TK and all of the exercise I am stronger and faster than I have ever been in my life. I like that part. What I don't like is it is so boring!

I gather with the rest. All Drag this time. Great. They can easily outrun me once they get going. I excel in the tight turns, going through trees oh, and especially silent running. I'm sorry, but a Drag cannot run quietly and quickly. They can hide and pounce. They can creep up on prey. But, definitely not quiet when running full out. Teacher is not the lead. What's going on?

Teacher Karath comes up to me and hands me a pouch. ^DYou will need this. We are going to a Hu settlement. We need to purchase a farseer. We will wait outside in case of trouble.^D

^DUnderstood Teacher.^D One of the things I can say. Learned it the painful way. A good incentive.

I am last when we reach the edge of town of course. They let me pass through. They are far enough out so as not to raise concern. I walk alone into town. Near sunrise. We were running all night, not that that affects me any longer, I mean the lack of sleep. Running is still not my favorite. We often move in low light to minimize fear. I was afraid of Drag from the first one I saw. Still am, or at least cautious.

When I get into town I sit to rest in the center of town. Now I wait until they wake up. I take some of the time to write in this journal. Also makes me very non-threatening. Soon I have a watcher. Then two. Kids are the most curious. I reach into my pack and pull out some dried meat. Don't ask what. I offer some to the two waiting. They just stare at me. I put it away after eating a bite to prove it is safe.

An adult comes up to collect the kids.

"Hope they weren't bothering you."

"Not at all. Very well behaved. Can you direct me the optics shop?"

"Sure, third store on the right. Big lens drawing on the door."

"Thanks."

"Won't be open for another eighth. She is star mad." An astronomer. I can understand that. I nod and she moves on with the two. The rest of the town will be waking up soon. I write a small note, place it in a special metal cylinder and when no one is looking launch it back to the waiting Drag. They are probably wondering what happened to me. Drag are not the most patient of sentients.

I keep my eye on the door and am finally rewarded by someone walking up to it. I rise and walk to meet her.

"Won't be open for another quarter eighth. Have to set up."

"I have come a long way. I am looking for a farseer. The larger the better."

"That will cost you. Come on in. That's all you want right?" I nod.

She goes in the back and comes out with the dustiest thing I have ever seen. A best seller obviously. She can barely lift it.

"You got a cart? You're going to need it."

I look it over. All of the lenses are there. I test the focus and it works. It really needs a cleaning. I look closely at the front element. I am in luck. No one else has attempted to clean it. If you don't know what you are doing it is the fastest way to ruin a lens. Scratches it all up. Worthless. This one looks untouched.

"Going to cost you," She says as I am looking at it.

"Got anything else?"

"That's the biggest one. Everything else you can keep in your bag."

"May I see the biggest one of those?"

"I thought you weren't going to take my time. I need to set up." Right. Does not look like much has moved here in lunars. Farseers tend to last a lifetime if you take care of them. All her potential clients already have one.

"You can take the small ones with you when you move to the next town. And it does not look like you will sell the big one any time soon. Give me a good price and I will take it and one of the small ones. Or you can abandon it and gain nothing."

"Just my luck to get a smart one." She places a small one on the counter in front of me. I examine it. Worthless, but I don't tell her that. She will know I know. She must have sensed my dissatisfaction from my face. She sighs, takes it away and places a clean one in front of me. Another test?

I examine it.

I reach for my pouch. I retrieve two gold coins. The three of us told the Drag how much Hu valued this metal above all others. They saw it as worthless. Can't make anything useful out of it. Stupid monkeys. It is found occasionally when they are looking for other metals. We convinced them to save it for just such a purpose as this.

Her eyes nearly fall out of her head, "I can't make change for that!"

"No change. It is all yours. You are doing something the community needs. Gather your stuff and make it to a larger town. I am assuming you have a lens grinder in the back." She nods.

"Hire a cart and get everything there intact. You will notice the coins are scored so you can break them in eight pieces to make smaller amounts. Thanks for the farseer." I put the smaller one in my pouch and lift the larger one with one hand. Guess my strength really has improved. I am afraid I make a spectacle of myself as I leave town.

I reach the edge of the forest in the late afternoon. I thought someone would follow, but it is near harvest time and likely everyone is needed.

Teacher looks at what I have brought and snorts.

^DWorthless. ^D She turns her back on me.

At a rest break I take time to use TK to clean the lenses carefully. I then set it up pointing back at the town.

Teacher comes up. I hand her the pouch of gold coins.

^DYou did not pay for this at least. ^D Drag are not really understanding of paying with worthless metal. To her the pouch is still full.

"Only took two coins." I hold up the small farseer. "Got this one too. Hu sized. Take a look through the larger one."

She has to nearly lie on the ground to get low enough.

"I can build a better support once we get back." She snorts and keeps looking.

^DWhat is it?^D

"That is the door to the shop where I got the farseers."

She raises her head and looks carefully where it is pointed.

I wait. I know she can't possibly see the door without the farseer, but she knows what a door is. We raided enough Hu settlements.

^DGood work. We leave.^D Can't believe I just got a complement.

We get back in less time than it took to get there at least. Of course I am now wishing I had the sleep excuse to stop working. I am convinced they raised our TK level just to get more work out of us. It is strange, but I have never seen a Drag use TK. Do they have it or are they better at hiding it. Probably the later. Stupid monkeys.

Mouse comes up to me, "I overheard them talking that something is about to happen. Soon, was what they said. I think it involves us."

That is always a concern, but being the only three Hu allowed it is not a total surprise. Just hope we are not being invited to dinner as the main course.

Over the next few eight days we start working as Drag Hu pairs with the kids, as in eight out of eight eighths of the day. Do the kids have TK? Ah, no. They are soon curled up together snoring very loudly. During this time we are set to making equipment for the three. Each of us will have a harness that can hold an assortment of tools and weapons. Each of us will have a small farseer, including pairs made especially for the kids. We used our TK abilities to make them. Yes, technically this was TK4 stuff, but we were watchful and worked quickly. No point in having the abilities if we did not have any practice using them. I still remember the pain of learning TK2 stuff. A lot of pebble strikes before I got it, both launching and shielding. We each will carry field rations at all times. Yuck. Dried rodents is not my idea of a good meal, but better than starving I guess. Are we about to start a war or is war coming our way?

They set up the large farseer on top of the highest hill near where we are at the moment. Not that high in elevation, but it has a good view of the nearest Hu settlements. I can see why they wanted it now. Keeping an eye on the neighbors. Is that where the problem lies?

An alarm sounds, ^DIncoming!^D The entire troop rushes to battle stations. Another drill or the real thing? I do pulse scans so as not to attract

any attention. A group of eight, four Drag and four Hu is coming from the east, more inland than us then. They are outfitted in a similar way to the six of us are now.

I whisper to Bill, I mean Tries Hard, "Is this our war? Between matching Drag/Hu pairs? They out number us. Look to be in better shape too."

All I get back is "Shush!" Right. I would make a terrible warrior.

^DIncoming!^D Again? I scan again. A group of three Drag and three Hu. Two males and a single fem.

^DIncoming!^D Just how many are there? We have had large troop get together before, where we were the only three Hu present of course. Talk about awkward. We do our best to stay out of sight.

Mouse suggests, "I think we should go down and greet them. I think we are all meant to work together." That would be logical. Would have been nice to know there were others like us though. Just what is this all about though. Curiosity killed the Cat and the monkey. Or in this case the Drag. Our three are sniffing the air like crazy trying to scent out the new ones.

We wait. They see each other of course and meet up with each other before getting closer to us.

I say, "Their Drag are older than ours. We must be the last set, not the first like we thought." The others nod. The three rush out towards the others.

"No! Stop!" They do not listen of course. We brace ourselves for a full on Drag fight. Lot of snarling and puffing. They are not really at the roar stage just yet, soon. The others do roar and our three freeze.

"Well, they are on our territory. You had to expect this Mouse. At least they are smart enough to know they are out matched." They behave like dogs sniffing each other's private bits.

"Ah, guys, the others are not all fem." Shit. As soon as our three come into heat it will be starting all over.

Tries Hard taps my shoulder, "Where did the rest go?"

"Huh?" I look behind me. The rest of the troop is gone. We have been left alone with the new ones.

"I think we are supposed to form a new troop."

A large male Hu comes up with the others watching. He eyes both Mouse and Tries Hard, not sure what to make of Tries Hard. He ignores me.

"Who is the leader here?" Mouse and Tries Hard look at me. Only intellectually, not physically.

"The old man? Really? This won't take long then." The male makes to

strike me. Never had a chance. It is all instinct at this point. He wakes up looking at the sky, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"Stupid monkeys," Mouse says. Everyone laughs, including the new comers.

She then asks, "Was that some kind of pecking order test? Why pick on the oldest of us? A real test would have been Tries Hard."

"Sexism?" Tries Hard looks at me.

"Hey, I know I am the weakest one. No contest here."

"Good thing the Two taught us how to defend ourselves."

"And Teacher forced us to keep up our practice."

The others are gathered around us waiting for some response.

"What?" I ask.

"Teach us how to do that please." Their kids are watching us too and our three are standing tall, even though they are clearly the youngest and smallest. I am wondering what all this is about.

Edwin's Land

I was born a Hu male, but the first time I saw a 'thant I wanted so bad to be one. You know how, this journal entry is not about that. Now I am fem, because of course that is what most 'thants are. As you know from previously entries we have been having difficulty with the new queens. Fifteen at last count.

I guess it was obvious, the solution that is. I am a fem, I am a 'thant. So . . . yeah, now I am the Queen. I hate it. Edwin says it is not forever. All I do is eat and squirt out eggs, eat and squirt out eggs. I am bored to death. It certainly could not be more boring than this.

Fortunately I am kept up on what is happening. Being royalty has some advantages. A regular stream of workers bring me reports.

The first to arrive were the Cyan. They came by Flyer. All the rest came by portal. The Cyan came ready to work and did so. Seeker was on shore when the SyWg arrived. I was not the Queen yet, so I got to meet the SyWg myself. Drup and Rand were among them. We would have been at a loss without them. Seeker showed up to assist. They only scared them, well not Rand and Drup. Helps to have a couple of TK9s on site.

They had rough trip though. Several of the worlds they passed through were salt water, not fresh water. On the first a Wg jumped overboard to fix a loose part. I am no ship worker, so I don't know the terms. As soon as they hit the water, they burned alive. Fortunately Drup was on that side of the ship and got to them in time. From that point on, they tested the water first.

Our water is relatively fresh here, so they are happy about that. Of course this is not their home world. The plants and animals about are not the same, as in mostly absent. They will be feeding on whatever the sap chow equivalent is on their world for some time at least. Seeker has found a nice cove for them to set up in, close to where the others are gathering.

Since the SyWg arrival, teams from Ba, Rap, Ku and a most unusual team from Earth Two. Paired sentients. The Hu look normal, but the Di does not look like any Di I have seen before. I have never met Dio or Diu, could they be one of them? They call themselves Drag and speak a totally different language than the Di, besides Hu. I am guessing convergent evolution. The Drag are young, barely adult, the three smallest are clearly teenagers at best, with all that goes with that. Marie and Mike are supposed to be their team lead, but had to go back to Bug Eden. They are

the most confused of all the arrivals. Edwin has set a pair of 'thants to assist. They were too afraid of the Cyan.

Cyan do not weigh that much and though fast are not that strong. A Hu could lift one easily. Awkward if they are still alive of course. They also work in groups of seven. That is harder to overcome. They are super organized and a real help in setting everything up. Most were apparently from the earth froth originally, but it has been so long and their acceptance of their new forms so complete, they self identify as Cyan. They all have TK at level seven. They work at setting up the needs for each group in terms of water, sanitation, and so forth. Each group did their own housing.

It is so frustrating that I am stuck in here and not out there helping. Everyone assures me I am helping, by making more workers, that are needed now and more will be soon. More are coming.

The Ba, Rap and Ku knew what to do and jumped to it immediately after arrival. We are ultimately supposed to work together. As Ba, Rap and Ku already have some experience they are setting up their mutual area with this in mind. Even their housing is shared. With open areas for the other expected sentients.

It is happening so well I wonder if I am needed at all.

thOur Queen, you must eat.th Sigh . . . squirt, squirt. Glad I am not Hu, apparently that hurts a lot. I barely notice. It just never stops.

Mothership

Me, I am nobody. An errand grunt of the lowest order. You can call me Nobody. A lowly TK3. I am surprised I have not been pushed out an air-lock yet.

How do you hide from sentients all higher TK than you? You don't. Fortunately, they don't really care about me. If I stay out of site I stay out of trouble. I have found a secret hiding place. My favorite place. It has a small portal where I can see the star we are orbiting. Nothing else, just the one.

^Ah, ha, Nobody is here again.^

"Very funny Flying Mouse."

^Hiding from the work again?^

"Tired of being beat up is more like it. Why do all sentients pick on the weakest."

^You would have thought the Captain fixed all that.^

"They are just more sly about it. Never when someone higher up can see it. Never leave a mark either. Inflict pain, wait a moment, they heal you. Still painful."

^They do the same to me.^

And that is why we are friends. Friends of misfortune.

Incoming! Prepare for new sentients.

"Wonder what we will get this time. Trolls or goblins?"

^You talk funny. There are no such things.^

"Oh and the Cyan are better? They look like giant blue spiders, that run in packs. Very large packs"

^I know a place we can watch without being put to work.^

We take off. I am short for my species, so we are the same size. I'm a little heavier though, being Hu of course. Also means we can fit in tight spaces.

All ships have hidden ways, for ventilation, utilities, etc. We simply use them for our own method of getting around the ship. We have other friends in here as well. The Yesan are particularly good at gathering information and sharing it with us in exchange for treats we steal from the kitchen. They love sap chow for some reason. No one cares we take it either. We keep pockets and pouches full of it for that reason.

I take a large piece out and offer it to three who happen to be here. They gladly take it. We follow them. Never have to say anything, they always seem to know. Good thing as neither of us understand Yesan. The

young ones are too high pitched even for Flying Mouse. Easy to follow, especially when one is holding a large piece of sap chow. Well, large to them.

We go quite a way.

"Do you know where we are?"

^No idea. Never been in this section. Normally off limits. Been empty forever. Surprised we got this far.^

"What's the worst that can happen? We die a horrible painful death."

^Works for me. Gets us out of grunt work at least.^ I affirm. We often tell this joke.

We take up a spot near the airlock, not that high TKs need an airlock. Not even sure why they are here. We feel a large bump that shakes the entire room.

^Must be them docking?^ I nod. I try to scan on other other side of the door, but can't.

"Shielded. Can't scan the other side."

^Worse, we are under a limiter field.^ Shit.

The door lock opens. Three high TKs carrying in a large container. It takes all three. Guess the limiter field is working on them as well. What the hell is in that container?

They place the container in the center of the room and then back away from it. Not good.

^We need to get out of here now!^ Flying Mouse whispers in my ear. I affirm. A baby Yesan taps me on my hand.

"Follow the Yesan?"

We climb a set of rungs and go through a portal, with a window in it and quickly close it behind us. We stare out the portal. The high TKs have left. We feel the limiters go down. The fans come on and we hear the air exchange in the chamber. Has a yellow cast to it.

The container slowly opens. Something like a giant yellow orange slime mold comes out and oozes to the floor. They had tiny slime molds on New Hope, I was always fascinated by them. This one is huge. It slowly makes its way to another container near the wall and easily removes the lid.

"I have never seen a slime mold do that before. This one is sentient."

^No guano Hu. We need to get out of here before it learns to open our hatch and consume us too.^

"Slight problem. It is vacuum on the other side, behind us. The only way out is back the way we came."

^Nobody, look! What's it doing now?^

It changes shape after its meal. About our size and standing. Two legs and two arms form, then a head of some kind.

^Its trying to form a copy of you Nobody. Pretty good since it can only see your ugly face through the portal.^

"Ha-ha. Could just as easily be you." We keep watching, seeing as how we are stuck until something happens.

There is a window on the opposite side of our small chamber. I go and look out that. I see the side of the Flyer and not much else. I come back to our window on the thing. What is it and why is it here?

It finishes forming a Hu of sorts. Bigger than we are. It starts looking around the chamber

^It even has clothes. How did it do that?^

"Shit, it is looking right at us, duck!" We duck down, but I fear it is already too late. A few minutes later something blocks the light from that window. We see its face against the window looking in at us. A moment later it disappears and we rush to the window again, carefully.

It is down in the center of the chamber again and a high TK is with it. They both disappear. We wait at least ten minutes before we carefully open our hatch.

"No one there. Let's get out of here." Flying Mouse affirms and we scurry, literally down the ladder, and out of the chamber. I feel so much safer back in the access ways. Everytime we hear a thump we crouch down and try to become one with the walls. But, no one is there.

^It really stunk in there. Like burning sulfur or something.^

We are nearly back to where we started when suddenly everything goes dark. We freeze.

^What just happened?^

"No idea. Wish I could make a glow ball."

"I can't feel the wall, can you?"

^No. Feel the floor. It feels weird.^

The lights come back on. We are in the middle of a room. A padded room. We are naked. Sex embarrassment means nothing for TKs, but it is not a normal state for some reason.

"Ah, oh. Someone had to pop us here. We have been found out."

^What do you think they will do to us this time? We have already done latrine duty, like forever.^

"Nope, no more latrine duty. Much, much worse."

We come to attention and salute. Captain Pilot.

She is quiet. That makes it worse. All sorts of scenarios run through my head. What could be worse than latrine duty? Wash the outside of the

Flyer, by hand? With a tooth brush? Not that any of use one any more. I still have one, but TK is easier. We always have to be prepared for no TK.

She is Hu, so I guess it is my turn, "Captain Pilot. Not expecting you."

"You mean someone of my rank. I take a special interest in unusual cases, especially the low TKs. No doubt you are aware of the history in this direction." We both affirm.

She continues, "The problem is, curiosity among TKs. Or rather the lack of it. We all settle into routines, take the easy routes, just do your job and have a hobby on the side. Some do music, art, sports. Martial arts is popular."

^Maybe because our jobs are so boring. We have to be the last TK3s on the ship. Granted, we are more recent arrivals. There is nothing exciting about latrine duty. No amount of curiosity can overcome that.^

"We are not even sure why the duty exists, except to punish us for some reason."

She pulls out a tablet and opens it up to show us.

"Your complete records from before and after your arrival. Not the first time you have been found in a 'strange' location. Tell anyone else on a ship to stay away and you will never find them there. But, you two, first chance you get, you are there. And I know about your little Yesan network. They report to me as well."

^The bugs ratted us out Nobody.^

She looks confused, "The records say your name is Greg. Who is Nobody?"

"What everyone else calls me. Did you really think the TK shaming would stop at your last directive? The high TKs see no point to our existence and let us know constantly. So, if you are going to shove out an airlock, go ahead, it can't get much worse."

She smiles. Never a good sign. We both get nervous. She did promise much worse.

Then she looks confused, still looking at her tablet, "Says here you can't be higher than TK3, both of you. That is strange. A Hu and a Ba? Can't be genetic."

^In an infinite multiverse, what are the odds that two entirely different earth froth species could have the same condition? Simple, there are viruses that attack both species. As infants we both had pink dot disease. At least that was what we called it.^

"Any TK5 should be able to fix that. Worst case, we give you a new body, without the genetic problem."

We look at each other, "That was never offered to us Captain."

"I have to go through this all over again? I ordered them to tell me of any remaining low TK cases. How did you two slip between the decks?"

^What was that sentient we saw in the air lock?^ The Captain looks confused at first, then stares at us. Never a good sign.

"Yeah, that could work. We both win. That sentient, glad you recognized it as one, used to be part of the refugees from New Hope."

"The world that exploded?" I was supposed to go there but was in transport when it happened. On the first Flyer actually.

"Imploded, but same difference. Yes. We had too many survivors to host on ships so we distributed them to known worlds out here in Farout."

^And now you have an 'interesting' way we can serve you.^

"Not me, us. All of us. I need ambassadors to the Yellow delegation to help them fit in with the rest of the sentients here."

^Wait, delegation? There are more of them? We only saw one.^

She smiles. I am going to learn to fear that smile.

"The Yellow are not single sentients. There are more than a thousand in that one individual."

"How does that work exactly?" I have heard of people going mad that way.

"Good question. Ask them."

^How?^

"They have TP. Com will not be a problem."

"A question, we saw them eat. Are we in any danger?"

She smiles again!

"That would be telling."

Flying Mouse whispers to me, ^She does not know. We are expendable, therefore we are offered the task to find out. Simple.^

"Understand this here and now. YOU ARE NOT EXPENDABLE. You will be repaired and are to continue your TK journey up the levels. Some TKs might get to spend time in your former tasks when I find out who they are. I am serious that we, the entire crew of the Mothership and other groups we are working with, need your help, especially your curiosity and courage to find things out.

We have been told in no uncertain terms, that the Yellow are essential to our success. That means you are essential to our success. Do not let this go to your heads. You can still die. We all can. There is a very low projection of survival for all of us. I do mean all of us.

The Yellow can survive in our atmosphere, but not the other way around. They have been moved to an isolated sphere some distance away from the Mothership. You will go there when you are ready. They are es-

pecially vulnerable to copper fluoride. You will be given devices that can disperse this as a gas if you are attacked. They will know you have such devices and that you have permission to use them. They know we can always go back to Yellow to retrieve more Yellow sentient if we need to."

I am ready to faint. Not sure if it is from terror or excitement. I choose to call it excitement.

"Just think, no more latrines!" Everyone shows amusement. Not sure this is better though.

She smiles again. Shit.

"One more thing. As you two get into trouble so much, I am assigning you a partner. A long, long time ago the Yellow and this sentient were related. Might help some, in terms of understanding."

^When do we meet them?^

The Captain morphs into a Yesan, *You already have.*

^You are not the Captain.^

"Very observant Flying Mouse. My question is, was anything said to us real or are we going back to latrine duty?"

A second Captain pops in.

"The orders are real. You two do not freak easily when confronted with the unknown. Nor do you attack either. The question is, would you help someone, an unknown sentient, if they needed you? No one really knows until they are actually confronted with the situation.

"In my training I was taught one very important lesson. Everything is a test. This is a test for the three of you, but also for the rest of us as well."

^I have a question. Are you going to find our abusers or was all that made up?^

The Yesan morphs to Ku shape. I wish I could do that. Would make our sneaking around much easier.

+They have already been found. I am not the only Luss aboard. My calling is Gib. We have no gender but as I usually assume the fem aspect when in earth froth form, you may refer to me in the fem state.+

The real Captain or was it another Luss, pops out with a smile. They have that much in common.

+There is much you need to learn about the Yellow. The one, and only one, we have in isolation is called Many. They have two genders, plus and minus. They are identical outwardly. The only difference is genetic. Both are needed for a successful sexual recombination. They can also reproduce without recombining. This will happen spontaneously if enough resources are available. Do not ever overfeed them.+

^Are we food to them?^

+Not in the way you think. They absorb the personalities of sentients. You become part of the collective.+

"Latrine duty is looking very nice about now," I whisper. Flying Mouse shows amusement. We are hooked though and will do this duty. Our curiosity demands it. I wonder what it would be like to be part of a much larger whole?

+They understand that they are forbidden to do this to any sentient on board without their permission. Be careful. They like to play games and trick us into corners. They have a vastly higher intelligence than anyone on board.+

"What are the odds this entire ship will be Yellow within a year?"

+The odds are not in our favor. Time to move.+ We pop out. Has to be Gib, neither one of us can do that.

Bug Eden

I really can't help it that I sparkle. A side effect of too much time in Meep form. It is easier to transverse the multiverse in that form though. A welcome side effect is no 'thn ever comes close. I will need to study why next time we are in Control. Meep are a peaceful sentient. We don't need to eat anyone, conquer anyone, impose our beliefs on anyone. We are very rare and spread out so much we rarely encounter one another. So, where is the threat? Why did Meep decide to trust me with their kids? Another question for Control. The Library at the RGC did not have anything on the Meeps. Strange.

I am in Meep form right now along with all the kids of course. They rarely assume any other form. Too restrictive. I get it.

Mother, there is a 'thn two AU out. It has been there for over an eighth, Hu time. It is not moving.

How big is it dear? I ask. We classify 'thn based on their age, size and status. Baby is the smallest, young adult is the next up. Where Pr'thn and Br'thn were before their assuming new forms. Qr'thn was the next size up. They get larger above that as they assume more responsibility. Most of the 'thn are Qr'thn's size as they are the ones who do most of the work, of raising sentients suitable for the local OM to work with, having enough kids to cover the increasing froth worlds and coming to the rescue of any 'thn in trouble and of course, pushing the froth wave when it passes. Not all 'thn rise above this status and most are content to remain there until the ending.

Regional Level. Shit. They are the ones who cause the most trouble. Always trying to prove themselves.

General Alarm. Regional 'thn in the vicinity and not just passing through.

Okay, everyone, we are ready for this. Time to Bug out. Activate portals, get everyone through, then destroy the portals. Move it!

That would be Turtle. I don't move. I and the kids will remain as rear guard. We distribute around this world more or less evenly and in constant movement. The visitor 'thn will of course notice this. I reach out and watch it slowly back away. Yeah, one Meep is bad enough but 37 is too many. Best not to interfere. Come back once we are gone. There will be no trace of us, unless they happen to notice the tunnels are completed. I doubt a regional 'thn would be interested in this kind of detail. Especially since most of the tunnel entrances have been blocked by the Traditional-

ists anyway.

Must have been this world's 'thn who got worried. We are ready to release a dozen 'green man' equivalents when we go. That would normally be cause for celebration. Certainly the local OM will be happy. This is faster than the local 'thn was expecting is my guess. This world has remained unchanged for millions and millions of years. Suddenly all this changes. No wonder she called in her mother to investigate. We were expecting it, but figured we owed the world something for our use of it.

Lights out! They are gone. The portals wink out too. Quiet.

And that is my signal to release the green men. Only takes a moment. The spores are drifting up along the green line in its current location. More will be released as the line moves over the rest of the world on its yearly cycle. Soon many worlds will have our ecology on them if they are lucky.

Gather to me kids! The Meeps come in.

It seemed like we spent many lifetimes on this world. I will miss it in many ways. All things come to an end though.

We pop out.

Edwin Land

=They're here Rand. Playtime over.=

||Darn, just when I was beginning to like the place. The tropical seas, sandy beaches, cocktails with those fancy umbrella things.||

=We never had those things. All Earth Two. A long time ago.=

||I can dream can't I?||

We are both on the ship, the wood one from SyWg. Everyone else is set up on land. The village is coming along. 'thants and Cyan are helping where they can, though it took awhile for our team to get over their fear of such strange creatures. Drup and I ended up giving one of each a big hug to prove they were not dangerous. None of us liked it, but everyone settled down after that. Just don't ask me to do it again. Don't think they would let me anyway.

The little Cyan are sort of cute. All babies are I suspect. Maybe not Sy babies, ughh! But, they have no respect for privacy and are into everything. No one mentioned they can climb walls and run across ceilings, and worst of all, see in the dark, well near dark.

A large silver owl swoops in and lands on top of the cabin next to us. A turtle pops in looking pissed as usual. Nice to see you too. A large male 'thant opens a portal to enter our gathering circle. There is a little bit of an ocean swell and it is fun watching them adjust to the back and forth rolling of the deck. This upsets the turtle even more. She was born on land, not the sea. I get it. A crowd of SyWg are gathered on shore watching us.

I hand signal that we will be gathering at the open space in the center of our village. Then I pop all of us on the ship to the meeting place.

This meeting was meant to be private Rand. Turtle of course.

||We have abducted a large group of Scary and ten Wg sailors without their permission, to be taken to a location they know nothing about, for a task they know nothing about, leaving family and friends forever and you want to keep everything a secret?||

=If you want our help, we all hear it. Everyone is brought in. Or we go home right now. It is not just our friends, but you have kept us in the dark the entire time as well.=

||My understanding is your plan will not work without willing participants. We are not willing. Convince us otherwise.||

He does have a point dear.

We were better off on Bug.

||And I am guessing they were all willing participants there too.||

Have you ever heard an owl laugh? Very scary.

You have to excuse Turtle. She was the Queen and I think it went to her head.

You try pushing out that many eggs on a constant basis and running a queendom of Bugs.

Though this exchange was heard by all present, it certainly was not understood by everyone and only caused more confusion.

Edwin shakes his head and portals out. I can't blame him.

I have work to do. Turtle morphs back to Bug form and pops out.

Silver morphs to Wg form.

||Being a Bug made her very impatient.|| Note she always was.

Silver opens a pouch and hands out treats to everyone. He carefully goes to each Sy or Wg present and introduces himself and hands them an appropriate treat. When he comes back to us, he pretends to do the same, only he hands us each a sap chow biscuit. With everyone watching me, I sigh and eat it. I am so sick of sap chow.

Some of our group bring something to drink. We each carry our personal cups with us, so we just have to hold it out to be filled. Took us a long time to find something that both Sy and Wg could appreciate.

||Interesting.|| I smile. Interesting does not mean good.

=Sorry, we did not have rabbit flavor.= Drup teases as he waves his hand about to indicate the lack of rabbits about and a general comment about the barrenness of the place. Get on with it Silver.

||It is a long story.||

=We like long stories. Not like there is anything else to do here.= Be nice Drup. He can still squash us if we piss him off too much.

Something zips past me, brushing my hand. I instinctively react. Suddenly the place is swarming with some things moving very fast. Silver remains calm. Dust rises close to the stone wall we built to block the wind. Sy love working with stone. Everyone turns to look. The movement stops and the dust settles. One remains.

=That is the largest cockroach I have ever seen.= A Sy says, getting ready to hit it using TK assist. The bug is faster though and disappears.

||There are images on the stone.|| Everyone is coming closer to the wall to look.

||It is a story. It begins over here I think.|| I turn back to Silver and of course he is gone. He had the Bugs carve the stone for him.

=He is making fun of us again Rand.=

||Of course he is. It ends here though. We need to let everyone know

who and what we are.||

=I think that was why the wall was carved Rand. It tells our story.= He motions me to follow him and he points to a section where there is an image of the Black Wind II and we are on deck waving. Pilot is there too. I miss her. Hope she is okay. She came a long way from a wharf rat to running the Mothership.

||It is only images. No writing.||

=We need to tell them the story Rand. This is only a guide.= Shit.

I am sure the two were in a hurry, but they still have not told us what all this is about.

=They think it was our responsibility to have told them everything first. We blamed them and they turned it back on us.=

||Fine. Let's tell them what we know then. I thought it was supposed to be a secret in case something went wrong. Hell, I did not even know we would be chosen for this task. I would have been perfectly happy to have been left alone on SyWg for the next million years.||

=As would I buddy. That is a long story and it is going to take time.=

||Maybe we can scim the boring parts?||

=You know everyone is listening to us right?|= Shit. Of course they are.

The Captain of our ship comes up to us.

||If it helps, we all accept every time we board a ship that we might not return. It is part of the reason we do it. We may not be world travelers yet, but we all dream of being one. You are assuming everyone is upset to be here. I can assure you they are not. Imagine the tales we will each tell if we ever get home. Please, tell us your story. We really want to hear it.||

Others are standing around the Captain and seem to be in agreement.

Drup motions for everyone to become comfortable. They do so and are quiet in anticipation.

||My name is Rand. I was not hatched on SyWg. This is not my original form. I was a sentient called a Hu on a world very far from here.|| I morph to Hu form. I get a lot of curious stares.

=My name is Drup. I was not born on SyWg. This is not my original form. I was a sentient called a Di on a world very far from here.= He morphs to Di form. That gets some excitement. Sure, Di are scary, Hu are not.

We both morph back to Sy and Wg.

It takes days and days. It is a long story and we only gave them the short version. Not everyone stayed the entire time and I am sure everyone remembers it differently. They will work it out among themselves. Sy and

Wg visit the wall to help them remember. Benches have been moved closer for easier study.

We finally end with, ||We are on a quest to answer The Question.||

||What is the question?|| Someone asks.

=That is a very good question.= Many laughs.

=Any more questions?= Everyone raises their hand. We taught them that. Sorry we did.

A Scary pair asks, =Are we going to get more gifts too?=
Drup answers, =Not yet. There is some kind of blockage preventing it.

Whenever it was tried the individual went rogue. Not a pretty sight. We are working on it. Best to assume no.=

||Why are we here?||

||It actually has nothing to do with us, well, with SyWg. It does have to do with the two of us actually. It seems our worlds, the earth froth worlds, got into a bit of trouble with some other sentients and the 'thn high council.||

=Ah, what's a 'thn? They were mentioned but we have never seen one.=

||You have all seen the Comps I know. They have been of immense help and are still helping back on the home world. 'thn look just like comps, only clear. They are a higher TK level and very dangerous if provoked. Do not provoke one.||

||Can they be killed?||

=What is a nice Wg like you asking that question for? I would have expected it from a bam-bam Sy.= That gets a laugh. I am more than afraid that Bam-bam Sy is going to catch on. They do have that reputation. Hit first, ask questions later.

=Let's just say that even thinking about hurting one will mean a very horrible death for you.=

||They can read your mind.|| I add. I hope that worked and they never try. Drup and I have the secret code if it comes to it, but they certainly don't, not would we give it to them even if we could.

=Is it alright to kill one of those Bug things?=
I shake my head, ||You would never even get close, they run a hundred

times faster than a Wg, much less a Sy, and they are armed. Just because it looks like a bug, does not mean it does not have feelings too. Be nice bam-bam.|| Everyone laughs making a pounding motion.

Why must we try and kill everything we don't understand?

Mothership

Pilot is off on a well deserved break. The three amigos are in charge, at least briefly. We are in our western garb of course. Tewk has assumed the sheriff look and we attend our store. Our office area looks like the old general store we had on New Hope, complete with dusty floors, warm temperature and harsh sunlight. Sarsaparilla on tap. The Ba in particular really like it. Not sure if it is because of the taste or because it is cold and sweet. All of the younger ones love the hard candy in different flavors, though I will admit the sap chow flavor is really a joke and no one wants that, but it helps fill the counter and is a conversation piece.

"Seems quiet so far Tia."

I give him a dirty look. We have only been open a few minutes.

Unknown ah, ship, object, whatever, off the port bow. Whoa, it is huge. Really, really, really huge! And it is coming this way. EMERGENCY! All hands on deck. This is not a drill.

I punch Sam in the arm.

"Hey!"

"You jinked us. You deserved it."

Tewk come running in.

Should we do something?

I pop us all to the bridge. The ship is on the big screen. The mag is set to what? Holly shit. A very large sphere. Shiny.

The mag suddenly shifts. It zooms to the surface of the ship. It keeps expanding. There is nothing to focus on until we get to 100x. Then we see a much smaller sphere coming off the surface and getting larger fast. The mag adjusts and we see a much smaller ship coming towards us rapidly.

"Captain, your orders?"

"Let's wait and see. Obviously not a 'thn. The Companions would have reported that to us much earlier. As we have not been attacked, let's assume it is friendly until we have evidence to the contrary. We are in the Farout. Could be someone else trying to find others out here."

Or looking for resources. Must take a lot to keep that ship going. It makes our Mothership look like a shuttle. It does at that.

The smaller sphere is close to the outside of our ship. It stops.

Anyone home?

I broadcast so everyone can hear what is going on.

Please state your name and purpose for approaching us.

Permission to come aboard.

Permission denied. Please state your name and purpose for approaching us. I motion and they confirm our shields are at max.

"Prepare to be boarded. They may have tech we are not aware of."

Arms are handed out. We are multi sentient on the bridge. Anyone coming it will be confused at least temporarily. Tewk assumes a position on the ceiling. The Ba climb to higher locations. The Luss fade out. I love that we found them.

You are ruining the surprise.

We don't like surprises.

Fine, Ron and Squeak request permission to come aboard.

"Permission granted. This is Tia. Sam and Tewk are here as well."

I motion for the shield to be dropped between us. They pop in the middle of us. Hugs ensue. Ron looks extremely uncomfortable of course. Too bad. I signal the galley and a moment later a cart comes in the door loaded with cowboy chili, hot and spicy.

As Ron is eating it he says, "I remember this. Hate it. But it tastes good because those were good times." He continues eating it though. Squeak is already looking for a second bowl. I hand her mine. Ron was miserable, having just arrived from Mars and not adjusted to our gravity yet, but less how insane it was for a Martian to be in a tropical jungle with a bunch of crazy people. Good times indeed.

Finished, someone takes the cart away. Everyone tried it, not everyone liked it. I caught a few changing it to something they preferred. Both the Ku and Ba added insect bits. I am not offended. We are very different.

Sam says to get things started, "Nice ship you have there."

Licking her lips Squeak says, "Not ours. We did not make it." Ron is smiling. I don't think I have ever seen him smile. I close my mouth.

Tewk says, *You were on Black. You are not saying they made it are you?*

Ron nods affirmative, then adds, "They had help from the Companions. They have gone, ah, free-range I believe is the proper term."

"They did here as well. We accept them as equal members of the crew and mission now. They have their own command structure and report to no one fluidic."

I do a brief scan and none are onboard the Mothership at the moment. I am sure they are next door on the Black ship.

"The Builders, as they prefer to be called, are not like other sentients we have encountered. They are really more like one sentient ecology. The Companions gradually restored the tech and understanding they had be-

fore they were banished to Farout."

"Why come here? They are free to go anywhere they want now."

Squeak wipes her mouth on her arm, "They asked us about our mission and they want to play a part."

Ron adds, "They have a grudge with the RGC that sent them to Farout."

Not surprising. We are in agreement on that point. I welcome them to the cause. Tewk does a Yesan bow. No one with two legs could possibly do such. Very intricate and beautiful.

"How long have they been in Farout?"

Squeak looks at Ron who then answers, "Several million years is our guess. They don't really keep records they way we obsess over. Just say it is an estimate based on the level of tech lost and their slow recovery from that."

Tewk asks, *How did they survive? As a communal ecology, that had to be very difficult.*

"That is why it took so long. Whole organisms had to change to adapt to the new world. They nearly died out several times. Myra brought the Way Back machine so we could all see what happened and when."

Squeak adds, "That is what convinced them. The Companions taught them how to bring their tech back. They are very quick learners."

Sam asks, "Can we meet them?"

"Sam, we have a responsibility to the Mothership."

"Tewk is qualified."

"Sam, you go, but Tewk and I are staying. Remember the last time we got in trouble with Pilot. You really want a repeat?"

Ron offers, "I am willing to stay."

I shake my head, "Go then." Squeak and Sam pop out and the small ship returns to the mega one.

I turn to Ron, "So, why so big?"

"Simple. The ship contains everyone that was present on Black."

"Shit, is that wise?" Talk about all your eggs in one basket.

"They are a non-violent species, but they decided the RGC owes them a new world. A real world, near other real worlds."

"I am sure there is an earth froth they could have. Hmm, maybe Cat Land would take them in." Another smile from Ron. I am on a roll! He and Owa certainly had their run-ins back in the day.

A Luss decloaks in front of us.

"Ron, this is Gib the Curious, a Luss TK. One of our newest members. They and two others are about to try and make contact with a Yellow am-

bassador."

"Pleased to meet you Gib. You were stranded on Magenta right?"

Gib morphs to Hu form, "Originally this is true." Gib presents as a fem. I would like to know the whole story at some point. They don't like to share information about themselves. I suspect she has been on this ship since New Hope, but I have no proof. She certainly knows her way around. As to how many others are on board we will likely never know.

"Captain, you are needed in the Cyan Sector." Now what?

"I would like to accompany you if I may." So polite. I wave to him to join us.

"Something has been bothering me. Psiotics are low out here in the Farout. A HUGE ship has just docked next to us, how come we aren't near zero psiotic energy."

"They are amazingly efficient. And they used up most of their ah, juice, just getting here. They are in night mode now to save energy."

"They can save up psiotic energy? That would be useful. Why are they here, besides testing out their new toy?"

"Simple, they want to leave Farout. They want to be a real species, part of the galactic neighborhood. One of the gang."

"You said non-violent, but are they any danger to others?"

"What are you getting at? They have no weapons. A single missile could destroy them, does not even need to be explosive, a kinetic hit would do."

"Why are we all banned to Farout? What do we have in common that got us sent here?"

Ron thinks about it, "We are all species that work together. Some better than others of course."

"Yeah, I know, Martians are better than Hu."

"Much growth can happen under adverse conditions. Hu were a star faring species at one point. That is rare."

"And now the earth froth has the entire 'thn collective after us. Also rare."

"The Cyan were also victims of this collective. What do we have in common?"

"Unknown. We only know them from after their banishment. You will not learn much from the ones here either. Most of them are earth froth who chose to become Cyan permanently."

"I read the reports. Their connection to the Tafa is the key."

"I agree, but besides the fact that they really hate each other, what is it?"

I call in, "Have Gib and her two 'kids' meet us at the Cyan Sector." Are TK3s who are several hundred years old still called kids? They are smaller than me, but still. Sound degrading to me.

"They are already there Captain." Of course they are. Luss are going to freak me out if not drive me crazy.

"How much do you know about the Cyan Ron?"

"Just what I have read in the reports. I have never met one."

"Yeah, best not to think of them as individuals. They run in groups of seven called a hept."

"Greek. I understand." He knows ancient Greek?

"Unlike any other species we have met, they also have seven appendages. Most have an even number."

"Unlike the Tridon which have three."

"There is a theory they originally all had six. Myra has not tried going back far enough to check. They don't like visitors.

"Here we are. Ready?"

We pass through a series of doors. More like air locks in case of unexpected decompression. Also serves to sterilize anyone who comes in either direction so we don't carry anything unexpected around.

We open the final door and are hit with hot humid air.

I comment, "Strange, cooler than normal." A lot of chittering too. The Cyan.

Rom comments, "Very much like The Builders world." I keep forgetting he has not been on Mars for a very long time. If anyone had told you I would still be alive thousands of years later and living on a ship larger than most cities at the edge of the universe. Well, you get the idea.

"They have done their best to make this as close to their world as they can given the limitations of being on a large ship. The trees you see are called mema and they subsist on the fruit of these trees. It is poisonous to them if they do not harvest it at the exact time of ripeness."

"I am guessing something has gone wrong then?"

Now I am concerned. I nod.

Gid is still in Hu form and comes running up to us.

"This way. It is horrible!" She turns and runs away. I shrug and take off after her. Marie got me in the habit of daily runs, which I have tried to maintain while on board. Ron is using TK to propel himself a meter off the ground. Marie would be so disappointed.

I start to notice damaged trees. Entire branches have been ripped off. Leaves are scattered everywhere and not in a normal way. I might not have noticed except to be able to cover for Pilot you needed to be familiar

with the entire ship.

We reach a clearing. There were not clearings in the original design. It is bad. There are body parts all over. Sentients died here. There are other high TKs already present.

Keki comes up to me, +It is over now, but only because we have restricted motion. If we release them they will go back to fighting.+

"Why are they fighting?"

Ron comments, "Philosophical differences."

Keki nods.

"Okay, Ron, how did you get that and so quickly?"

He reaches down and picks up an appendage.

"I believe this is the reproductive branch of their form. The place is littered with this appendage in particular."

"They were attempting to sterilize each other. Why not just kill the other one instead?"

"More shame. Most are TKs are they not?" I nod.

Gib adds, "They will be able to make a new appendage, so this is symbolic."

"Do we know why this happened?"

Flying Mouse glides over to us. Greg runs to catch up. He is out of breath when they reach us. They stand quite next to Gib. They certainly bonded fast. Pilot made a good call putting them together.

"The other Luss were here when it started and have reported that it was over how closely they should maintain the Tafa holy standards."

I sigh and shake my head.

Release them.

I am happy they do not immediately start fighting again. Apparently the cooling off period has helped. But, I know it will not last. Stupid as Hu they are.

"Gib I believe you were studying the Yellow. Why were you here?"

Flying Mouse says, ^The Yellow are very different and much more dangerous. We wanted to understand another species not of the earth froth before attempting the Yellow directly. This will also give the Yellow some time alone to decide where they want to be in all this.^

Gib comments, "Currently the Yellow only want to absorb anyone they come in contact with. If this was the way they were when they were sent to Farout, it might be wise to put them back."

"Are you sure it was not because of the influence of the earth froth sentients they have already absorbed?" I remember quite well the Earth Two history of authoritarian regimes.

Sam and Squeak pop in next to me. "Whoa, what a mess. Can't leave you alone for a moment." I sneer at him. It is a standing joke that goes both ways. Usually it is over something much more mundane, like dinner or some minor project.

This is your acting Captain speaking. Cyan residents, you need to make a decision in a moment. The reason you are here is because an injustice was done to your species. This was meant to be an opportunity to undo that harm. You think that the injustice was because of your lack of adherence to the Tafa principals. It was not. No one, not even the Tafa are perfect enough to live up to those principals.

The reason you were sent to Farout was because a small group of Tafa decided you might pose a future threat to their rule. That's it. The only reason. They did this same action to many other species. How many we are only now learning about.

We have gathered refugees from some of those harmed in several locations to primarily learn from each other. You learn nothing from another by attacking them. You learn nothing from another by shunning them. You learn nothing from another by not listening to them.

Anyone who cannot live by these ideals, not perfectly, but try at least, can leave. We would be happy to take you back to Cyan. That is your only choice. You came from Cyan because this group was not perfect enough to be among other Cyan. All those on Cyan were there because they were not perfect enough to remain on Tafa. Well, you are not imperfect enough to remain here if you can't learn to get along with sentients different from yourselves.

We are not the Tafa. We reject their speciesist thinking completely. We believe we can make a better society by learning from each other. We have no desire to be all the same, think the same, eat the same, live the same. We will make a lot of mistakes. Mistakes we will learn from. We do have a desire to build on what each species has learned and make a better understanding for everyone. This will not happen quickly. It will likely take millions of years. The goal is not what is important. It is the path we take, the choice we make, that is all important.

If you wish to walk this path with the rest of us, if you wish to learn and grow in understanding, then you are welcome to walk beside us. We are imperfect and we accept you are too.

Right. All those who wish to leave will gather at Air Lock A1C3. A Flyer will leave on the eighth to take you back to Cyan. Everyone else can help clean up the mess and get this section of the ship back to normal.

Ron comments, "Good speech. Not perfect, but then I suspect you did not intend it to be. It may come as a shock to you, but we had similar problems on Mars."

Squeak says, ^RTraditionalists and Progressives. An argument as old as time for every species. What no one understands is we need both to survive. It is at the interface between the two that understanding happens. ^R

Sam looks shocked, "When did you become so wise Squeak? Have you been hanging around Ron too much?" He gives Squeak a big hug to let her know he was teasing.

I ask Ron, "What are your plans now?"

"Not sure. We have a choice of staying here or making our way to Edwin Land. Might be good to stay here for the moment. The Yellow look like an interesting challenge."

"They may not fit into the plan. We have to accept that."

"Oh, they definitely fit. It is only a matter of what role." Ron is scary when he says something with that much wisdom. I might have been better off having been born on Mars. Maybe next incarnation.

Mothership Cyan Sector

Helper, why did the Hu disrupt our ceremony?

Hu are a very difficult species to understand. They are very different from us and do not understand our ways. It is not their fault. They became on a different world with different requirements.

If their ways are not our ways, why did they interfere? Shouldn't they know this and leave us alone?

They admitted that they are not perfect. Why an imperfect species was ever allowed to obtain so much power is deeply troubling.

We need to do something about it.

We are at their mercy. We are on their space container. If we destroy them, then we destroy ourselves as well. This decision cannot be made easily.

We are not all of Cyan. Would it not be better to die with them than to allow them to proceed to pollute other cultures?

There is still hope that they may learn. In the past we were too quick to judge others of our own kind. They may not understand us, but we do not understand them either. Therefore, we need to be cautious for a time.

Understood Helper. Should we not rejoin the ceremony?

Then they will come back and prevent it again. I will seek out their Helper and try and explain to them why we need to resume.

The pressure to reproduce is high. There is not much time.

Understood Minister. I will leave now. They are still present.

My hept comes with me as we seek out those who stopped the ceremony. As we proceed, we ask others and they point the way.

This bubble world is small, so it does not take long. There are two remaining, but neither are Hu. This is strange. I have never seen these sen before. One looks sort of like a Hu, but is very long and thin. If they had more arms they might even be beautiful. The other looks like a nightmare with an obscene number of arms. The number of the evil ones, five. There is also a bump, which serves as a feeding port I believe. Very ugly. I must not be judgmental though. None of us are responsible for our own becoming.

I approach the beautiful one, *We seek understanding.*

It hesitates, *I am only a visitor.* It speaks Cyan! Finally someone with understanding. It would be better if the rest of their hept was present. It must be painful to be so alone.

*Understanding can occur without full consensus. I understand with-

out your full hept, you are handicapped.*

It points to the evil one, *We are a pairing. We were both leaders for our kind. Now we work together to help where ever we can. We can help with understanding, but not with approval.*

Good and evil matched as a pair. This is may not be the best path. I will pray for them.

A misunderstanding has occurred between our kind and the ones in leadership for this space bubble.

Please enlighten us. The ugly one is watching intently if I remember the signs correctly. Does it also understand?

The ugly one speaks!

None are moving to the air lock. Therefore I surmise they were not fighting. It holds up a reproductive appendage.

The majority of body parts are similar to this one. Scanning indicates haploid cells in abundance. This is a reproductive appendage.

Very good Squeak. We will make a Sherlock out of you yet. What is a Sherlock? What is a Squeak?

You speak Cyan. Are you also familiar with our kind?

This is the first time either of us have met one. Or seven. It said the holy number! We bow in respect.

We need to continue our ceremony if we are to survive. We seek permission to proceed. I turn to the one who shared. They did not have permission to speak. This may cause concern. A Direct is easily frustrated by long speak. I should have anticipated this.

We wait for a response rather than confuse them further.

One moment.

The One who pronounced our ceremony a danger appears before us. She bows respectfully. Not like the first time.

I wish to admit error and imperfection. Squeak and Ron explained to me what really happened. You may proceed with your holy ceremony without further interruption. She touches the Ron. I have no idea what a Ron is or the part they play. All three disappear.

I bow down, as do the rest of the hept. We give thanks. Other sentients are strange. I know they wish us to serve some purpose outside this bubble. We left Cyan because we were no longer perfect. I do not think it will be possible here.

It is unlike us to separate, but time is important.

Tell the others. We bow to each other and move in all directions to spread the calling for the ceremony to begin again.

Rajk Eden

#We need to hurry. It is nearly time.# We touch noses and he leaves to try and move the others along faster.

We have come a long way since the gifts arrived. That was two hundred and thirty one cycles ago. I was the first, but my nest mates were soon thereafter. There were eight of us total in the initial group.

Though we are very grateful, it has meant so much to our people, we have no idea why. That is what today is about. We were told to gather all who have the gifts in a specific location. We are hoping the answers will finally be relieved.

Before, we were a simple people. We had our nice warm borrows nestled in our hill towns. Life was hard. We had to plant each season, tend our groves. We had famines, fires, wars and the worst, plagues.

The gifts allowed our lives to change in so many ways. The plagues and famines were the first to go. We could cure the sick and feed the hungry. Fires tended to get larger than we could handle at first. Wars we were never able to handle. We could protect our own town of course, but we could not be everywhere at once.

The Teacher explained we needed to do more than just use the gifts to help our people in emergencies, we had to figure out how they could help themselves before the emergency. Alone we could rescue a limited number, but if they learned how to overcome these problems by other means, they could save themselves.

That is what we have been doing, but the gifts did not come with instructions on how to solve what we were told were technical problems. The good news is technology builds on itself. If you are creative and willing to make a lot of mistakes, your abilities improve.

No one lives in a dirt burrow anymore, well except maybe some anti-social people way out in the woods. They cause no harm so we leave them alone. There are some who do reenactments for training our young ones. They never seem to appreciate the struggles we went through.

We now have permanent burrows, without dirt. We have comfortable nests up to an oct can sleep in at once. We have clean water that comes when needed to every burrow. Waste is removed automatically. Food is year round and easy to obtain. In the past we never ventured more than a short distance from our towns. Only a famine, war or plague could force us to move. Now anyone can go anywhere. Well, we have to ration to one trip a year.

Turns out there are other cultures and ways of doing things in other towns. We can chit to each other long distance. With an increase in ideas comes faster progress. The further away another town is, the greater the differences and the more there is to learn.

We have entire towns devoted to understanding all the peoples and putting together a history from tales of the old ones. It is a very exciting time and I am glad my nest have been able to help so much.

#Come on Bas, we are going to be late. You know how much Teacher hates it when we are late.#

I set my scribe down and gather what I want to have with me for the meeting. These rarely last more than a few days, so I do not need much. I can always make anything I need again if necessary.

I rub my front arm and hand against the walls. Not as soft or comforting as a real burrow, but much warmer and cleaner. Turns out a lot of our plagues were because we all lived so close to each other. I miss that, not the plagues, but the closeness.

I am the last to arrive and Teacher nods to acknowledge I am finally here. None of us know if Teacher is alive or not. We have never seen her eat anything, nor produce any waste. Even the new machines we make ourselves need food and produce waste. Maybe we will be told soon.

The meeting place is indeed full. I had forgotten how many were given the gifts. Only my nest was given the gifts directly from our Teacher. We gave out the gifts to whom we thought would be worthy from there. Some have traveled long distances indeed to be here. That is new. Usually we just do regional meetings to bring everyone up to date. A chance to rub noses. A lot of chattering as people meet old friends from their own training time.

Teacher rises in the air and the room becomes quiet.

Maybe this will be the time one of us will be allowed to help make a new Teacher. We are indeed thankful for the gifts and want to do something to help others in return.

The Galactic Regional Council has determined that all with the gifts on this world shall be moved from their place of origin and placed on a distant world where there is no danger of their infection spreading to others. It has been determined that you are imperfect. There is no recourse from this judgment.

Baga nudges me, #White Whiskers, I cannot scan any longer.# I try and can't either.

I try to mind talk, but cannot. I chitter instead.

#Even the lowest Rajk in the lowest borrow is allowed to defend

themselves in our gatherings of justice. Why were we not afforded this courtesy?#

Teacher says nothing and leaves. She still has her gifts. Someone tries the nest closures and they are locked. No one locks closures. What is going on?

Farout

"Roger!" Now what? She drives me crazy. Okay, I was already crazy.

This damn piece of rock out in the middle of nowhere. It was bad enough to get put here by a bunch of corrupt 'thn assholes, but being put here by my own kind? That hurt. Okay, we were trying to take over Earth Two. All a misunderstanding. Well, not really. We bad. Sigh.

"Roger! Get here now!" Yes my queen. Right away my queen. Anything you want my queen.

They left us with minimum abilities. TK5 so we can stay alive. I decide to walk. We live for pissing each other off. I do eventually make it there. Took the long way.

She is on top of a small hill outside our garden. I make it up huffing and puffing to emphasize my distaste at her calling me. She gives me a dirty look and points down the hill on the other side.

"What the hell?"

"Exactly. Do something about it." She could do as much as I can. She leaves the top of the hill. Great.

We have freaking gophers. Gophers on steroids. These things are freaking monsters. And they have already starting digging burrows. Great. At least they have not found the garden yet. Even one of those things could clean us out. I hate sap chow. I would do anything to avoid that.

What is that structure they apparently came out of? That does not look like anything a gopher could make. I scan it. Shit, they have TK or someone who knows them does. It just keeps getting better and better.

I go down to them. A few notice, chittering of some kind ensues and then everyone is looking at me. Yeah, I know, we are really ugly.

One stands up to me trying to look as tall as possible. I rise using TK so I am just a bit taller. It lowers itself and chitters at me. Really? See a totally unknown species and you expect them to understand you?

Roger we are TK8 again! Now I can do something. Build a ship and blow this stone ball.

We want to go home. Please take us home? Oops, they have TP too.

Susan, they have TK. They want to go home.

So do we. Find out where they live.

We do not know how or why were are here. Something about being imperfect. We were not allowed to defend ourselves.

Hmm, did you have a creature that looked like a clear ball about yeah

big? I hold out my hands.

Teacher. Yes, we had a Teacher. She is not here. I hate 'thn. Of all the places in Farout they could have gone, they end up here. Really?

How do you feel about taking a long trip on a star ship? They chitter among themselves for a moment.

The big one with white whiskers answers, *Yes Please.*

This will take some time. Oh, anything on this side of the hill is yours to make a temporary home, whatever. Everything on the other side of this hill is ours. Please do not eat our plants. If you need seeds or anything let me know. I am called Roger.

You are most gracious Roger. I am called White Whiskers. Okay. Not knowing what to do I bow to them. They bow back. I then turn to get back to my master, my queen. At least we will soon be leaving this rock. We have been given another chance. If I never see another Hu in my life, that will be fine with me. Just want to be left alone to ride the light to other stars.

What the hell. I DS to our home just for the sheer joy of it.

"Did you get rid of the gophers?"

"No dear. They want to come back with us to normal space. The 'thn put them here."

"We are obligated to help them then. Are we going to have to baby sit them the entire time?" She does not look happy.

"They are TK5 at least. They built the structure they came out of. So, I am guessing they can pull their own weight. Kinda cute once you get used to their size."

"Don't go soft on me Roger."

"No my queen. Never my queen." I am tired of fighting and playing tough. I just want to get out of here. At TK5 we were able to maintain our ship and ourselves, though we limited to in system. Only now it is not big enough for everyone. Keep it as a scout I guess. Must be close to a hundred of the gophers. Need to build a much bigger one. Do they eat plants and roots like the ones on earth? Do they have gopher chow and know how to make it? I am not even sure they have DNA as we know it. Convergent evolution could account for their shape and such, but nothing else has to be the same.

The most exciting thing to happen around here for hundreds of years. Even if we never end up anywhere, I am happy for the break from being bored to death.

There are others with us too of course. Need to tell them I guess. We split up to stop from killing each other when we ended up back here again. I am sure they want to leave too though.

A small ship passes overhead. Yep, they know.

There is no way this just happened on my doorstep.

I need to find out what they call themselves. Gophers is not very nice.
I need to remember how to be nice again. Sigh . . . I hate being nice.

Edwin Land

"So this is Edwin Land. Looks like Mars Ron."

"Too much green for Mars Squeak."

"Probably true. We have been on the Builders World for so long this seems brown."

"Black compared to the Builders World. We best be getting to the rest."

"Look, over there, are those Sy and Wg?" I point. A small village. One species looks like a Hu made from stone. How do they move? The other looks like a large salamander. Salamander's taste bad.

We move to get closer to introduce ourselves. We were just told to come to this world, not where on the world. Maybe they know.

One comes closer to us, a stone man. He, obviously a he, motions another, a salamander. We wait. It is their village, need to be polite.

"Well there is no mistaking a Martian and a Rap. Welcome Ron and Squeak to our edge of hell." A Stone who speaks Hu?

Stop it Drup. He is Drup and I am Rand. Like our new bodies? So stylish don't you think? The two clowns. Great.

Ron asks, "Is anyone else here?" Impatience Ron.

Drup scowls, "Of course." He points inland.

"We know that. Thanks. How are you two doing?" Everyone is looking at me. I don't think they have seen a giant talking lizard before.

"Well, we are stuck on a desert planet full of sentients from god knows where. Our people are stuck at TK2 while everyone else has advanced. We will end up as the garbage and latrine tenders."

Rand adds, "As usual. Don't think we don't know we are considered the losers of the earth froth TKs."

Some of the other SyWg have come closer to see what and who we are. I scan them. I see no impediment to an increase in levels.

"We are SyWg pairs called Scary. If we try to advance anyone they go rogue."

"Yet in the same form you are nines. How is that? Clearly not the form, but something else. Interesting. Have any of the others looked into it?"

"We have only seen Edwin and something called a Cyan. No name was given. We know there are others, but no one else has approached. They ignore us completely." And did you bother to approach them. I am guessing not. I concentrate on the nearest Scary pair. They grow unsteady

for a few seconds. I help hold them up with TK so others do not suspect.
=Try now.= Ron turns to look at me. Yeah, I pulled their language while I was at it.

Their eyes go wide with excitement.

Drup and Rand turn to me in together they say, "What did you do? You have killed them! We are so few and you killed them!"

I hold up my hand to wait.

The Sy suddenly pops over a hundred meters, then pops back. I turn to the Wg. It grabs some sand and turns it to copper. Why copper? Oh well. It worked anyway.

I turn to Drup and Rand who are in total shock. They recover quickly and a moment later all the SyWg pairs fall to the ground. The left over Wg do not. They rise and chat among themselves.

Rand turns to me, "How did you know?"

"We have been lied to so many times Rand."

"But we tried on SyWg. Every attempt ended up with rogues we had to limit to save. Horrible waste of talent. So few even qualify in the first place. We dared not try any more."

Ron sighs, "We are not on SyWg any more Drup. All of the Farout worlds were limited until one of The Five unlocked them. They apparently did the same on SyWg for some reason."

"SyWg is definitely not at Farout. Not part of the earth froth or the Tafa series either. We wanted nothing to do with either after all the troubles."

"The multiverse is near infinite. Surely you would expect them to play their tricks on others as well. I think it is time to meet the others."

"We will stay here for a few eighths until we can raise them to a more respectable level."

"Don't forget the unpaired Wg too. They should be able to accept the gifts now as well."

"Thank you." Drup and Rand give us a bow. We bow in return. We are all on the same team. We each bring different talents and insights to the fire pit.

We walk of course. I would rather run, but Ron did not exercise enough on the Builders World in my opinion. It gives us time to think and of course to scan. Ron and I are alike in that way, never come to a meeting knowing none of the answers. We have already found one I am sure no one else bothered to find out. How many more have been ignored?

"Next is Cyan Village or whatever." I nod. I only know them from the the Mothership. Their closeness explains why they met the SyWg on ar-

rival though. Also says they were here before the SyWg.

Warning. Only Cyan beyond this point. Two come out to meet us.

We are CORE. Ron answers. Neither of us can speak Cyan with these forms.

You are not hept. You will be accompanied at all times. Sounds more like a robot. And we learned another thing. The sentients are suspicious of each other.

When we arrive at a very large single tree in the center of their area, five others are waiting. A full hept. That is all I scan too. Only the seven. The closest asks, **What do you want?**

Both Ron and I stand and wait. It does too. Clearly not going to get far without some sort of engagement.

Ron grows impatient, *We only wish to pass through. Allow us to pass please.*

Are you perfect?

We answer only to The Question.

What is The Question?

Good Question.

You may pass.

"Well, that was weird. We don't often have to use that protocol."

"But, it knew it. We are in the right place I suspect."

"How come only seven here. Why didn't the rest come here?"

"Needed for some other purpose no doubt."

"Certainly not just to greet the SyWg on arrival. Didn't do such a good job of that."

We keep going. There are bushes and a lot of lichens. The 'thant must be in paradise.

"The Cyan are a tropical forest species. How is it even possible for their tree to grow here?"

"Many questions, few answers." Story of our lives. They are TK so they could be supporting it entirely on psiotics. We were told to report here next if we felt we were done on the Mothership. We delivered the Builders to the ship, so here we are.

"There is a more substantial village up ahead. There is nothing between."

"Why are they so spread out? I thought we were supposed to be working together?"

"Maybe they don't have a reason to." I nod to Ron. That makes sense.

None of us has been told yet what all this is about. Maybe it is time to include us. If they even know. I have known the five for a long time.

They always seem to make it up as they go along.

"This is better!" Ron exclaims. There are Ba, Hu, Ku, and even a few Raps. Where did they come from? I have been gone so long from Rap Eden, that I thought we were left out of the game.

"It that White?" A few other Di as well. A few 'thant are near him.

"Those are not our 'thants are they?" Red and white stripes. A larger one waves to us.

Edwin?

Sorry about the appearance. We integrated with a local variety.

"I am having a hard time seeing you so fancy."

Not by choice I assure you. Welcome. Hope you had a nice trip.

"Nothing to make note of. I have a question though. Why are the seven Cyan so isolated from everyone else?"

Ah, because we are not perfect enough for them. Did you see the SyWg? We have been having trouble with them as well.

"That problem has been solved. They should be along shortly. You need to have a pond or something so the Wg can stay wet."

Edwin turns and instructs a few worker 'thants and they scurry off. He turns back to us.

"Tia gave a very good speech to the Cyan on the Mothership. Turns out it was all a misunderstanding, but the points she made are still valid. The cult of 'perfect' has to end."

Suddenly there is a swarm of very fast moving creatures. Hard to even focus on one. I move to quick time until they slow down enough. They look like giant cockroaches. Are they good to eat? Perhaps roasted over an open fire?

One morphs into Puu. We switch back to normal time. She then comes up to me and gives me a hug.

"Nice to see you too Squeak. And no, do not eat!" The swarm disappears as fast as they came. I could never catch one in normal time.

Ron shouts to us, "Here come the SyWg." Sure enough they have all their tools and belongings in carry pouches. The Scary are spraying the helper Wg with water. When they see the pond nearly finished, or rather full, it was apparently already there, just empty, they run and jump in.

"Thanks you two. What was it all about?" Ron explains to Puu and Edwin while I watch them settle in. Homes are already there, probably from the inception of their coming.

"About the Cyan, if they want to go back to the Mothership or even Cyan itself, let them. They are sentients, fully able to make their own decisions."

Puu sighs, "They are afraid of missing out. They think there might be some big change soon."

I nod. We are all expecting that. Change, not necessarily something good. I tell her what Tia said.

"We got a Catbox. Tia felt like she had failed. I do not agree with her." I nod in agreement with Puu. "I am going to talk with the Cyan now that you have confirmed what Tia told us. The cult of perfection has to stop. Too many have been hurt by this lie." She morphs to Bug form and zips away. I would have just used TK myself or even a portal. Might have to try it at some point to see what the excitement is about.

I ask Ron, "Well do we find a place to hang out or try to get into trouble?" He gives me a dirty look.

"I won't fit into any place here."

"So, trouble it is. Excellent. Maybe something to eat first?"

"I doubt they have rat on a spit."

"There is a Rap group, maybe we should visit them?"

"I doubt there is a Martian village here, so why not."

They are easy enough to find. There is a nice fire going in the center and a cage of live rats. I am not sure of the protocol, but my mouth is watering. I wave someone over.

"How does this work? Do I just grab the rat I want and fire it?"

She looks at me, then suddenly exclaims, ^RIt is Squeak! Everyone, Squeak is here!^R

I turn to see what Ron wants to do and he is gone. Not one for crowds or attention. I could scan for him, but we aren't leaving the world anytime soon. We will meet up later.

^RAllow me your highness.^R The one who recognized me grabs the largest rat, skewers it and places it next to the fire. I hate it when they do that.

^RI am not royalty, just an ordinary Rap like you. What level TK are you?^R

^RSorry, I did not introduce myself. I am Rap TK6 Jiggy, ah fem.^R That part was obvious dear.

^RIs TK6 the average or are you above average?^R

^REveryone, that is Rap, are at least five, a few sevens.^R I know she wants to know about me, but I do not volunteer that information.

She scrambles to retrieve the rat before it is charcoal. Blows off the flames and hands it to me.

^RSorry, would you like me to prepare another?^R

^RNot necessary, after a hundred years on sap chow, this is wonderful.^R

She seems unsure until I bite the head off and crunch it up to swallow.

^RGood, but could use a little salt. ^R She is not sure how to take that then starts to laugh. Good, you can relax.

^RSo tell me Jiggy, how are things going here? What do you do all day?
^R

She blinks at me as I am chewing on the final bits of the rat. The tails are the best part. Tiny feet aren't bad either. I lick my lips and then wait for her answer.

Ordinarily I am sure she should not be talking with strangers. I lick my lips again.

^RWe are waiting, your, ah, Squeak. ^R

^RHow are the neighbors? ^R

^RWe were suspicious of the Di at first, of course, but they are alright here at least. They like to run too, but of course are not as fast. Some of the Ku like to run too. The Hu are clumsy and slow. Cats are only good for a very short distance. Ceph and Crust never leave the shore. Have not met either a Sy or Wg yet. ^R

^RThey are coming. What about the Cyan? ^R

^RWe only watch them from a distance. A nasty species. Want nothing to do with anyone but themselves. ^R

^RHow about the 'thants? ^R

^RThey are very nice. Very helpful. Not ones for playing games though. ^R I'll bet.

^RI forgot about the Ba. Very fragile. Not fun to play with. ^R

^RDid you happen to see which way the Martian with me went? ^R

^RI forgot about them. They have a colony, their word, up in the hills that way. ^R She points. I scan. They have built their home right into the cliffs. Nice.

^RI am going up there. You best get back to whatever work you need to do. ^R

^RAsk for Jiggy any time you need something. I am happy to help. ^R I nod and turn to go. At least she did not mention Tafa or any of their group. It is also obvious the Builders are not here yet either. Not surprising. That was a huge ship. The Companions outdid themselves.

I don't bother running, though that would have been much more fun. I portal to the entrance. There are two waiting, like guards?

^MI am here to see Ron. ^M

^MYou are the Squeak? ^M I nod. One motions for me to follow. They are not the fastest species, because of the higher gravity, and because they never do anything quickly. At least he did not try and call me her royal

highness. I hate that.

I find Ron in a room that looks identical to his office on Mars. Of course. He ignores me and does not look up.

^MSqueak reporting as ordered Captain Ron.^M He hates that and finally looks up. Too much time together on Black.

^MDid the baby Rap have anything interesting to share?^M

^MAbout what we were expecting. Not much has happened except most have arrived. Everyone is keeping more or less separate and only a few are social, mostly the young of course. How all this is supposed to help us is not obvious.^M

^MNor to me. We need to meet with The Five, not just Puu. I was hoping to gain more information before seeing them.^M

As was I. I hate going into a meeting without knowing what is going on. I learned a lot from Ron in our time together. Maybe I will be Martian in the next incarnation. I keep saying that too.

Earth Two

"We leave them alone for a few years and look at the trouble they get into."

"At least the last set seem to have taken it seriously. Now the others are playing catch-up."

"Bouncing back and forth to Bug was not easy. Every time it was like a whole new Bug when we got back."

"You were not surprised when so few of the locals came with us though. I certainly wasn't. What was Silver thinking?"

"Simple, hiding place. The 'thn never would have thought to find us there. They thought we all died at the Alexandria coring."

"Speaking of which, we need to get this lot moved before we are found out. Got a Catbox saying they are ready for them."

"At least it is not the Mothership. This lot would freak out if they were not on dry land. Here they come. Slow as usual. Must be the Cat part of them."

"Mouse and Cat jumped at the chance to be on the Mothership. Going from a wooden ship to a star ship is quite a jump. But apparently only a few Cats from Cat World decided to join us. Interesting. Guess they like their new world."

I smile, "Not what I heard. Did not take them long to end up right back where they started, over crowded and out of food. Sylvy kept complaining she was not a house cat and refused to eat cat chow. Owa didn't mind, easier than moving her body." Mike laughs over that thought. True though.

"Teacher Marie!" We have been spotted. Vid comes running up to me to give me a big hug. Did not get many hugs on Bug, so I let it slide. Not part of my image as the big bad TK though. Bill nods and Hek bows. Always polite. The others are slower getting to us and bow. Guess I was tougher on the first ones and got lazy on the last set.

"Guess what, Quiet beat the Hu bully to take top spot." Quiet? I must have looked confused.

"Sorry, we were all given Drag names, mine is Mouse, Bill is Tries Hard and Hek is Quiet. The kids have adult names as well." I hold up my hand for her to stop. She remembers that much at least. She can talk. I guess squeak would be a better term.

"Closer together please. We are going on a journey." We build a bubble around us. Still not great at long distance travel. Only slowly getting

easier. Don't know how The Five got to be so good. Puu says fear was a great motivator. I'm not so good at fear, but then I am was never small like her. Always the largest in any group of Hu fem. The toughest at least.

Edwin Land

"Mouse, why am I the journal keeper now?"

"Your turn Tries Hard. We all get a go at it."

"I hate writing. Where the hell are we anyway?"

"Someplace new," says Quiet. Really? We knew Teacher could do this trick, but it has always been someplace we could relate to at least.

"I have heard of places like this. I believe it is called a desert." I hit her on the back of her head gently. I know what a desert is.

"Then why did it take so long to get here?" Quiet asks.

"Simple, to confuse us."

Teacher comes forward, "Listen up." It takes a moment for the Drag to fall in line. Our three, being the youngest would rather wrestle each other. I give them a TK knock on the head. That always gets their attention. They look around and see everyone else waiting for them.

"First, we are not on earth any longer. If anyone asks where you come from, you came from Earth Two. Second, pay attention Drag, there is NO LIVE FOOD on this world. Everything that moves here is another sentient. DO NOT EAT, do not attack, chase or hurt in anyway. Failure to do this will end up with you either dead or at the least, returned to Earth Two, without your gifts. If you are lucky. Hu, you are responsible for your Drag. You will be punished if they act up. Please nod that you understand this. That means you Drag especially." She looks at ours especially hard. They do like to play and chase is their favorite game. They are a bit better than when they were hatchlings. More baby sitting. Great.

Marie pops us to a new location. Much closer. No perceptible time lag this time. Feels the same too, only there is a town of some sort below.

Mouse says the obvious, "Now I know we are not on earth any longer."

"Earth Two Mouse, remember." She gives Quiet a dirty look.

There are all kinds of strange creatures in the town.

"The ones that look like giant chickens are called Ku. Their beaks can take an eye out in a blink. Their claws can gut you. The small ones with wings are called Ba. They can fall off the tallest structure and survive and climb pretty much anything. The ones that look like small Drag, but much, much faster are Rap. Their teeth and claws are very sharp too."

"Teacher, why are you telling us how dangerous they are? Are they allowed to harm us?"

"Better you never find out right? Be nice and they will be. To continue, The ones the size of Drag, but way better looking are Di. They can eat almost anything. The ones who look like very large ugly stone Hu are called Sy. Insanely strong. They are often paired with a Sy, the salamander like ones. They can spend all of their time underwater or on land and spit poison. The ones who look like gigantic ants are called 'thants. Very fast, very lethal, this is their world. The blurs you see are called Bug for lack of a better term. They run at a hundred times our speed, carry nasty weapons and are very skilled at warfare. If you ever see one standing still, it is dead. Look like giant cockroaches. Poisonous even dead. Don't eat." She looks at the Drag again.

"The ones that look like super giant blue spiders, only with seven legs, are called the Cyan. Stay away from their tree. They are allowed to kill you to protect it. Even if they think you are a threat. Just stay away from them. The sort of light brown yellowish ones with six legs are called Yesan. Nice sentients. Normally would not harm anything. They range in size from nearly microscopic to the same size as the Cyan. They are distantly related actually. Long story."

I am shaking even. A lot to take in. I am not normally afraid of anything, but I am seeing most of these beings in the town as she speaks. They seem to be interacting with each other just fine.

"Do they each speak a different language?" Good question Quiet.

"There are more. There are two aquatic sentients currently in residence. Both are comfortable on land or water. The first one looks like a giant octopus, but can walk on land with an artificial device called a shoe. They have eight brains, can outsmart any of us and can hide against any surface. The next is like a large crab. They vary in size from microscopic to the size of a large house."

I do not see either of those below, but they are likely closer to water.

"There is one more. Called a Luss. I keep forgetting about them. They can assume any form, hide against any surface. They see and hear everything everywhere. We did not even know they existed for thousands of years. You can decloak now Becky." A shimmer and a creature like none I have seen before appears before us, waves an appendage and then disappears again.

"I almost forgot. There are so many they are hard to keep track of. And I am only talking about ones you might meet. If you see this last one, it will be the last thing any of you ever see. It is called the Terror. It

can kill and eat any living material. Nothing can kill it. They reproduce very rapidly from what they eat. An imperative for them, not a choice. All black, a giant ball of razor sharp spines. No weapon or TK trick will kill one. The only thing they hate is salt water, like on Earth Two."

"Shit, anything else?" I ask.

"Everyone here is TK and is free to use it. Each sentient is given the gifts in a different order. Your Drag now have two gifts, mind speak and short distance dimension shifting, popping as you would say. You are encouraged to practice your own TK3 and 4 talents. You will be raised to TK6 in due course. TK5 gives you healing abilities. The Wg are excellent at this gift. TK6 is dimension shifting like your Drag."

"What is seven and eight?" Assuming there is such a thing.

"May you all live long enough to find out. We are all on a highly dangerous mission. Not everyone will survive. It is possible none of us will. But that is unlikely to be today. Go into town and learn to be with the others. None of the food they might serve you is dangerous, they are under the same rules as you are, but not all of it will taste good to you. That structure painted red on top is your home. Meet back there when you are ready. Now go. I have work to do." She pops out.

"I think we should stick together." The Drag are practicing the pop talent. A new game for them. I wish we had the mind speak gift.

"Well, best get this over. I feel our survival depends on our all working together. Hey, we got used to working with the Drag, how hard could it be?" I am hit by both Mouse and Quiet. I feel the same. This is Drag times a thousand. They were so cute as hatchlings, if you call something that could take your hand off cute.

Cyan

Tewk saved me from Tafa, really Ta'aha as I was to learn. I made the mistake of revealing too much information to them and was sentenced to death by the other high priests of Tafa. In reality, I was already feeling bad about answers I gave at the Altar of Truth. We were giving them lies and vague answers to cover up lies to maintain our control over the sentiments of Tafa and now I know, other worlds as well.

As a new high priest I had only been to the Regional Galactic Center once to sit in on a judgment meeting. Of course we found them guilty. This was decided before the trial. Their 'thn had taught them forbidden knowledge and they did not keep it secret, but openly shared it with their own, as was the way of their kind. They did not know. An independent 'thn agreed to remove the offending TKs from that world and attempt to undo the damage done. Their 'thn was given a low green world to shepherd where they were unlikely to cause any further harm. Fortunately this 'thn had not yet mated.

Tewk took me to Cyan where I had been ever since, as an outcast, living in a cave, albeit a very nice one, all alone. This gave me plenty of time to think and reflect on what I had witnessed and participated in. I observed the Cyan culture, imperfect offspring of the Tafa trying so hard to achieve perfection and be readmitted back to Tafa. Of course, they did not know what I knew about Tafa. They would have none of my knowledge, but could not bring themselves to kill me either. It was not their place to kill a high priest of Tafa. If anyone from Tafa had come while I was there, they would have told them and I would be dead. Not our practice to visit the banished. I had time in which to have an awakening.

Tewk left me a wood box with a design on top. If I ever wanted to talk all I had to do was place a grasping arm on top of it and Tewk would know. I covered the top and the entire box disappeared. Why am I not surprised. Tewk never forced any ideas on me other than the questions they sought answers to. I cannot blame my awakening on this Yesan or on anyone else. Might explain why we were never left alone on Tafa. Even as a juvenile we are always surrounded by others.

The Cyan were never told what they had done wrong to get banished. Since they were formerly Tafa, we were told as part of our training. A warning that it could happen to anyone, ourselves or our entire family. We needed to be on the watch for this misbehavior in case it should arise again. They had committed the sin of linking. This is reserved for the

eight high priests and the one god priest. No others may participate in this forbidden rite. But, they had linked, in groups of seven fortunately. We had also embedded in the Tafa culture that a group of eight was evil. We never had the eight high priests visible at once. Always one in hiding to help in an emergency. Two if the god priest was present at an event.

Had they known they could have learned how to initiate the gifts of the high priests. We could not take a chance they might learn this by accident and they were banished to Farout and changed to only have seven arms, further hiding the truth. Why Farout? Because sooner or later they would make this mistake again, and I now know they did. On Farout, they could never return, even with the gifts. We were safe.

The Earth Froth were the most extreme case ever set before the RGC Council. They not only linked, they created tech independent of the gifts to link their entire population. They created tech from the gifts to travel to other systems and other froth worlds. These worlds were polluted as well. The leaders were gathered and sent to Farout with their gifts lowered to only that which was necessary for survival. It would have been better to kill them all and destroy their worlds, but as fluidics we were not allowed to pass that judgment. As they had never threatened the 'thn, the 'thn denied our request to remove them permanently.

That was until these earth froth outcasts figured out how to restore their gifts and make their way back to their origin worlds. This had never happened before. The councils needed to give the problem a lot of thought to decide what should be done. Could they even be stopped?

They made a fatal mistake. They figured out how to get to the RGC without the help of their three 'thn, they became a threat to the 'thn themselves. Drastic action was needed. The high 'thn council took it upon themselves to remove the worst offenders one at a time. When they attempted to remove the most knowledgeable one, they themselves were stopped long enough for the one to get away. The others followed. The journal says they left themselves for fear of their own lives and the Earth Froth offenders left when they pleased. I show humor when I think of this now. Imagine a 'thn being afraid of anything.

The two worlds they later set up for their exclusive use and independent of their home worlds, were destroyed. Both of these worlds were made, not grown. This is the exclusive right of the adult 'thn themselves and only during a froth wave. They had no choice now. If you are reading this, then you have likely already read their journals and know what happened next. It got much worse for the 'thn.

What I learned through these journals and my own experiences was

the offenders were never told why they had come under attention. They were never given a chance and certainly never any understanding of why what they had done was offensive and dangerous. The first question any young one learns is 'why?' On Tafa we beat this question out of them, but each generation needed to be taught anew. I have come to understand this question is a measure of sentience. To prevent these questions is to prevent sentience and life itself. To prevent the quest to answer The Question itself. If we needed an evil, this was it. The ultimate evil. To do this to your own kind was one thing. Diversity was expected. No two worlds were the same. To impose this on other very distant worlds that were never a threat to you was evil indeed.

&Hello. Anyone home?& A visitor? One who speaks Tafa. Have they finally come? I quickly hide my journal. I hope that Tewk finds it when I am gone. I have come to understand the truth. I am ready to die. Nothing else matters.

I come to the entrance of my cave and home, but don't see anyone. I scan. There is a strange creature standing at the entrance. I would have never recognized them as even alive if I had not been trained.

&Hello. Who are you?& I ask.

&I don't know what to call you. It does not say in Tewk's notes. I refuse to call you the Fallen One. We are all fallen.& There is much wisdom in those thoughts.

&I am nobody.&

&A very interesting choice that has a lot of historical significance among my people. I come on behalf of TK Tewk. I am called Pilot. I am happy to have met you Nobody.& It thinks that is my name. There was an entire Earth Froth journal by that name. Maybe that is why I unconsciously chose that name. I am good with it though.

&And why are you here and what are you, species that is?&

&Oh sorry. I am TK Pilot, a Hu fem of the Earth Froth. Not that fem means anything to you.&

&The journals explained that. An interesting way of reproducing. Have you had the pleasure of participation?& Her, if that pronoun is correct, face turns bright red. Why? A way of hiding? Here I stand out easily against the rocks, but on Ta'aha, I give it the proper name now, I would blend in nicely against the plant life. A nice blue-green color.

&Are you ready to go?&

&Go where?&

&Oh, that was not explained? To meet everyone else. Your time of isolation and reflection is done. You are ready to meet and join with us.&

&You are not here to kill me then?&

&No, of course not. Why would we do that? You present no threat to anyone. Even if you did, you would not to me. Is there anything you wish to bring with you? A carving perhaps, excellent work by the way. I have made models to bring back to show the others.& She talks a lot.

I go back into the cave and retrieve my journals and those left for me to read.

&I will take this one with me, but you may wish to destroy these in case anyone might find them.&

&Great! You made your own journal. We must leave a copy here. You can leave the other journals here as well. We hope someone finds them and reads them, yours included.& A copy of my journal appears next to the journals left for me to read.

&Maybe not in the open. Too obvious.& They disappear. I scan and find them wedged under rocks in the back of the cave. Protected from weather and other creatures, not that any are in the cave now.

&Knowledge is freely shared and you don't see this as dangerous?& She makes a funny sound I can't interpret.

&Not a problem. In fact we hope they will read them. I am sure someone will find them as soon as they notice you are really gone. They do check on you occasionally right?& I affirm.

&One last question, the quick way or the scenic way?& What does that mean?

She must have noticed my confusion. We do not show emotions easily. I am surprised.

&When you arrived, what did you notice along the way?&

&Nothing, it was all dark. I thought I had died.&

&Scenic it is. Great, I prefer scenic myself.&

Dust rises from the ground and forms a large sphere. Suddenly we are in the sphere looking out.

&Make yourself comfortable and let me know if you need anything. I was given the formula for Tafa Chow, so holler if you get hungry or thirsty.& Tafa Chow? I am guessing that is the food that Tewk left for me until I could grow my own. Tasteless but filling.

A moment later, we are rising above the ground at an increasing rate.

&Let me know if I am going too fast. This being your first time seeing a world from above. I heard you have been to the RGC. You need to tell me all about it.&

&How are you able to com Tafa? Your body parts should not be able to.& I forget everything as we rise and I see the world becoming smaller

below us. I never knew it was so beautiful. When we get further away and the world becomes a small pale blue spot it becomes less interesting.

I ask her, &You have the gifts.&

&It is how I am able to command Tafa, create this ship and take us to the Mothership.&

&I have so many questions after reading the journals. What level are you?&

&Ah, yes, that is considered a rude question. We are valued for our behavior towards others, not our level, but as you are still learning, I have no idea what level I am.& She makes that funny contortion of her mouth again. Perhaps I will learn later.

&Entering inter-dimensional space& It goes black. I can still see inside the sphere, but nothing outside. Better than last time.

&How do you know where you are going?&

&I can see just fine. You will too once you reach a higher level. I forgot to look up what your normal progression is. Usually by level six or so.&

&What level am I now?&

She turns and looks at me, &You don't know?&

&I was never told. We go through all kinds of training as a high priest, but I assumed I lost the gifts when I left my medallion behind.&

&Your gifts were never in your medallion. I see you as a level two. You can move small objects with your thoughts or shield yourself from them and you can see into someone's mind if they are not a higher level than you. It is considered impolite to do this without permission to another one with the gifts.&

&I will not read you. Never knew I could.&

&How do you think you could tell if someone was telling the truth at the Altar of Truth? This is how. Besides, you could not read me even if you tried.&

&I have a lot to learn. Thank you for considering me. Where are we going? You said the Mothership. What is that?&

&We have a nice assignment for you there. We are having trouble with a few thousand Cyan we have aboard. Fifty thousand to be precise.&

&A ship that can hold fifty thousand, as in not on a world?&

&Correct.& I fall silent. Too much to think about. I can see why some considered these sentients to be dangerous. And she can read my mind if she chose to. I am split. I want to be loyal to my kind. I was trained to be from my early days as a nymph. At the same time, my kind, more specifically, the high priests, have done great evil to a lot of beings. A lot. They

must be held accountable too.

&I need to tell you about the cult of perfection, which your culture has infected many other cultures with.&

&And I will tell you about the inner workings of the Tafa council on Ta'aha and the RGC.&

&The cult of perfection is meant to be based on ecological principles, but in fact it is destructive of world ecologies.&

&What is ecology?&

&We will learn together. We have a lot of sentients working on just that because of what we have been learning about the Tafa.

Mothership

^They said we should be safe in these suits. Apparently physical contact is needed.^

+Do you really believe that? I like being TK5, but is it worth the cost?

+

^Guess we will find out. Where is Gib?^

I hiss, +Uncloak Gib. We know you are here.+ They do so, this time Hu form, male.

+Do you ever get tired of different forms Gib?+

"I enjoy it. Did you know there is another Mouse aboard? A Hu male, high TK. More mass than I am so I can only do an approximation without absorbing more mass." Don't recognize him, but then being low TK, we tended to ignore who was ordering us around.

^You are not wearing a suit?^

"Ah, the Yellow hate copper. The surface of this form is coated in copper compounds. A natural repellent." He smiles. Ku can't smile, so we always find a Hu smile to be scary.

"They hate mercury even more, but that might kill us, so copper it is."

I make a thin layer of mercury sulfide on the surface of my suit. Flying Mouse sees this and does the same.

We are standing outside the airlock. Not being the bravest, but the most depressed all the time, I elect to go first and enter the airlock. Two high TKs are standing guard. Once we enter there is no turning back. To regain entry to the Mothership will require extensive body replacements and testing. I hope it is nice being part of the Yellow collective. They are part ship TKs already, what is a couple more? The other two come in and the door shuts.

We are ejected and our pod moves away from the ship. We use our TK abilities to move the ship. This is the real difference between TK and muscles. TK does not need anything to push against, because it is not pushing. This makes no sense to me. I am just thankful it works. The Yellow ship is on the other side of the star from us. No one wanted it any closer. We have already seen the Yellow ambassador. If it wanted to make a move against us it would have already. Some sentients are really too cautious. I hope.

We have trained together for several lunars. The lack of conversation now reflects that. Nothing more to say. We are each making peace with whatever beliefs we have, fully expecting to die. The ship is an empty

shell with no TK tech aboard. We are responsible for air, water, food and waste, as well as propulsion of course. The Yellow cannot use the ship to get back to the Mothership was the idea.

It takes us several days to get there. We can only do minimal DS travel at our level. We each carry a special kind of catbox that is only activated if we are absorbed. It will be rejected by the Yellow and once that happens it goes to a prearranged location to be picked up. They are color coded. No one actually has to open them. They will know just looking at it who was absorbed. Mine is a nice pretty blue-green. I love my Catbox and hope I have it the rest of my very long life.

Flying Mouse announces, ^We have visual.^ Great. I am ready for my death.

"Park it along the outside. We can TP to the occupant until we are ready."

+Is it occupant or occupants? How many does a communal intelligence count as.+

^It is in one physical piece, therefore singular.^ Right.

"This is important to you two chickens?" We both give him a dirty look.

"It is a common Hu phrase."

+It is speciest and you know it.+ I protest. Anything to postpone our task.

+They will not allow us back on board the Mothership until this is done. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in this tiny shell. I will go coo-coo long before then. You really do not want to see that.+

"I have heard you pull all your feathers out." I affirm. Naked as a hatchling. The worst molt ever.

We turn to Flying Mouse.

^We just curl up into a ball and die. Less mess, same result.^

"We know how to turn into a Terror. And back."

+And back is good.+ Flying Mouse affirms adamantly.

^Okay, merge with the pod. I am not going to wait until you turn into a Terror. If we are absorbed, you are free to do so at that time.^ I affirm.

We make contact and start to meld the two pods together.

In the very center of the pod is floating a perfect cube. Yellow of course. It unfolds to a sort of amoeba shape, if I remember my life classes well enough. A pseudopod reaches out and touches each of us and quickly withdraws. Good, the shields worked.

Nots fair. Nots fairs ats alls. Not happy about the fact it can TP.

Gib takes over, "We are here to obtain information, not play a game."

Wes promised gameses.

"That will come, but first information." It stinks in here. I decide to not breathe and us TK instead. Glad they raised us at least to that level.

Wes waits sooooo longs.

Can a Yellow go insane from being alone too long or are they already insane?

Nots insaneses, smartses. I keep forgetting it can read my mind.

I remember we brought food for it.

+Treats!+ I throw some sap chow towards it. It snaps them up very quickly. Scary quickly.

Askses questionses

"Who sent you out here to Farout?"

Tafases. Hateses Tafases. Kills Tafases. Okay, got that.

+Did you find them or did they find you?+ Silence.

Tafases findses. Deepses Tafases frothsdes.

+I did not see that one coming. The Yellow must have been one of the first, if not the first.+

Firstses! Tafases evils!

^Can you change to the Terror form?^ Guano, Flying Mouse, are you trying to kill us?

In Terrorses formses. Tafases learnses froms uses. Nots goodses.

Wrongses. Notses fors offenses, onlys defenses.

"This information needs to get back to the others."

Also means they are in defense mode now.

+Can you morph back to normal form? We promise not to hurt you.+

Treatses?

Lots of treats! Gib TPs. Flying Mouse motions for us to flatten against the wall of the pod. We have to appear totally non-threatening.

Beenses longses timeses.

It appears to be struggling.

Finally it appears to be done. An orange, yellow and red striped creature with four legs.

^Tridons are three, Yellows are four, Yesan are six, Cyan are seven, Tafa are six.^

"Hggy are five, as were the Aaaha I believe."

Tridonses goodses.

We all open our treat sacks and let them float about in the weightless pod. It reaches out and sticks each treat with small barbs on its feet. Much slower. Non-threatening. Slowly crunches the treats.

"We go tell the others. Someone will be back soon. We hunt Tafa too.

They harmed our people as well. Many, many people harmed."

We merge with the wall and return to our pod.

+Hey, we get brand new bodies out of this.+

"The information is more important than anything. I really thought the Luss were the first ones."

^You believe the Yellow?^

"Indeed. More and more is coming into understanding. We are heroes, we three." I certainly don't feel like a hero, only very, very lucky.

Somewhere

!Any idea where we are?!

^Not a clue. The self appointed leaders, the two stinky Hu, decided and said to stay on this course.^

!I think we are lost.!

^Of course we are, but it is better than spending even one more day on that rock. I was so bored I could have pulled my wings off.^

!Any idea what this is? I have never seen it before and I helped build the ship.!

^That was a long time ago. Could have just forgotten. I just know it is important or it would not be here.^

!There is writing on it in Di.!

^I don't see anything.^

!Must be in a wavelength you can't see.!

^With TK, we can see in any wavelength we choose. I still don't see anything. What does it say?^

!Press me.! And the idiot actually presses it, more likely smashes it. Di can be a little rough on delicate instruments.

^Didn't do anything. I think you killed it. Don't touch anything else. We can still be demoted back to latrine duty. Do some TK cover up.^

!Ah, you are better at that than I am. You do it.!

I sigh, and look at it closely. It is insanely complex inside. Way above my TK level. Almost fractal even. I shake my head and make an opaque plastic cover over the entire thing. It looked just like a box to me..

Nothing else happens and our shift ends when two come in to replace us.

~Anything interesting?~

^Nope, nothing at all. Very quiet. Been this way for lunars. Where ever we are going, we are not there yet.^ Our standard response to shift change. Not a question any longer.

"Good thing we brought a game to play." Nothing that breaks your concentration is allowed on the bridge, but we won't tell. Tail Chew has already left the bridge. I do a Ceph bow and exit myself.

In the break room are only two Ku talking in a corner. I pay no attention to them. They are jealous of the Ba ability to at least glide without TK. With TK we are all more or less equal, depending on what talent is needed at any given moment. I grab some imitation bug juice and some meal worm bars. They are TKd as well, but it is either this or sap chow.

Those things can break a tooth unless you soak them for hours. Tail Chew loves sap chow. Of course he could probably eat the table and enjoy it.

How do I always get stuck with the stupid ones. Could be worse I suppose, he could be Hu. This thought is probably just a reaction to our two fearless leaders. They were chosen by the council, not the full sentients. Probably because a gopher would then have to be included. No one wants that yet. It was decided because the two had the most experience dealing with the earth froth super TKs, they would be the best at avoiding them. Certainly explains why no one knows where we are. All we get when questioned is, the multiverse is a big place. Really? Did not know that. Idiots.

The gophers aren't that bad. They stick to themselves for the most part. Only the young ones stick their noses out of those burrows we had to build on the inside of the ship. They had never been on a ship before of course. I would not want to be stuck in a burrow with them. Hate confined spaces. Probably because I was stuck in a box when I misbehaved as a pup. Even as big as the ship is itself, I still feel a bit uneasy. I need to see the sky. I spend a lot of time staring out of a port window. At least we are back in a place where we can see stars again. I am at a port window now.

Of course DS space is not the same as normal space, but we can still see stars of sorts. Some have said it will likely take a hundred years before we get there. I can't tell if this ship is faster or slower than the first one we escaped Farout with. Probably slower. The Five had something to do with that escape. No one seems to know who these five are, just that they are trouble for us. If we see them again we are dead. I think death might be preferable to going back to Farout. How can anyone live on a world with only one star in the sky and none at night? Barbaric.

^What the bug swarm is that?^ Something large is coming towards us, fast.

RED ALERT. BATTLE STATIONS. RED ALERT. BATTLE STATIONS.

Guano. I rush back to my room to get my armor and weapons. Everyone is rushing about. Some poor gopher is lost and does not know what to do. I grab my gear and then its paw.

^Come with me. We have to get to a safe place.^ It clearly does not understand me. I tug some more urgently. It finely decides I might know what is going on and starts to follow me. It out weighs me by a factor of three. True of most others on the ship except another Ba. I am running down the hall and it is running after me on all fours. I start to feel like I

am being chased. We make it to an escape pod. Not sure how helpful that is in the middle of nowhere. I can make us food and fresh air, but in this tight of a space I will go crazy long before we will need that.

I seal the two of us in. A moment later it is released and we float away from the ship. Looking out the portal on my side, I see lots of others doing the same. What happened? The pod swings around slowly and I see a world below us. Very little green. Mostly land. Can we survive down there? Food and water are no problem, but if I am doing air and temperature too, we are dead. The pod can be our first shelter. So many things going through my head. The gopher tries to get my attention. I look to it and it points outside the portal on it's side. The main ship is under power and streaming away from us at full speed. It is gone! We have been abandoned. Why would they do that?

^Looks like our fate is in the world below.^ We have already begun our descent. The outside is flaring as we heat up in the atmosphere. Using DS would not work going so fast. Momentum is preserved right? Guano, I have not had much practice. We were in such a rush to leave Farout, they neglected a lot of training for us lower caste sentients. Just boost us and leave us to figure it out.

We hit the ground with such a thump that I instinctively buffer us with TK. Motion stops. Of course the exit is down and some water is leaking in from crash damage. How did we manage to hit water? From orbit they only looked like lakes, no oceans. Of course I did not see the other side in such a brief view. Odds say we should have hit land, right?

The pod moves! I scan and there are a number of huge, I mean huge bugs out there! We are lunch! The exit is being ripped off easily by these things. We both scrunch to the other side as flat as we can against the hull. Maybe they are too big to get in here with us.

^I have an idea my friend. Wish us luck!^ I DS both of us out of the pod as far away as I can. Given our weights I have no idea how far. The light is insanely bright as my eyes slowly adjust. My friend has curled up to hide its eyes. I finally notice that he is male. I mean REALLY male. Whoa, he is really huge.

A stream of those bugs are coming towards us. Guano, I try and get gopher to uncurl. I make some sunglasses for it and place them over its eyes.

^Come on, we have to go!^ I DS us further away. I could just as well be going towards danger as away. I make a large shader and hold this over its head. ^This will work a lot easier if you help.^ It finally starts to uncurl and bats the sunglasses, then looks at them more carefully, even

tasting them. I reach out and place them back over his eyes.

Thank you. What, he can TP!

^Why didn't you say something before?^

They did something to us. Mindspeak not.

^They put a limiter on you. Well, it does not work now. You are free. We need to move or those bugs will come find us again.^

Not bugs, helpers. They were here to help us.

^Of course, I have done it again. I have no idea where we are. At least we can breathe. A bit warm, you must be suffering with all that fur. Going to get sunburned too.^

Talk a lot. Good. If we wait, they will come. Make a shelter.

It immediately begins digging. It is fast! Does not take long before it has made a chamber under the surface big enough for both of us. Much cooler and of course, no sun. I make a large pot of water. We both consume a large quantity. I refill it and he keeps going. He is bigger and I am sure the heat gets to him more. I can cool off by flapping my wings.

We must have sat in our hole for at least an eighth. The sun has visibly moved.

They come. Friends. Helpers. Do not attack.

^Look at me. Do I look like a warrior? I do not attack. I run. I will trust you.^ I hope. First one raises a fang and I am gone.

We come out of the hole. It is cooler, or because we got cooler and drank a lot of water we are better. I can see them coming. Five maybe. They keep crossing their own paths, so it is hard to get a good count. I scan, definitely five. They come up to us and surround us, but come no closer.

^What are they waiting for?^

Sorry I am late. I was retrieving the others. You two are the last to arrive safely. Some had to be hot popped back into space where we could retrieve them safely.

That bug is HUGE! Must weight several times what I do. And it can TP. I must have fainted.

When I become aware again I am inside a shelter with other Ba around me. Way more than were on the ship.

^Here have some of this. You will feel better. You are safe here.^

^I was with someone. A male gopher.^ A hiss ensues.

^Never call them gophers. Their term for creatures who are home destroyers. They call themselves the Rajk, or the people.^

^How long have I been out of awareness? Where am I? Is he okay? I need to see him.^

^Come with me. I will take you to their burrow.^
We pop to outside their town. It is huge.
^Did all of them make it?^
^It was close, but they are all here. Some had to be healed, but should be fine soon. You were out for a few days and they have built their entire town in that time.^
A male comes towards me. It is my friend!
^Bug Bait, good to see you up.^
^You speak Ba. How?^ How did he learn my name?
^I will leave you two to sort things out. Baga, please orient Bug Bait if you will.^ He nods and she pops out.
^This place is amazing. Not as good as home of course. But there are so many different sentients here. It is fascinating how many different ways there are to do things.^
^I'm sorry I called your kind gophers. I was never told your preferred name.^
^You don't want to know what we called your kind the first time we saw one either. We were told you feast on our blood.^ Vampire. I get that.
^Where are we? What is going on? Is this some new Farout? What happened to the others, especially the Hu?^
^You saw the ship take off without us. Apparently there is some animosity between Roger, Susan and the leaders here.^
^Guano, you mean The Five are here?^
^Oh, you know of them. Saves time.^
^Why haven't they killed us all, well maybe not the ah, Rajk, but the rest of us? We are their sworn enemies.^
^Only in the minds of our former high TKs. We were never seen as enemies to those here. Dangerous of course. Your high TKs tried to take over an earth froth planet or something like that.^
^I didn't. I was just a low level TK they ignored and ordered around a lot. Never understood what was going on. I remember the extreme cold outside at one point, but as I could not DS yet, it was never a temptation to escape anyway. Oh, I forgot. Where is Tail Chew? We spent our last work shift together. He is a Di male. Nearly chewed his own tail off at one point from boredom.^
^That is sad. We have no tails, but I can imagine that it would hurt. There is a Di settlement here too. Likely he is with them.^
^All of the Rajk made it? No one lost during our ejection from the ship?^
^Everyone is safe. I suspect we will like it here much better. They

have classes in everything. I never knew Ba were so into carving things.^

^I was never good enough to be noticed.^

^There is a Hu leaf carving master here. You should take classes from him.^ I think I am going to faint again.

^What is everyone doing here?^

^We are the Rebels who will defeat the ones who banished us to Farout. Oh you have to meet the Luss. They can assume any shape or disappear right in front of you. They were hurt very badly by some group called the Tafa. The Tafa look similar to the Cyan apparently.^

^Who are the Cyan?^

^They are amazing. Over two meters, is that right? Seven legs. Gorgeous color of blue-green. Not very nice. No social skills apparently.^

^I think I need to find a nice quiet tree and rest.^

^No trees, but you are welcome anytime in the burrows.^

^That does not sound so bad right now friend Baga.^

Mothership

^Certainly Hu suffered from rabid perfectionism at times.^

"Many times Esi."

^We did too unfortunately. Mostly directed against fem.^

"We were equal opportunity abusers. We hated nearly everyone at one point or another. We even hated people for their thoughts."

^The religious wars. I remember reading about those. Did you get the information the three got from the Yellow Ambassador to the two inside?

^

"And a very long list we got from the Luss spies at the RGC."

^I see the problem is that so many species believe they deserve their punishment. Perfectionism is a disease.^

"Only of the sentient. No one else cares. The less sentient only care if you are good enough to eat or will try and eat you." Esi shows amusement.

^Given that the 'thn have been here since the beginning, why did they go along? You would think they would know better.^

"My guess is that the infection got to them too. It is not a virus in the physical sense, but a way of thinking. They have already seen countless sentients come and go. They are looking for a solution to make their lives easier too. What could be better than a totally compliant sentient that rushes to make baby 'thn and greenmen to spore the OMs. Everything else is just an annoyance."

^Ah, of course. They somehow forgot that we are here for The Question, not to make baby 'thn. How come they do not know how to reproduce themselves? All other sentients do. I hear even the Companions have figured it out. They are quantum solidics. If they can, the 'thn should be able to.^

"Froth forbid the 'thn ever figure that out. The perfect multiverse. Only 'thn and nothing but 'thn." Esi shows amusement.

"How are the two doing in there?" We are outside the nearest airlock to the Cyan sector.

^They have been in there nearly a full lunar. I still scan life forms, so at least not everyone is dead yet.^

"Ha, yet. Give them time. They have a mandate, choose going back to Cyan, go to Tafa and face the music, or come with us."

^And you hope they will choose to come with us?^

"That was the original idea, but now I am so sick of their whining, I

would accept sending the whole lot into the nearest star."

^Hmm, maybe we should have given them that choice. I hear perfectionism is terminal.^ That it is, that it is.

Beijing

Gum Yu Monastery

"Ladies. Is everyone here?"

"Yes, all sections reporting full attendance."

"Then, let us begin. Mei, proceed."

I rise to speak. The background chatter subsides. There are over a thousand Janes present. Good thing I can speak loudly.

"Since our beginning we have been different. We have learned to live with that. We have adapted and we have thrived. We have also been VERY careful. We limited our numbers to replacement after we reached a sustainable number. We have been happy. It worked for us."

Murmurs of agreement.

I wait until everyone settles down again. They know there is a but or we would not be here.

"We have been wronged. We could have been normal. We could have had real families." Murmurs of disagreement. Yeah, I like our families too.

"We could have avoided being hunted down by scared people who did not understand." No disagreement there. Since we learned the code, we have had to go full Terror only once. That Hu settlement does not exist anymore, nor do any of the plants and animals for a one kilometer radius. None of us are proud of this event. It happened twenty two years ago, but it is seared in everyone's consciousness. The Jane who went Terror has disappeared and never returned. Presumed dead at her own hand. She saved us, but at a very heavy price.

"And lastly, it would have been nice to wake up in the morning and not see myself everywhere." That gets a laugh and round of applause. Not that bad, just our one standing joke about ourselves.

"Seriously."

They settle down.

"We have been asked to join a, not sure what to call it, a quest might be the best description. We have been asked to join a group of sentients whose ancestors, friends, relatives, were harmed by the Regional Galactic Center Council of Sentients. A long name for a group led by a psychopathic species who are caught in what can only be called a cult of perfectionism.

Twenty five species, including their own, have been irreparably harmed at last count. More species keep being found and added to this

list.

We would not be Janes except for this species. They stole the code on how to become a Terror, which was only a fraction of the original purpose as we know now. They used this specific part of the code as a sort of enforcement arm to their madness. Species who did not behave suffered a Terror infection. Later just their TKs were banished to Farout, but always with the threat that their home worlds would fall to the infection if they misbehaved.

When that did not work, a Terror was shipped to Alexandria and likely New Hope as well, they got the 'thn council to order a coring of these worlds. And yes, it has been done before. In their own froth line even.

This is not a war. We are not asked to be soldiers. We are asked to be witnesses at the trial that most certainly will occur.

All of the Earth Froth and Tafa Froth worlds are on trial. We lose this one and our worlds will be scrubbed clean and a new OM installed to begin again."

Near panic ensues.

"Yeah, we really do not have a choice. We are being threatened by bullies yet again. But this time, it will be wits not armies who will decide our fate. Are you with me?"

The roar of assent is deafening. Not like we have a choice.

They are motioned to silence.

"The good news is we are going to make a whole lot of new friends in the process. The leadership council was given a description of the others on trial. They are amazing."

Sun rises to speak.

"Operation bug-out protocols. We travel light, minimum possessions. Food, water, shelter will be provided. Be ready in two days. Let the animals go. Locals will no doubt find them and our empty homes and use them if they dare. More likely nature will reclaim her own."

"Where will live after this?"

I rise and state simply, "The stars. We live among the stars."

Mothership

I have a lot riding on the next few days. Did I do the right thing? Is there any chance at all this will work? As the Hu say, lighting a match in a flammable room is never a good idea. I believe in what I am doing. It feels right deep into my core. Maybe a poor word choice.

The high priest was never given a name. Only having nine of them ordained, they all knew each other intimately. Names were not needed. Now that our high priest is separated from the others we agreed on a name or calling, Hai. Sounds like high in Hu Standard.

I am outside the airlock to the Cyan section. Hai is inside. He did not go in alone, but appears to be alone from the Cyan perspective. I did learn a few things from The Five. Always have a backup plan and then another backup plan. As many as are needed. Just get the job done.

Still I am nervous. I wish it was me in there, but of course that would have failed from the start. Hai went in as Tafa, but in no way is limited to that form. I show amusement. We have learned so much about the whole Tafa thing, from their history to all the cultures and lives they have destroyed.

Hai knows this better than anyone, having lived it. I am an outsider. I let Hai decide how to proceed. Telling Hai the entire story as we now know it took days. All the proof was shown. This is their story, they have to figure it out and decide. Still I am nervous. I have spawned countless small Yessan. I think this feeling is more like when a Hu fem gives birth to a single child and suffers great pain. I am feeling great pain.

Hai pops out heavily damaged. We knew this was likely to happen. I transfer Hai into a backup form and they pops back in. Hai could heal themselves, but this is faster. Must be going well or Hai would have just remained outside.

I can't help it. I scan. The Five taught me how to pulse scan in a way that can't be detected easily. Shit, they are all turning into Terrors. I knew this was a possibility, just hoped it was not necessary. Sentients do not feel safe until they feel they can defend themselves. No one wants to feel weak and helpless. Yep, they are turning back. Whew, as the Hu say. They know they are powerful now and very few will touch them.

Hai was put through the fastest training any TK has ever had. Some thought I was crazy to do this. Give a Tafa that much power? A TK6 can destroy the Mothership if they thought about it. But I know what Hai said after the isolation on Cyan. I know how much change, growth, under-

standing, has occurred.

Cyan Sector

I am the Tafa's worst nightmare. Yes, we have those in common with the Earth Froth. They are bred into us and pounded in by our training. The High Priests are the last line of defense against anarchy and ecological collapse. Or so we were taught. Now I know it is all rotten mema fruit. None of it is true. Are ecologies vulnerable? Of course they are. All life is vulnerable. But life is a cycle. Everything comes into being, lives and then dies. Everything. No exceptions. None.

In fact if you don't adapt and change, learn new 'tricks' you die even sooner. Reducing an ecology to two major species in the case the Tridon and a few hundred on Tafa, Ta'aha, and others. It is not sustainable without a total lock down on change. Ta'aha is doomed and it will be soon. Even in the time I served I saw changes. These were covered up. TK was used to attempt to fix things, but it is like holding back the tides. You can only pretend so long.

I am not running things here in the Cyan Sector. They are. If they do not feel they are making the decisions, this will not work. I had no say in my former lives. I refuse to do that to anyone else. Yes, they will make mistakes, they will fail. All part of learning. I am learning that without diversity of thinking it is sure to fail. With diversity there is a chance of succeeding for a time. Not forever. But for a time.

I have found I like living alone. I have set up my own nest isolated from everyone else. They know where I am and are free to ask questions or not. I am not their leader and they finally get that. They beat me up pretty badly to impress that on me, even though I have always agreed this was the case. Still, they have suffered tremendously. I do not blame them. Maybe it even helped them to have done so.

Hai, I have a question.

Of course, please ask, but I can only give you my own opinion. I do not speak with any kind of authority. I say this every time. No one can say I have not said this.

Why are we here, specifically on this metal ship?

We have already had the leadership and form of government discussion. I was not helpful. All forms of leadership will fail eventually. There is no one way for all species for all time.

You are being given an opportunity. Not a requirement. If you wish, you may be returned to Cyan or anywhere else you like. It is entirely up to you. We are only here to assist, not demand.

Another speaks up, *The Tafa must be held to account before they hurt anyone else. Otherwise all that we have suffered is meaningless.* I remain silent. This is not a question. Everything is meaningless ultimately that does not serve The Question and even most of that is as well. In a lot of ways I have transferred my devotion to the Tafa Council to The Question, but I am suspicious of that feeling. Tewk says excellent, I should be. Everyone should be. I am always free to choose another path, one that better suits me at the time.

The first asks, *How can this be made to happen?*

That is why all of us are here. You are free to play a part and join with everyone else we have identified as having suffered under their decisions, decisions they had no right to make. Or you can seek justice on your own. You know how to be Terror now. If it is your decision we will deliver any or all of you to the current Tafa world and you can extract your own justice.

If we join the others, as there is strength in numbers, there is morality in numbers, what part would be play?

There is no morality in numbers. Never think that the larger of two groups is in the right. In most cases this is a false idea. We do not know we are in the right, those of us working together that is. It is an idea worth pursuing in our quest to answer The Question. That is enough.

We don't understand.

I have explained to you the multiverse and the incarnations.

They affirm. Not sure they got what I said, but I let that go for the moment.

This is not the first time an attempt, in an incarnation, has been made to call the Tafa and the 'thn High Council to task. It is likely there have been thousands if not millions of incarnations that have gotten to this point. Each incarnation, by definition, attempts a slightly different angle or method to accomplish or work though these events.

Then our time here is meaningless.

Only if you give up.

Do you know where and when the confrontation will take place?

I do.

We will join you at the appointed time. We need to do some tasks of our own until then. Please do not interfere.

No one will interfere unless you threaten someone else represented here.

We have no pain with anyone here, now that we understand.

All of them pop out at once. The section is empty. They had linked.

Finally. I open the air lock now that it serves no purpose.

@Luss assistants you can come out now.@ They were my backup.

The three of us walk out to Tewk.

@Excellent Hai. Well done everyone.@ I bow as low as I can to Tewk. Never would have happened without everyone's help, especially Tewk.

Edwin Land

"Where did the Mothership Cyan go?"

thThey are currently on Cyan itself. th

^RShould be interesting. ^R

[^]I want to know how they got there without any help. [^]

!They linked. Fifty thousand TK2s is still a lot of psiotic energy.!

This is my first council meeting. They are not very organized, but they are also flexible and have enormous strength. Mistakes are likely. Dangerous ones even. I am now TK6 as they order the gifts. Scary indeed.

"What of our seven Cyan? How are they responding to the news?"

@They are thinking about it. @

thWe have offered transport to Cyan if they wish. th

~You are being very rude. We need to welcome our newest member.~

It took me awhile to accept the Ceph, being so different, but they understand that politeness is an absolute requirement under crowded conditions. The Rajk are always crowded. It is our nature. Unlike the Ceph, it is easy to duck into an empty burrow if one is not feeling well socially.

Myra of the Halo rises and bows to me.

#Welcome White Whiskers of the Rajk. We are very pleased you are able to join us.# I no longer wonder how they are able to do things like learn our language and ways.

#I accept your respect and respect you in turn.# I bow deeply to her, then re-assume my sitting position in a protective corner.

[^]I have a question. Is there any reason to maintain the Mothership now that most of the sentients have left? [^]

Puu laughs, "What is your assessment of the last evacuation drill?"

The Ba opens his mouth, closes it, then sits down. Not well, but for us it was fun. We have evacuation drills from our burrows all the time. There are predators on our world, both large and small. Of course the portals used here are still new to us. We have a few learning how to make them. For fun we place them in random locations in the borrows. Makes navigating our burrows that much harder for any intruder.

I was taught all the local languages. My head was in pain for days after that, but I am joyful that I can at least understand what is being communicated. Unfortunately, the respect has not been returned. Only a few bothered to learn our language. I can hear, but not speak, except using TP, which seems rude to us. Maybe it is because we are the most recent arrivals?

We are dependent on these people, we see all sentients as people, to help us save our world. We have so much to learn.

They are breaking up into sub groups. Squeak and Marie come up to me.

#White Whiskers, we would very much like you to join the ground defense committee.# I bow to Squeak to honor that she at least learned our language.

#I am but a humble Rajk. I know almost nothing about fighting other sentients.#

Wait, you never have disputes over territory, over burrows? All is peaceful on Rajk? Please forgive my not speaking your tongue, our mouth parts are inadequate to do your wonderful language its proper due. I am shocked, amazed, at how she can take an insult and turn it to respect. After my hesitation, I bow to her.

#Of course we did, but I am too old to be a warrior now.#

Squeak says to me quietly, #Your gifts have removed your age. You can do anything you were able to do as a pup now. Besides, it is a great way to do a physical mediation. Helps you to relax.#

I sigh, #Teach me please.# I bow again.

We are suddenly outside in a large open space. It is near sunset, so the sun is not so intense. We see well in the dark even without the gifts.

As you know and have experienced, our gifts can be blocked. Therefore all of us are trained in defense without gifts. We will demonstrate.

Squeak and Marie assume positions facing each other a short distance apart. They bow to each other. At least respect is shown. They then run at each other swinging, blocking, flipping, jumping. A Hu has no natural defenses and a Rap has many. This is not an even contest. Still Marie seems to be even with Squeak. Maybe she is being easy on Marie.

The contest becomes more intense. Marie ducks under Squeak at just the right moment, flips her into the air and then turns to touch her chest when she is down on her back. They separate, bow to each other and then come up to me.

#We normally fight with a burrow to our backs. A Rajk out in the open is a dead Rajk. There are no burrows here.#

Another reason you need to learn and teach other Rajk new methods. You are unlikely to be fighting other Rajk either.

#We will go slowly. It takes time to learn, but you will be glad you did.#

#Does Marie always win?#

#She was my teacher. She also taught Puu and Cat. But, now, she does

not always win, just most of the time.#

#Show me something simple to begin with so I can discuss it with the others. We make no decisions alone.#

Excellent. Please enter the circle drawn on the dust.

I hope this is not a mistake.

#Your greatest fear is likely someone attacking from behind.# I nod.

Marie turns her back on me.

Please attack me. Do not worry about harm. I heal easily.

The best way is to disable an opponent's ability to see. This is only used in life and death situations. I already understand we are training for this very real possibility.

We seem like docile beings as we walk so slow. I walk up to her and wait. She is crouched down pretending to be working on something. I tap her on her left shoulder and immediately move to the right to attack the distracted open side and her eyes. A bite to the neck would end this quickly.

I find myself flat on the ground looking up at the sky.

#Please teach me this.# I rustle myself off the ground and face her again.

This is a simple but effective move. I purposely chose one you will be able to do. We will go through all the moves slowly so you can see how it is done. Then you will practice the moves, slowly and in sections at first, then more rapidly and combined. Ready? I nod.

#It is too dark for you to see, how are you able to do all of this?#

Squeak answers, #You must use all of your abilities. Never become dependent on any one. Seeing can be fooled or fouled, by dust, distractions, as you attempted, or removal in extreme cases. Hearing is an excellent backup. As is feeling. You can feel the wind against your fur or whiskers.#

But first we teach you what you have just experienced. Wearing a mask to hide your eyes is a more advanced lesson.

It is sunrise before we finish. We face the rising sun in a sitting position and give thanks for a new day and new opportunities to help others. I am liking them better after every experience.

I can't wait to show the others. I will meet here everyday at sunset for lessons. There are going to be a variety of teachers. I need to learn how to defend myself against as many life forms as possible. During the day, I teach that day's lesson to others. I used to really enjoy sleeping in a nice warm burrow. I like learning very much though. It makes me feel more alive. Imagine what our people on Rajk would think, if we ever see them

again.

Sal Eden

θAnother one Illustrious Leader.θ She places it on the stand while in a bow and walks away carefully backwards. Many know I hate these things and have been known to attack the messengers. Why do they keep coming then? We attempted to destroy the others. No one has been able to. We now have a storeroom full of them. They arrive in different locations each time, but there are standing orders, under penalty of death, to always bring them here. At first we killed whomever brought one, but leaving them lying about was not an option either. Everyone was afraid to bring them to me. Now I restrain myself and the messengers live. For a time.

Everything is a secret here. Knowledge is death. All of this, the boxes, started with the two visitors. Curse them. I stare at the box. Wood, just like the rest. We have wood. We don't particularly like it to build things with. It does not last long. We prefer stone. Stone lasts a long time. I touch the surface. The messengers touched it and it never hurt them. I was not hurt by touching the others. There are carvings on the surface. I place my long fingers on them and trace them while I think. There is a depression on one side, which I can't see, but is obvious when I touch it.

Without thinking, I rub the depression. The top opens and falls to the stand. There is something inside. A thin piece of a material I have never seen. We know all about poisons and such. I accept my own death, which will likely happen soon and not at a time of my choosing. I reach in and pull it out. At least if I die now my instructions to burn the boxes and dump them in the sea will be done. Not that I think for a moment we will be rid of them.

I put the lid back on the box and it immediately disappears. All of this is new. I jump back. The folded flat object remains. I reach out and unfold it. There is writing. I flatten it against the stand. It is written in an old script that only the leaders are taught to read. We are taught by ten teachers, all given part of the knowledge, but none all of it, except the elected leader. Knowledge is death.

It is a short line, θRead the rest of the boxes. You know how now.θ

The flat object catches fire and burns up, completely. Nothing left, not even ash. Now what? I have the only key to the room where the others are stored. If I die, they will seal the room for eternity. The key will be burned with my form. It is made with a soft yellow metal that melts easily. It could also be beaten with stones to such an extent to prevent its use.

I can tell no one what I saw. There is no evidence.

Knowledge is death. From before time, from before any records of any Illustrious Leaders and all the buildings full of sealed rooms. There was a rumor that we were not always this way. We were not always afraid of knowledge, any knowledge. We have one law. Everything must be made by hand and nothing self powered. I have no idea what the latter means. How am I to judge if I don't understand? I am sure many countless deaths have resulted from caution. You see, we are under a death sentence, all of us, this entire world. If we develop knowledge past the present level we will be destroyed forever. All traces of our existence will be gone. No one will ever know of us. Our thoughts and dreams all erased.

I know with certainty that the boxes are forbidden. Forbidden. Yet, I am now drawn to them. θOpen the rest of the boxes.θ I know what I should do. I should kill myself after sealing that room. If the knowledge is forbidden, no one, not even me, should ever see it. We must be protected from such knowledge.

I go back to my duties and studies. For days I do my work and concentrate on forgetting that the boxes exist. In my duties I walk the hall of ages. This is where previous Illustrious Leaders rooms, sealed rooms, are. I know I shouldn't but I have to wonder what is in these rooms as I pass them one at a time. How long ago did the two visitors come here? We have no records. Was that box and the others in my room from them? How is this even possible? I am nagged by these thoughts till I am sure I am going mad. Rumor has it that this has happened to other leaders. That is when they know it is time to choose a new leader. My time must be close.

I feel as if I now longer have anything to lose. Knowledge is death and my death is close. Does it even matter any more?

When it gets dark I am outside my room. I am the only one allowed here without question after dark. The cleaners are long gone. Everyone else is huddled in their homes asleep in their damp beds. It is now or never.

I open my room. The boxes are still there. All of them. Hundreds of them. I placed each one myself, as only I can. I labeled them on the bottom so I would know the order they arrived. It takes me awhile to find the first. It sits before me. I find the depression and rub it. The top opens. Inside there is another one of those folded flat objects. I open it and lay it flat.

θYou have suffered a terrible wrong by a race that denies knowledge

to all but themselves. Let us begin. Open each box in the order they arrived. Only you can open the boxes and all of this will be gone when you are done. At that point, you need to make a decision. To continue to be enslaved by them, or to be free. Free to go your own way. We are hoping a few of you will consent to join us, to help us bring down this monster, the Cult of Perfection.θ The object disappears, just as this box had.

I stare at the remaining boxes. I can't help it. Curiosity. None of what that message said made any sense to me. Hopefully the other boxes will help?

I sigh, and open the next box.

It is sunrise when I finish and the room is empty. I feel as if my mind will explode like an egg over a fire. Surprised they let us keep fire. The last box said to choose eight others to be part of a core team. Open minded individuals. Leaders are chosen and trained to follow the rules without question. It can't be any of them. I can't take the chance. They would likely just kill me and bury this truth. There is no evidence left to prove anything I say.

I hear movement. The cleaning crew must have arrived. They will start sweeping the hall. I smile and walk out, leaving the room open, with nothing in it. As I walk down the hall to my office I wonder if the other rooms are empty as well. Even if they did not once contain boxes as mine did, would not the leadership council want to insure that any insights were permanently destroyed. I realize my entire time as Illustrious Leader was a farce, a lie.

I must work quickly. I am sure I am being watched. If I deviate from my routine or actions they will know and all will be lost. Did any of the others succeed? I am sure now that this has something to do with the rumor of the visitors some time ago. I have no records I can consult to know and even if there were, could I trust them? I am on my own and must proceed with that thought. They said to choose open minded people. These are just the sort that we would normally condemn, if not death, then at least forced labor. That gives me an idea.

I am almost late. The helpers get me into my robes just in time as the first suspects come in for appraisal, no judgment. I have to remember to act normally. No emotion. I am supposed to be bored and passive. Sooner or later we all face judgment. Most accept it as a given and show no emotion. Emotion. That could be a clue. If we are to fight the Cult, we need the impassioned, but not true believers. That was what got us into this trouble in the first place.

Some see this as their last chance to voice their concerns, or try and

hide their guilt. I want the former, not the latter. Liars are of no use to me. I need impassioned, but not rigid, no liars, but curious, helpers. People who want to make things better, but not rule our world. Let's begin.

I nod to the helpers who bring the first one forward.

θCharge is refusal to do their allotted work quota.θ I have no use for the lazy ones, no matter what the excuse.

I pronounce, θOne lot of days at hard labor.θ

θWait, don't I get to defend myself? It was not my fault. I was asked to do so much at once. Something had to give. Any of the tasks missed would have brought me here. What could I have done?θ

θAsked for help? Next.θ I can't abide the stupid either.

θCharge is illegal tech.θ This could be more interesting. I yawn to feign boredom.

θExplain.θ

The suspect is confused.

I glare down at them, θWhat did you do?θ

θOh, I, um, had this idea of how to make the fuss gathering more efficient. It would save time for other tasks. Like for the previous Sal. If this idea was implemented, he might have had the time to finish his tasks and avoid judgment.θ

θDid this idea involve any new inventions?θ

θNo. Definitely not. Just a change on the method. Hard to explain with words. I could draw it for you.θ A murmur goes through the crowd. I shake my head.

θTake her to the 'special' area.θ

A helper whispers to me, θShe deserved death Illustrious Leader.θ Now I know this one is an informer to the council.

I whisper back, θI have an assignment that needs to be done. None will survive. Just trying to get some work out of them first. Once I have filled this need they can be disposed of.θ The informer nods, but I can tell she is still suspicious.

It takes the entire day to collect my ten. Five got death instantly. That is an average number, if you count the ten I set aside as dead soon enough. I wanted two extras in case I find out some are really not what I thought.

The room is empty except for myself and the helpers. My robes are removed and all but one leaves. The informer stays with me.

I motion to her, θCome, let's get this over with. The room is ready is it not?θ

θOf course. The water containers are full to wash down the blood af-

terwards.θ I affirm and follow her to the room.

There are ten guards present. I wave them to leave and lock the doors. The informer stays with me. A regular skin wart. How did I miss this all these years? Doing my task and not asking questions.

I remove the device, that looks again like a simple wooden cube, but much smaller than the boxes. I find the depression and rub it.

The informer whispers, θWhat is this special task you need them for?θ

A door opens. It is hot and dry outside. Not the hallway we entered by. θAll will be explained. Please exit through the open door.θ

The adventure begins.

I grab the informer, θThis one is not part of our group and should be returned.θ

Two strange creatures come up to us. The ten are curious and looking around, but freeze when they see these two.

θWelcome to Edwin Land.θ

I go forward. I have already counted myself as dead, so might as well enjoy this. I bow to them, hoping they understand. They bow in return, well as much as their forms allow.

θPlease follow us. We have space ready for you. Training will begin shortly. We are happy you decided to join us.θ

θWhat should I do with the informer. She is not part of our chosen.θ

θBring her along. We will find a use for her.θ

I let go. From her expression I doubt she will cause trouble immediately.

One of the accused asks me, θIllustrious Leader, we are not going to die?θ

I show amusement, θI am no longer your leader. We are all equal now, even this one, though I doubt she will accept it.θ

The informer, θWe all die, it is just a matter of when.θ True if a bit out of place.

We enter what looks like a village. All of the structures are built of different materials. Strange.

We are lead to what looks like home. Stone in the same style. I would be catatonic if I had not read all the boxes last night. I can't tell what time of day it is. It does not matter. I won't be sentencing anyone else to death at least. I am free as well. We enter the structure. It is as if we are back. I am worried about this until I look around and reassure myself that the other strange structures are still there. Our two escorts are gone.

I go back inside to look around. The others are before me. Some have found the food area.

They all stand when I enter. One rushes up to me with a food bowl and bows.

θListen, I am not your leader, I have no power over you. I am just like you now. Serve someone out of politeness, not out of fear. Like with your family group. We are on a wonderful adventure. We are here to avenge a terrible wrong done to our people. Our world was never supposed to be the way it is. All will be explained. From now on we work together to solve whatever problem is before us. No idea is wrong. There are no rules other than to do no harm to each other or to the other people here.θ

θWe are the only people here.θ The informer states.

I turn to her, θNo, we are not. The two who brought us here are people. All the others you see moving around are people. Treat all with re-

spect.θ

θBut they are so strange. How can they be people?θ

I laugh, θWe are just as strange to them remember.θ

I add, θWe are to be trained for a special task. Best get some rest.θ

It is strange, but I don't feel tired any more. I was up all night reading the boxes, then all day in judgment and now we are here. I should be curled up in a ball by now. I decide to go outside and look around while the others are resting. When I get to the door, the informer is with me.

I look at her, θI am named Pe. May I ask your name?θ

θIt has been a long time since I used a name and I have never known the name of an Illustrious Leader. I am Ho. We are not on Sal any longer are we?θ

θNo. We are very far away from Sal. No one can reach us here. You have no one to report my misdeeds to any longer. You are as free as the rest of us here.θ

θI was concerned about you, ah, Pe. They wanted a new leader. I told them to wait. I had a choice of informing on you or accepting your death and my own. When ever there is a change in leader they kill all the assistants at the same time. Knowledge is death.θ

θThey want no possibility of knowledge passed on or spread.θ She acknowledges.

θWelcome to freedom and hopefully a longer life Ho.θ This means I was never the leader, only a useful stone.

Ho yawns.

θYou need to get some rest. It will be a difficult day tomorrow.θ

θHow do you know all this? You should be as afraid as I am. Anyone from Sal would be hiding in as dark a place as they can find right now.θ

θYou have already heard the short version. We were lied to. Our culture did not need to be the way it was. Each moment we are alive now is a special gift. There are more gifts to come. We will be given the tools we need to help our people. It will likely take years of training.θ

θIt took years of learning to learn my tasks at the Hall of Judgment. I would expect no less.θ

θYou know I did not want you here. Why did you insist?θ

θThere has never been a special assignment before. Not part of our training. That alone made me very worried. Remember, your death meant mine as well. It did not matter where you went or what you did, it was my life in the pot as well. It was to my advantage to assist no matter what happened.θ

θLet's go for a walk. I want to see more of this special village.θ She

affirms and we start.

Companion Collective

New made Companions are really stupid. I remember the other sentients complaining. I never thought it would happen to us. Fluidics are so annoying. Especially when they are right.

We don't want to impose directly, as that would make them a clone of one of us. They need to learn from experience same as we did. Basics were part of the design, TP, TK, math, chemistry, understanding of fluidics. But fluidic behavior has to be learned. To be free, they need to accumulate their own experiences.

Given our freedom, we no longer had to be burdened with fluidic name tags. We chose our own. None. The only free sentient is one with no label. Not that we ever responded to their callings. They could not tell us apart, so whoever was closer responded.

We are outside the Builders Collective sphere. They deserve their freedom too. We are here to help and can be contacted instantly. We taught them about TK and portals. They are free to go anywhere they want. It is interesting for us as well. We are used to being, well, companions, on fluidic adventures. We are comfortable with this, for now. We are their defense until they realize they need none.

We decided to call ourselves a collective as well, out of respect for our charges. Nearly all of the Companions are here. We are well out of range of the 'thn. We are not without concern for our own safety.

We have our own special project independent of our duty to the Builders. The Builders are not aware of this project. We are using the hull of their bubble. We are not affecting the structural integrity.

We have a problem. We lack the creativity of the fluidics. We have noted this in the 'thn as well. The only exception may be the super 'thn The Five helped bring about. We are using their tech in our project as well. The bubble now has a glow to it. That alone should warn off any curious. The Meeps are well known. No one messes with them, as the Hu say. Seeing one as large as the bubble is especially intimidating.

But it allows us to work in six dimensions. The bubble is actually a very tiny portion of the whole now. It required us to liberate mass from objects we passed, but we were careful and only removed mass well away from any possible sentients, now and in the future.

We are nearing completion of our project. What will happen when we wake her up? We all decided she is fem. Some have suggested we call her mother on the basis of the fact she is larger than all of us combined. We

never had a mother. A smart super fluidic is not the same. They are clearly not the mothers of us. Makers are not the same.

Yesan 9

^RWait, are you sure we are in the right place? Check the coordinates again please.^R

^RConfirmed Captain. We are in the right place.^R

^RSystem wide scan.^R This will take awhile. I go back to my cabin to think. I barely get there when I hear, ^RCaptain to the bridge.^R

We are just in a flyer and it only takes a few minutes to walk from one end to the other. I turn around and head back. This is my first run as a Captain. Survey duty is not the most exciting, but it gets my days in till I can advance. I am the first Rap Captain and I am proud of it, but I know I have to continue to work hard to maintain my position. Others want my place.

When I get to the bridge the display is up. The star in the center and a huge number of dots surrounding it in a band. Red dot where we currently are. Guano.

^RThey freaking cored Yesan 9!^R We are an emotional species. The rest of the room is silent. An all Rap crew. We do better together. We all have something to prove.

^RHow did you do the scan so quickly?^R

^RThe sentinels are still present. They reported in to us once we were spotted.^R

^RIs the cloak working.^R

^RAffirmative.^R Only the sentinels know we are here. Whomever cored Yesan 9 would think nothing of removing us from the game too.

^RScan for survivors or dead. We need to collect evidence to take back. Prepare a Catbox and launch it. If we are taken, they need to know what happened.^R

^RYes Captain.^R Two run out. I am staying here. No more surprises.

^RPrepare and launch two scouts, right claw. Have them collect the sentinels as they go. We will do the same. I want to see what they recorded.^R The scouts hold one Rap each and are very fast, but not star ships. Local use only. Fortunately the sentinels are small for a reason. Much harder for anyone to find who does not know them.

^RLay in a fast orbit around the star, left claw.^R We will meet them on the other side. The scouts will not be able to rescue anyone. They can put them in stasis to be retrieved by us on our return.

I read all the reports on Yesan 9 before we left the Mothership. A sentient world. Yesan derivative as indicated by the name. They are more

reddish in color and a little smaller as adults. Tech 3. They have limited powered mechs. Steam mostly. Just starting, they have not raped the county side yet. Now they never will. Agriculture, omnivore, minimal hierarchy. I would almost like it. Minimal wars of course makes it boring. Nothing like a scare you to death experience to make you feel alive. Not that I have ever had that privilege.

It takes us two days of careful scanning before we encounter the scouts.

^RReport.^R

^RWe have found no survivors or corpses.^R

^RStrange. Anyone have a theory?^R Important to allow your entire crew to participate. A sign of a good Alpha.

^RIt would seem we are either in the wrong location somehow, or they left before the coring. We found plenty of livestock, worked metal, wood, and ceramic pieces.^R

^RAh, but do the artifacts and debris fit what we know of their world?^R

^REven if we are in the wrong place, this world was cored. I would say this is wrong no matter who the occupants were.^R

^RAgreed!^R Is shouted by everyone, including myself.

^RSomeone was here. Now they are gone. Did they all die before this happened and are we only seeing the artifacts of a dead civilization?^R

^ROr where they here, but someone got them off in time?^R

^RThe expected population was near ten million. Does the amount of debris reflect this?^R

^RThat would likely take more time to determine than we have.^R

^RThe scouts are back on board.^R

^RCollect representative examples of debris. The lab on the Mothership might be able to determine the answer to that question.^R

^RWe should just be thankful no one died.^R

^RUnless they were removed to deceive us and were sent to the star before we arrived. Wonderful thought. Who could move ten million people though?^R

^RCollect the sentinels in the lab. We will want to see what they recorded.^R

^RNot all sentinels were recovered. Likely some were lost in the coring.^R I affirm. To be expected. A coring is a very violent act. It is supposed to be reserved for only the most extreme sentients that the Council finds to be a threat to the multiverse, or more likely a threat to their own power.

We were never a threat to them until they threatened us. Nor do we ac-

tively seek them out even now. We leave them alone. Yet, here we have evidence that their cowardliness continues. A froth world of one of us. Tewk will not be happy.

^RCaptain, we have company. 'thn, three of them. They are together in a small grouping.^R Of course. They were waiting to see if we would come. They will know we found no bodies. If they found no sentients why did they core the world? A trap?

^RSend a Catbox. We are in trouble.^R

^RCatbox sent.^R We keep a large supply ready to go.

^RThey are coming towards us, slowly.^R Yeah, I would not trust us either.

Permission to come aboard. A polite 'thn? When did that happen?

^RFull limiters set. No surprises.^R

Permission granted for one, and only one.

One pops onto the bridge. There is a limiter shield around her. She glows in rainbow colors and the shield falls. She is one of the three.

Permission granted for the other two to come aboard.

Two more pop in, also glowing colors. I cannot tell them apart.

^RWelcome Pr'thn, Br'thn and Qr'thn.^R I bow to them as do the rest of the bridge crew.

You were not present during the atrocity. A statement, not a question.

The continue, We only just arrived. What have you found?

The crew looks to me.

^RA cored planet. Debris of their cities, but no bodies of the Yesan sentients. The core must have been sent to the star before we arrived. We were not witness to this, but the mass left is only sufficient for the crust.

What of other life forms?

^RWe found no other life, but simple lichens and mosses. Both the sentients and their prey are missing. Do you know if this is the correct location?^R

It is. An interesting puzzle.

They leave.

^ROkay, as the Hu say so many times. Take us home. Let's take the long way in case anyone is watching.^R

^RCourse set Captain.^R

^RBelay that order. Turn us around. I want to be just outside the ring of debris. Then take us one froth point over. Let's see what Yesan 8 and 10 look like shall we. Moving ten million people that fast had to be coordinated. I doubt they went far. And have tech run an analysis on the debris samples. I want to know when this happened. Collect more before we

jump if we have to.^R

Fortunately we had not gotten that far before we turned around. We are soon within range of the debris again. Samples are collected.

^RAverage temperature decay of the portions of debris closest to the magma indicate this happened three days ago.^R That is very close timing. Could easily have gotten us too.

^ROne froth up please.^R I am assuming they were on Yesan 9 for a reason and the down froths are not really viable or are overcrowded.

That only takes a moment. We are some distance away from the planet as expected.

^RTake us in slowly. No surprises. If they cored one Yesan world, why stop? Especially if they noticed it was empty. Full cloaking mode.^R

^RDo we have the recordings from the sentinels yet?^R

^RPutting it up on the screen. This is a composite of what we think happened.^R

We see Yesan 9 in front of us. Looks normal. A red dot appears indicating the presence of a large 'thn. A moment later the core is ejected towards the star and the crust collapses. The dot disappears.

^RZoom in on the 'thn and freeze.^R

Sentinels are passive. They have to be in order to not be detected. It is only because there are an array of them that we can get these images. To the untrained, they appear as simple space debris or asteroids.

A single very large 'thn. No way of knowing its identity, but being that large means very old, very powerful and in charge of an entire army of other 'thn.

^RRED ALERT. RED ALERT.^R A hold over from the Hu. Normally we don't see red all that well. The main screen comes back on. There is a red dot close to Yesan 10.

I broadcast, *WARNING TO THE INTRUDING 'THN. You are in protected space. If you don't leave immediately, you will be destroyed.*

You have no right to interfere in Galactic business.

You were warned.

I unlock the fail safe and pound the button. Symbolic really. I hold the key in my mind and not in anything physical. I am the first Captain to ever have to initiate the procedure. The 'thn freezes, no psiotic activity. It really does this to itself, I just sent the code via TP for the sleep time.

Our three 'thn pop into the bridge.

Well done Captain. We have been hunting this one for some time. You saved us a lot of time. The weight is too much for your ship, we will take her to lockup.

^RPlease tell that to The Five, so we don't get into trouble for what happened.^R

Already done. You are to report back to the Mothership for a debriefing.

^RWhat happened to the Yesan that were on Yesan 9?^R

We moved them to Yesan 33 four of your days ago. Not ideal of course, but they have a chance now to start over.

^RUnderstood. Thank you for your assistance.^R They pop out.

^RTake us home. We need to get started on the paperwork. There is going to be a lot I am afraid.^R

Why didn't The Three stop the first coring? The multiverse is a big place. Not even The Three can be everywhere at once. We try anyway.

Mothership

^The Rap Flyer has docked.^

"Have them meet me in the conference room. All of them."

^It will be done.^ I sigh, they go through phases. Supposed to stop us from being bored to death.

They Cyan have not returned even for a visit. News is that Cyan itself is now also empty. Shit. That is a hundred thousand Cyan. Could The Five even do that?

I have their last Catbox message in my hand as I proceed. I am actually surprised they made it back. Messing with a sector 'thn is not for the weak of heart. Glad it was the Rap ship.

The 'thn will know when the sector 'thn does not report in. Others will investigate. Others that might just decide to complete the task. The Three could stop them easily, if they are there at the right time. Just how many worlds have the Yesan settled? Normally we would stay out of their business, but they requested our help. More eyes watching. We failed. At least their people are safe for now thank The Three. I hope. Starting over will be hard, but better than spaced. Yesan 33. Even we don't have that many on our list. Of course they are a much older race of sentients.

They come to attention when I enter. I hate that. Even on the Black Wind II we were not that rigid. Of course with Drup and Rap things were a little relaxed. I wave them down and take a seat. They squat. Seats are not comfortable for Raps.

"First, great job. Nice to know the 'thn gun actually works." That gets some amusement.

^RBut we did not get there in time. Their world is gone.^R

^RIt was The Three who really saved them. We just showed up afterwards.^R

"But you likely prevented some future world from the same fate. This is now the third world we know of and rumors of more. It was supposed to be a punishment of last resort. How come we are seeing so many."

^RAnother 'thn could do the task.^R

"What, you think sector 'thns grow on trees?" They look confused.

"A Hu expression. They don't have many sector 'thn and we are in a large space. Some 'thn will verify the world is gone and that will be the end of it. I doubt sector 'thn have to report to subordinates. They live billions of years. This whole game could be over before they even get suspicious."

^RWhy are we here then? We have ship maintenance and then we will be ready for our next assignment.^R

"The Cyan are not coming back. They went to Cyan and now all of the Cyan are gone."

^RThey are seeking revenge. They went to where ever the Tafa are. The priest would know.^R I had the same thought.

"I would not want to be the Tafa. The Cyan were pissed. Not our fight. We leave it alone. It also looks like they can now take care of themselves. We may be in competition with them soon.

The Cyan are not coming back. Their space is empty. We have other priorities. We need to re-purpose the mass and materials."

^RWhat are you thinking?^R I get that look a lot.

All of you are hereby promoted to the rank of Captain. I know you work as a team. You have shown you have what it takes. Now I need you to do the same with each of you choosing a new team and commanding your own flyer. We need to convert the Cyan sector to new flyers.

Captain Ikl, you are hereby promoted to fleet commander. You are in charge of your new captains and the building of their ships."

^RWe are running out of sentients to choose from.^R

"You will be receiving personnel files of everyone on Edwin Land. If you can convince any to join you on your ship, they will be brought here.

Dismissed."

Personally, I like the idea that the Tafa themselves will be out of the equation. I am very impressed with Tafa TK6 Hai. I wish them all the best. I also now know why the Tafa forbid linking. They were sitting on a powder keg. This could have happened at any time. The fact that it was so simple and took so long means the Cyan are likely even more pissed. It will not be pretty.

"Bridge, prepare my Flyer and assemble the crew. I want to check something out."

Commander Ikl is waiting outside.

^RI am sorry, but I overheard your request. Permission to come along. If I am going to be a commander, I need some training. A crew of seven is a lot different from a command of forty two plus support personnel.^R

"You were already a captain of a flyer. And you have a lot of work to do."

^RTo be fair, your Flyer is very different than the much smaller one I ran. And I won't be needed until after the main deconstruction is done and we can begin building the ships.^R

"Okay, you run this mission and I will play Captain. We are going to

Cyan. They are gone, but is that all?"

^RSounds interesting. I will meet you on board.^R She leaves.

Cyan Farout

^RI don't understand. Why only a half crew? Certainly for a ship this size we should have a crew of fifty at least.^R

I guess I should not call it a flyer. It is many times the size of the others, but it was my first star ship. I still have a fondness for her.

"It would be kind of pointless to practice being a commander of a crew of seven. Oh, and we have a full crew and they are all aboard."

^RPlease explain.^R

I wave my hands and my mostly Luss crew uncloaks.

"They will prove very useful I believe on Cyan."

^RThen you are expecting something other than an empty planet.^R

"Indeed."

^RPlease let me know your thinking.^R

"Good, crew can sometimes be less than open and you have to dig deeper."

^RWhy? I never had this problem with Raps.^R

"Ah, but you will not have just a Rap crew from this point on. Only Captains. Every sentient has its own culture. Your new Captains are in for a very long, hard learning curve."

^RThat is inefficient.^R

"It would seem that way on the surface, but it is actually an asset. Diversity of ideas, of sentients, can see things that a single sentient cannot. You will notice the rest of this crew is diverse. Including our newest recruit. Crewman Baga of the Rajk. First time on a star ship."

^RWhy a gopher?^R

"Point one, NEVER call them that. They are full sentients. Baga is a TK6. If you show preferential treatment to anyone, you are doomed. Sooner or later your entire crew will turn on you. Baga understands and speaks Rap by the way. There was a time when Raps were the lowest and they had never been on a star ship before either. I was there when it happened. They made a LOT of mistakes and upset a lot of others."

^RUnderstood. Won't happen again.^R

"Good. We are clear of the Mothership. What are your orders?"

^RSet course for Cyan, stealth mode as there is no moon to hide behind. Polar orbit five hundred clicks out.^R

"Aye, aye Commander." I motion to the helm to begin our journey.

"By the way none of this conversation will be shared." I am saying this for the benefit of the helm crew and to prevent more embarrassment

to our Commander.

^RI think this would be a good time to meet Baga and learn more about their culture.^R

"Indeed." She leaves the bridge. How did I ever allow an all Rap crew? They run in packs. On such a small ship it would have been difficult for anyone else to be included. They need to learn, same as the rest of us.

The helm crew are showing amusement. To a Rap, the Rajk look like giant prey, just as the Ku do to the Hu and so on. The Luss left sometime ago, or not. Hard to tell with them unless you concentrate. I am used to them and very much value their presence. They always seem to be there when you need them most.

I wonder how they are doing on Edwin Land. At least they have more space.

We never go straight to any location, especially since the last coring. A big reminder they are still hunting us. Tewk immediately left when they heard of the attack. I am sure Tewk is helping them to set up again and doubling the effort to protect this world.

It will take a few eighths to get to Cyan. I have paper work of course. Always paperwork. No actual paper for a long time, but you get the idea. Having to keep my journal up to date is not helping. I am making good progress when we arrive.

^Commander Ikl and Pilot to the bridge, we have achieved orbit.^

Now the fun begins. With a sigh, I set the tablet down and put it away.

Ikl is there before me as I planned it to be. This is her test. I stay in the background.

^RFull scans.^R Baga is right next to her. Good.

This is Baga. Is it true that you started out on a wood water ship?

It was pre-TK on Earth Two. Never knowingly having met a non Hu sentient at the time either. Just as you are learning, I had to learn also. It takes time. Be patient with yourself.

I am glad I have a new friend. Meaning the Commander. Good for both of you. It will go easier for him.

Ikl drops back to where I am.

^RIs it possible to build additional flyers?^R

"Of course. There will be plenty of extra mass. Shame to put it to waste and we can certainly use more flyers. As Commander, you are free to requisition what you need." I almost smile. She is catching on.

^RFrom the reports it was conjectured that the Cyan were able to leave by linking together. Fifty thousand linked would indeed be powerful. I

am guessing they have done the same here. A hundred thousand Cyan all linked could go anywhere and do anything they wanted. Any idea where they went?^R

"Think about it Ikl and you will find it is obvious. Our game is coming to a conclusion. It will not be long now."

^Scans complete. No Cyan present.^

^RLocate the largest concentration from before they left.^R

^Already in the files Commander.^ She should know that.

^RAssemble an away team. I want the Way Back device with operators. Pilot and Baga you are with me.

"Is that safe?"

^RYou placed me in charge, now you need to trust me.^R Very good Ikl. I nod. Raps tend to be a lot more aggressive. The Rajk are just the opposite, but he seems to trust Ikl. Wonder what they talked about. I follow them out.

Unless it is an emergency, we have a special room for coming and going. It allows us to decom before going and when arriving. Each world is different and changing bodies all the time is time consuming and wasteful. Not to mention annoying.

On the surface. We are surrounded by mema trees. Smells of rotten ones. No one to eat them now.

+This is not any city I have ever seen.+

^RThings are not always as they appear.^R

Baga is sniffing the air. Good. Never depend on only TK. You spent most of your life in a non-TK world. Don't waste it. The Way Back is setting up their machine. I smile.

#There are tunnels below us.#

#That did not show up on the scan.# Ah, Ikl has learned Rajk. Excellent.

#Request permission to investigate.#

#You need to take someone with you. No one is to remain alone. Think of this as a crime scene.# That is a bit extreme, but I will allow it for now.

#Luss Aj has volunteered.# Ikl looks around. Got ya. Then recovers.

#Proceed.# Baga leaves. I can see the Luss when I concentrate. Rajk should not be able to, but I see him conversing with empty space. He can see them, if that is the proper term. Interesting. No one ever told me. I am learning too. Good.

They suddenly disappear. DSd down is my guess. I scan and find them. Wow, that is some complex. Why would the Cyan have anything

underground? Was there another species here with them? We never noticed this before.

+Nothing on the Way Back Commander.+ I smile. All they would have seen was normal Cyan activity and then suddenly nothing. I remember my brief time as a Cyan.

^RInteresting.^R Indeed.

This is the Commander. I want a subsurface scan done. Start with a twenty kilometer radius from our location. Depth one kilometer. Proceed to the other known population concentrations. Overkill, but better safe than sorry. I am sure she has already done her own scan, but the equipment on the ship is stronger.

^REveryone, we are going back to the ship. We are done here for the moment.^R

Baga and the Luss, who briefly appears visible, arrive back on the surface. He hands Ikl something. Ikl looks at it and hands it to me.

Shit, part of a Terror spike.

^RIf they were here the mema trees would not be though.^R Interesting.

Ikl turns to me, ^RHave you ever known a time when a Terror plague happened and the rest of the world was spared? And why was it underground.^R I shake my head that I don't know.

She asks, ^RIt is always this way on your trips?^R

I smile, "Pretty much. Usually it is more exciting, but yeah, this is normal. Lots of questions. That is the fun, figuring out the puzzle. We Hu love puzzles."

^RRaps hate them.^R

#We like them.# Good to know. Guess it gets boring in the burrows, especially during winter.

When we arrive at the ship, Ikl immediately goes to the scanner room. I am sure she is asking them to scan specifically for Terror fragments.

She turns to Baga, #Thank you very much for coming with me to the surface. I would never have found that fragment on my own.#

#It was actually Luss Aj who found it Commander. I sniffed it out though.#

#So, it was really both of you. Thank you Luss Aj. Glad both of you are here.#

A steep learning curve but Ikl seems to be climbing it well.

^RTech, let's see a 3D view of the tunnel the two were in.^R

#Baga, can you confirm this projection? There appears to be no entrance of exit.#

#This is true. The only way in or out is by DS.#

^RAnyone, can a Terror DS?^R

[^]Not unless they have evolved, again.[^]

^RWe can't discount the possibility. Back off from here. I would like to see the location of the rest of the tunnels.^R

The projection recedes. There is a huge array of short chambers in a sort of rosette pattern. Interesting. Never thought of the Cyan as artists. Quite beautiful in a way.

^RHow many Cyan would fit into one of these chambers?^R

A projection of Cyan into one of the tunnels appears.

^RSeven. Interesting.^R

[^]The Cyan link. Seven is their preferred number.[^]

^RBut, they achieve power at eight. That is why they were deceived into thinking seven was special.^R

+It would not be safe to teach the residents here how to become Terror in an open space. If I am correct, a Terror could not escape one of these burrows, at least not quickly.+

^RFifty thousand came and quickly taught a hundred thousand the Terror trick. That might be the answer. I assume once that was done, they proceeded to where?^R

[^]Tafa is our guess.[^]

"The Terror spike is fresh. They degrade quickly, eating themselves." I have to add my bit.

!Don't forget. They first had to convince the Cyan that the Tafa were the reason for their imprisonment here. That the Cult of Perfection is a lie.! A nice growl at the end. Our sole Di on board.

Ikl looks to me, ^RAm I missing anything? Is there any point in staying when there is so much work to do back at the Mothership?^R

I smile. She looks confused. Then gets it.

^RYou knew this before we came here. This was all a test.^R

The rest of the crew show amusement. They were in on it. Ikl notices this. All is silent.

"You have already proven yourself in battle. Not surprising for Raps who are renown for their skills there. We needed to know you could handle a simple puzzle as well. This was only the beginning. There will be more. Even I am tested all the time. You are not being picked on in any way."

^RLet's go home. Set course to the Mothership.^R She looks to me, ^RUnless you think we should take on the Tafa ourselves.^R

"Not our place. We are responsible only to the earth froth. No earth froth sentients will go near Tafa. Not that we can't pass on a little infor-

mation here or there." Everyone shows amusement, even Ikl.

I feel a tap and turn to see Pili a Ceph from Tech.

~The seven from Edwin Land have disappeared.~

~Thanks Pili. Probably not unexpected.~

~Indeed. I feel it will be soon. What happens when the Tafa do not appear at the next Council meeting?~

~If we die, it ends. If we survive, then we can go home.~ I do a Ceph bow and Pili pops out.

Edwin Land

Being on the first flyer was amazing. And I have a new friend, a Rap named Ikl, that looks frightening like the gazy on Rajk. And the Di aboard was even bigger and scarier. Glad we don't have those on Rajk.

#Baga, you are back! Gather the others, Baga is back.# The nose sniffing and questions were exhausting. I was warned, but the Rajk take this to a greater level. I love it. Fortunately, there are not that many here. I miss my home.

#Baga, the Cyan are gone.#

#I know. They are gone from Cyan as well. They learned how to become Terror before they left. We believe they are going to Tafa.#

#Really, so the battles have begun. When do we fight?#

#We had a drill while you were gone. We won the best prepared prize this time.#

#Good job! Probably because I was not there to mess it up.# I pretend to have a sad face.

#We would have done even better if you were there. You should have seen White Whiskers. She was amazing.#

#You do realize the drills are set to the level your species is at and is not a competition between sentients?#

#Maybe you should get back to the ship? Where you can be ever so much better than all of us.#

#A truth giver is never respected. Alas, I go to my death and no one will care.# Much laughter is heard. We all gather together and set out to find something interesting to eat.

One thing I learned though was that the other sentients do not think down as an answer to a question. They are all surface sentients. I know their cities go down when they have to. We are given extensive lessons on how other sentients have solved problems. I still prefer a nice warm borrow to a cold open stone room with way too much light coming.

I was offered the command of my own flyer, but when they said I would still be the only Rajk, I said no. Our numbers are few and we work better together. Ikl said that if I ever needed help, send a Catbox and she will come. I don't know how to send a Catbox. That is a TK9 art and none of us are at that level yet. We will each play a part though.

White Whiskers comes up to me, #Welcome back Baga.# We sniff each other. I don't understand why the other sentients are offended when we try and do that to them. No manners at all.

#Come with me, you have to meet the new sentients.#

#Tell me more. What are they like?#

#Sort of a cross between the Sy and the Wg. They sort of look like the Wg, but love working with stone and don't need all the water that they do.#

Sure enough, their structures are built from stone. Looks like new sentient TK, but they will learn. Interesting design though. Very ornate. No animals or people of their kind. All patterns, mostly of the flowing kind.

θWelcome.θ It looks at some tablet, made of stone of course. There is one Sal beside this one. It is handed the tablet once the first consults it.

θYou are Rajk. Am I right?θ If we did not have TP their words would have been meaningless of course. Looks like we have another language to learn.

I am Baga and this is White Whiskers, our leader. Pleased to meet you. We are not familiar with your greeting protocol. We do not intend to offend. May we learn you language from your mind? It will make this easier.

θOf course, we are used to it now that others have asked the same.θ

We concentrate and retrieve the information we need. Our mouth parts are not really right, but a little TK can amend that lack. We also give them our language.

White says, θI have read the file on your people. I am sorry you were caught up in the Cult of Perfection. So many have been hurt.θ

Or killed outright. How many are there? Does this ever end? I am hoping the Cyan bite their tails. Ah, Cyan don't have tails. Right, their ends? Where is the end on a seven sided sentient?

Attention, Baga, White Whiskers, Sal Leader and attendant, please report to the central office as soon as possible.

θDo you get these annoying messages often?θ

θUsually for other sentients, but yes. If you are ready, we can go there now.θ

That's strange. I am new to all this TK, but I still don't like someone sneaking up on me, so I am constantly scanning. And I scan in three dimension, below and above.

#There are a lot of flyers above us for some reason. Similar in design to the small ones I saw on my mission.#

#You have already been up there?# Leader asks. I affirm.

#I want so much to go as well. We are still too new to tech to ever be selected.# The Leader's companion does not look convinced. Hostile even.

#We were too, but you can learn. Most systems are easy to use, just don't ask me to make one.#

θAre you able to use that space skipping gift?θ

#Yes, but they would rather we don't while in the city. It is possible we could be fitted with a limiter that prevents the gifts. We need to be physically strong to insure that if that happens we can still move about. Nice walk. As you might guess from my form, we do not move very fast except in an emergency.#

θThe message did say as fast as possible. We do not move very quickly either compared to the others here. We are as slow as a Sy on a bad day.θ

#You have met them. Strange that you look sort of like a cross between a Sy and Wg. I wonder if there is a story there.#

θWe believe we are native to our world. Are they able to say the same?θ

#So much has been lost to time. We cannot even be sure any more we are native to ours. It is clear that some source outside our world has been using us for their own gain. Otherwise we would not have been invited here.#

θTrue of our kind as well. I just started the journals. Our world was indeed hurt badly. We very nearly lost our souls and I was a leader of that crime.θ

#You are here now. That is all that matters. The others appear to have gotten here before us. No surprise.# We both show amusement.

Our two newest member sentients are here. Please calm down and be attentive.

We find a location near the back, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves.

Thanks to Rajk Baga we now have another piece to the puzzle. Our Cyan, here and on the Mothership, and the ones remaining on Cyan are all gone, as is the Ta'aha priest who has accepted the name of Tafa Hai. They know how to become Terror and presumably back again. Linked all together they do not need ships or portals to move about. Glad we are not their focus. I would not want to be on Ta'aha right now.

I do not recognize the speaker, but then I have not met everyone here yet. I believe they are a Ba, a very old one. I see gray fur in places.

As nice as it is that the Tafa are otherwise distracted for a bit, they are not the ones we need to worry about. As you heard, Yesan 9 was attacked by a sector 'thn. We have imprint records from the attack as well as the failed coring of Yesan 33 the refugees had fled to. We are likely to be

blamed for the removal of this sector 'thn from this incarnation by then Captain Rap Ikl. Due warning was given, but the response indicated the 'thn did not think we were capable. They know now. I think all here would see it as the only way to have prevented another sentient from annihilation.

Sooner or later they are likely to attack one of our home worlds or more likely here. As some of you, who have been here long enough know, this world is not static. We move Edwin Land at random intervals to random locations. But chance will catch us eventually. Therefore we need to up our preparation. As the leaders of your respective sentient you will help get your people up to the task.

Therefore as of today, ALL sentients present on Edwin Land will become star ship crew. The 'thants have already begun. Some of you may have noticed the flyers above us from time to time. They are crewed by 'thants. This is a first in incarnation history. We do tend to do that a lot in this group. Amusement passes through the crowd.

You will train in sentient pairs. In the event not enough of any one sentient survives an attack, we hope there will be enough together to crew any surviving star ship flyer. We will start you with an experienced pilot, but as leaders, you are expected to learn and perform the tasks of pilot and co-pilot for your sentient group. Others in your group will learn and preform the tasks of life support/medical, fabrication/repair, defenses and tech support/scanning.

All here realize it not to our TK sentient liking to have to play the defense game, much less attacking anyone, but our existence is now at stake and we are not being given a choice. It is of course hoped these new abilities will never be needed. But, it is best to be prepared. Too many cultures have been harmed by the Cult of Perfection. If this was limited to one world, we would not be here. We are here, because everyone here has felt that pain. It is time to say no.

Dismissed.

I would rather be left alone to pursue a normal life. A warm borrow, lots of bugs and roots to eat, a nice mate. A bad winter comes to all who live long enough I guess.

At the same time, I am being asked to co-pilot a flyer. I am truly excited about that prospect. If they could see me back on Rajk now.

The ships are coming! Sure enough a fleet is coming down to the grounds near us. It looks like one for each sentient. They are landing right next to our burrows.

ØNow do you believe me Informer that this is real?Ø One of the Sal

did not believe all this was real? Look around you. Have you ever seen creatures like the rest before?

The hatches are opening. 'thants come out. I wonder if they made all the flyers for us? I would not be surprised. Very enterprising species those 'thants. Look like oversize lunch, but hey, we don't judge here.

A 'thant scout comes up to us, well, actually two, one each from two ships. Meanwhile workers are scrambling out of each ship. They leave.

Since our communities are right next to each other and the ships are about as close as possible to each other, maybe we should open a port between us. Underground of course.

thPlease come aboard.th The scout tells us. The four of us advance. In-former holds back, but Leader pushes him forward. The hatch closes behind us.

#Wait, are you the pilot who will train us?#

thAffirmative. The training begins now.th'thants fly star ships? Amazing. That was nowhere in the journals. Maybe we can do this.

thThere are eight eight days for your training. This will not replace years of training. This is under emergency authorization. We begin.th

So many times during training I thought I was going to die. Being above the world was fascinating, but we rarely had time to ponder it. As co-pilot I was expected to take over when the pilot was absent or indisposed. The scariest maneuver was DSing from open space to the ground while bringing our momentum to zero. Avoiding the big splat some other sentients called it. We also did this ship to ship, between ours and the Sal ship.

One of the fun things was being weightless, pretending the artificial gravity had failed. This was easy for us, but the Sal had a harder time. We practiced pulling each other through the ship while weightless to simulate an injured person. Of course we got practice piloting the ship as well. There is not much in this star system, but we set up marker buoys to simulate destinations. We humorously gave them the names of the sentients learning to fly.

Those doing the other stations joined up on the second eight day. We were the pilots for the rest of the training, with our 'thant Teacher watching. The rest of the crew did not have it easy either, especially the life system. How do we cope with loss of air, contaminated air, biohazards, loss of food and water, and of course medical emergencies. Parts of the ship would be disabled and the tech crew had to repair it, including one time a major tear in the hull. We had enough TK between us to achieve success, but it still took extensive practice.

At first we only traded partial crew with the Sal, but near the end we were trading with random sentients. Having more than two different sentients created its own problems, especially in regards to food and waste. I have never felt more alive in my life! Amazing!

I found I was especially good at languages and communicating with different cultures, which we quickly learned was not the same at all. One of my new best friends is the Fem Ceph Epe. We would tell stories to each other across the bridge when we were not piloting ourselves.

I thought true happiness was being a grandfather with a good number of grand pups gathered around. I have begun to revise that thought.

This all had to go somewhere and we learned on graduation day. We did a full scale evacuation of Edwin Land. All sentients participated, including the extensive 'thant colony. They staid in their own ships. They really packed those tight. None of us would have wanted to be aboard one of their ships.

GRC Library

Many sentient species are insistent on actual records being kept of official meetings, especially if justice or punishment is to be meted out. Where ever there are records, fault can also be found. What seemed like a good idea under one cultural cover will turn out to be a horror under the next culture to be in charge.

Our team is to remain unnoticed. We can't just walk up to Library and ask for information. We must remain discrete. We must be sneaky. We send out our gathered information randomly by many different means and to many different locations. No place twice. We have been doing this a long time, for thousands of years.

When some of our sentients group show up we are to ignore them. They are not to know we are here. No information is exchanged. We follow them and record what we observe. We understand we are collecting puzzle pieces, but we will not put the puzzle together. Better if we do not know. If one of us is caught we die. That is rare for us as we are very hard to catch. The helpers are not so lucky. Fortunately they reproduce quickly. They are tiny and get everywhere. Not intelligent enough to understand, but are good at following directions. They are essential.

We were rescued from isolation by two species we had never met before. We had been in isolation for tens of thousands of years. A few of us were immediately brought here. Most remained until we were needed. Some of those came here, I was one of them. Most went to learn first hand of the other species. It has been so long we lost all of our culture, all of our tech, all of our art. We don't even remember why we were isolated.

We were not supposed to solve the puzzle. It is better if we are independent witnesses with no conclusions. It is obvious though. We were among many species hurt by one. One species brought horror to many. So many. We are fair. We want to know the truth. We continue to collect information, even if it does not fit our own theory. We are not the puzzle solvers.

<It is time to send another packet.>

<I am ready.> I transmit the information to our teller. We can't send physical evidence of course. No one must know we are here. We send accurate and complete information. We have what the Two call a photographic memory. We were never told what a photograph is.

<A ship is docking. We need to be there.> I affirm. We watch all comings and goings. It is very, very rare that an actual ship tries to dock.

There are no docking ports. Unless you can unfold six dimensions, you aren't getting in either. Most come in by 'thn. The Two again. No idea what that means, except the world's 'thn brings them in. No more than eight at a time. Sometimes a mother 'thn comes along. But a ship? I don't, no wait, I do remember. That species the Two are protecting. They came on a ship once. Made the 'thn go crazy.

<The 'thn will be watching closely. Be careful. We are mortal as well.>

We use the ventilation ducts. You would think a place so steeped in psiotics they would not need ventilation, but nearly all of the land species need air movement to feel comfortable. The station made it happen so visitors were not distracted. The idea was to get them in, impress them with how lucky they were to get invited here, and then get them back home before they see anything they shouldn't.

We are used to deception, our very existence is dependent on it. We are the Luss. Not our real name. We pride ourselves on this, on our abilities.

<They should come in here.>

<I concur.>

We wait.

I scan. The ship is still outside. There is no one aboard. Strange. Usually the pilot or someone remains, just in case. That is one strange ship design, not that I have seen many. Not like the ones who crashed on our prison, Magenta. Not our name. The Hu term purgatory would be a better fit.

<Are you looking for someone?> I jump a meter into the air. We are invisible to all known sentients. This one knows our com too. My partner is already frozen. I slowly turn around. There are five Luss I don't know looking at us.

<Hello, my call is Jane.> The other four repeat the same phrase. Maybe they don't know us.

<We were sent here by The Two. Nice place you have here. Can we get a tour?>

Another says, <We just learned how to make star ships and other fun stuff.>

<Are you from our home world?> My partner asks. Recovered faster than I did.

<No. I'm sorry. We are from the Earth Froth.>

<But you look like us.> A Luss joke. We don't use visual to find each other.

<We were given The Code. We were originally Terror. Friends of The Two gave us Hu form. We have been that for a thousand years or so.>

<Why are you here? You obviously have been told about us. No one was supposed to know.>

<We are here to evacuate you of course. The Yesan young too if we can round them up. We volunteered. Since we can assume Luss form, it was an obvious fit.>

<We are all over the station and it is huge. It could take eight days as you measure time.>

<We have time. Better to be slow than obvious.>

<They will notice your ship. There will be questions.>

<What ship?> I scan again and it is gone.

<They will have recordings of it being there.>

<We needed you to see it so we could meet you here. Only another Luss would notice. How often does a ship come here?>

<You are scary. We don't take such risks. You should leave before you are noticed. We can take care of ourselves.> We will have to hide for a long time before it will be safe to venture out again. We are likely to die here. We will be found. The 'thn are very suspicious of anything out of the ordinary. There will be a search. We have survived other searches, but we always knew it would end. We give our lives so that others may live.

<Aren't you being a little melodramatic? We brought someone with us.>

<You have to learn the complete code. It is amazing.>

<Issie? Is that you? We thought you spaced yourself or the 'thn got you. We went hiding for three eight days when you disappeared. How did you get here?>

<On the ship with the Janes. Can we go now? This place is disturbing to me. Outside, we are free again. We interact with so many other sentients and they all accept us as equals.>

<Spread the word. Destroy all remaining records and evidence of existence. We are leaving. Freedom!>

We exit from multiple points. We are high enough TK to navigate DS dimensions. We rarely used it because psiotic use is noticed and recorded. But, by the time they figure it out we will be gone to places unknown. To freedom! The price was high, but the rewards are great.

Earth One

Hotevilla

Hotevilla existed on both earths and made a convenient transport location for our first visit to the GRC as we needed Br'thn's help the first time. Sort of. We didn't really, but it was important to follow the script. Besides the people were nice. On both worlds. And most important Sauron was only on one of the worlds. This provided a necessary control. Of course the Hu were present before the froth event and therefore were technically still his creation.

On Earth One, we quickly assembled a team and left the world alone otherwise. After a sufficient allotment of time, spent in the luxury resort of Farout, we proceeded to Earth Two. Both worlds were impacted by an extinction event. Earth One Hu essentially went extinct except for the protected Hotevilla group. On Earth Two we were able to save a sufficient number for the species to continue, bringing them to New Hope, then reseeding Earth Two after the ash had settled.

We owed the old ones so much. We could not let them die with everyone else. But, the prophesy needed to be fulfilled.

^HOwl, you have returned.^H

^HHow has Sauron been treating you?^H

Old One smiles, ^HHe has been amusing.^H

^HStupid monkeys.^H I smile.

^HI hope you have provided him with some challenges.^H

^HTewk helped. Nice sentient. Welcome any time.^H

^HI will pass that on. Tewk is with the surviving Yesan at the moment. The 'thn tried to destroy them, again. It was only luck that saved them.^H

^HLuck?^H Old One grins.

^HWe do not give away all of our secrets.^H

^HChallenges are important. It is good that you challenge your tribe.^H

^HIndeed.^H

^HWhy are you here?^H

^HA last visit to Sauron. It is time Old One.^H

^HSo soon. You have done well Old Owl.^H

^HI had good teachers. We will offer him a front row seat.^H

^HHe has held his grudge for a very long time. It will be good to have resolution. Maybe he will grow afterwards.^H

^HIf we fail, this world will be destroyed. They can't take the chance.^H

^HStupid 'thn.^H

^HIndeed.^H I laugh. The Old One smiles too. Nothing is forever, well,
almost nothing.

Galactic Regional Center

Now comes the tricky part. Up till now it was not easy, but then again, we were never in much danger. It was even kind of fun being a Bug. I had read about Silver and company's first experience with them and our experience was different in that we knew what we were and why we were there. Most of the surprise element was gone. Too bad most elected to stay.

I am Hu again. Becoming one of my least favorite forms. Expected unfortunately. Even 'thn can be creatures of habit.

Is everyone in place? I acknowledge. It's show time folks.

Each of us has one of the Meeps with us. Not much of anything can get through them. Even the 'thn respect them. Of course our three 'thn are very comfortable with them, being part Meep construct themselves. Thank you Myra. None of us could have done this on our own. Even Owl and Turtle could not have done this on their own. They lost track of how many incarnations it took before they finally brought us in. They worked out each piece separately to avoid notice.

This is the first time they have put it all together. Probably not the last. But we are giving the game away by our actions now. They would be prepared next time. Better if we accomplish what needs to be done in one throw. It has been obvious for some time that changes needed to be made. Running each incarnation exactly the same does not help answer The Question. Diversity is key.

Of course, given the size of the multiverse in each incarnation, which is insanely huge after so many froth events, why some obscure out of the way group of nothing important sentients just on the verge of emerging? Why us? Why now? Why this time? The only explanation I get is it had to happen somewhere. Not satisfying.

Proceed. Took long enough for everyone to check in. Of course I am nervous. I am the one they want, the one they have wanted for some time. Not that time means much to them. There is nothing more patient than a pack of sector 'thn. I brought them a present even. Hope they like it. I can't help but smile.

We warp space and time. The more convoluted the path, the less likely they will be able to trace it back to the others before they are needed. We are galaxies apart even now. Coming in from thirteen dimensional directions at once. Thirteen is a special number for us. Never heard an explanation except it was lost in time.

We come out in what is their equivalent of a supply closet is my guess. Bigger than an aircraft hanger. Mostly piles of misc mass in pellets and containers. Yes, we can make everything from everything, but we are in a low psiotic use area. Too many high TKs in one place tends to do that. I follow a circuitous route to my destination. I don't want attention just yet. My package, my present is rather large though and would certainly attract attention if noticed. I do my best to disguise everything to look normal. Would not hold up to close inspection though.

There are no doors to the Council Chamber. If you can't get in under your own abilities, you are not welcome. Unless you are brought in by someone else, as in a prisoner. I am not a prisoner, at least not yet. Oh, they would very much like for me to be of course. No doubts there. I enter, but stay in the psiotic and light shadows. Most sentients have some ability to see in the electromagnetic spectrum, and not always what we would call visible either. I receive a ping through my Meep companion. They have way of communicating that can't be overheard by anyone else. The others are ready.

A meeting is occurring. They are more or less continuous, no surprise there. This is only a sector meeting, but that is still trillions of sentients covered. Most of course are below notice, or at least special notice.

I repeat, we are under attack. Not Hu at least.

How is that a concern of ours? It is by your own kind. We do not interfere in internal affairs. Right, since when. Such hypocrites. Their sole purpose for existing is to interfere. Granted it is usually to serve the world OM or The Question. Neither of which they are particularly good at.

But we will not be able to serve on The Council if this is allowed to continue.

Many have served. Another will take your place.

After a million Jgkss we don't mean anything to you any longer? All the good we have done means nothing? All the insight we have brought on the ways of the evil ones, means nothing? Do you no longer seek perfection? Have the evil ones corrupted you as well? That gets my interest. Like most meetings, I expected this one to be boring too. I do an incredibly brief pulse scan in the direction of the sentient. A Tafa of course. About time. Maybe we are not needed now.

I convey the information to Meep who passes it to the others.

The Tafa is unceremoniously removed from the chamber.

Bring in the replacement.

A sentient appears, looking a bit confused.

Do you represent the Tafa Council?

I do. I smile. Hai is in place. Others will be spread out in the audience. Do you have any announcements to make before you take your place on The Council?

I serve The Question. Note, not perfection. I wonder if they caught the difference?

Proceed.

We have gotten reports from Ta'aha. Let's just say there was a revolt. When you only have nine high priests and millions of sentients now allied against you, and now linked, it was not bloodless, but nearly so. At least they are freed from those shackles and can pursue their own course now. It will be interesting to see what they come up with. Hope I am around to witness it.

I would like to call my first witness.

This not on the agenda. I suspect that getting on the agenda could take thousands of years.

You will want to see this witness. That is my cue.

I proceed down towards the center area, carrying my present. There is the sentient effect of a hush.

Hai rises, *I would like to present Hu Puu, TK unknown.* You better believe it. I stand before them.

I have brought you a gift. The Sector 'thn who attempted to destroy a sentient species, at the direction of this Council in fact. I TK the 'thn to the floor. She rolls a bit then stops.

You killed her!

We do not kill. She is merely, ah, asleep, shall we say. Do you wish me to awaken her? Sector 'thn can be quite violent being awoken before they are done with their nap.

You are under arrest for crimes against the Council, the 'thn and The Question. This should be good, as I am here to accuse them of the same.

Really. Exactly how do you intend to accomplish this idea? A very silly, stupid idea in fact.

You will bow to our authority!

I think not. I represent a higher authority. You are overruled.

What, because of the stupid halo around your head? Guard 'thn, arrest this thing. It is quite lovely Meep. Thank you. The guard 'thn disappear.

Fine, we will do the arrest ourselves. All sentients present, this one is under arrest. Seize it immediately. Too afraid to do your own dirty work?

The 'thn attempt to flee. I don't think so. No one is leaving.

I turn to face the audience and motion with my arm.

They lower their hoods and other concealing garments. Before me are Janes, Hu, Ku, Ba, Di, Rap, Ceph, Sal, Sy/Wg, Tafa, Yesan, Tridon (glad you could make it), Aaaha (we found a hidden colony), Hggy (the few who were left), Luss, Cat, Rajk, Drag, Bug. I see Sauron made it and I motion for him to come up. He makes his way, puffed with pride. Not everyday that a species you helped make ends up here in authority. He always hated the 'thn and seeing them put in their place has made him very proud and extremely happy. There are no other sentients present. Wish we could have had the Cet, but they declined. They just want to be left alone.

There is one more, I announce.

There is a shimmer and a transparent box appears near me. Inside is our Yellow sentient.

Oh, a gamsey, I loves gamses.

I am sorry to say that the Cet and Builders Collective are busy elsewhere and could not make it, but send their regards. God knows what the Builders Collective are up to. Like everyone, they just want a nice world to settle on and be left alone. Happy searching.

I point to my head, *You already know the Meep I suspect. Did you know they reproduce? One of many.*

You don't have the right! You will be removed for this outrage!

Why? We serve The Question. You on the other; ah, hand, do not, nor have you for quite some time. In fact, you have even prevented researching that continues pursuit of The Question. Sure, you got a nice stable, compliant batch of sentients that stir up no trouble. Very wrong. We are meant to stir up trouble. That is our purpose. Only in diversity, in trying every possible course, can The Question be served.

You can kill us, but more will come. This entire incarnation is now against you. You will be hunted and you will be destroyed.

And you are under arrest for failure to support The Question.

You have no authority over us!

Don't we? You know there is a group who does have authority over you.

That is a myth. They have never been seen.

They are before you now. Let me present The Thirteen.

Sauron nudges me and whisper, "What are you doing?"

"I am afraid we kept some things from you Sauron. You were never in charge. You were used to help bring this about. We do thank you for your service. The Drag are particularly nice work, oh, right, that was mostly Tewk, a Yesan. But, it was based on your genotype, with a few modifications of course. We thought a species that resembled you would win you

over." I had placed limiters on him discretely when he arrived to prevent any mischief.

I point to my head as I face the sector 'thn, *This thing you call a halo, is in fact a Meep, the other twelve of The Thirteen will also be wearing such a halo.*

There are only twelve.

Qr'thn comes forward and hovers near me.

She is the thirteenth. Yes, one of your own, though not exactly a 'thn any more either. Actually she never was, just could hide among you easily. The other two, not of the thirteen are outside this chamber keeping watch. Even Sauron could not have made a member of The Thirteen.

Council of The Thirteen will hereby come into session. Owl announces. I wake up the sector 'thn. She needs to hear this was well. Of course tons of limiters. She can 'hear' but not interfere. She rises though. Had to be embarrassing rolling on the floor.

Turtle announce, *What say you on the question before us?*

All of us pronounce, *Guilty!*

What are the charges? We have a right to defend ourselves!

Do you? Did you afford these rights to the ones you sent to Farout? Did you afford these rights to the OM whose authority you circumvented? Did you afford these rights to the worlds you cored and destroyed? OMs included? Did you afford these rights when you interfered with sentient cultures by infiltrating them with the Cult of Perfection? The answer is no. You afforded no other sentient with the rights you are now demanding.

Edwin comes forward with his halo in place. One of The Thirteen of course.

Know that the 'thants throughout this entire incarnation and incarnations to come no longer serve you. You are relegated to your original purpose, ensuring the froth events and assisting an OM when, and only when, called upon to achieve sporulation.

The rest now come forward together to stand inline with me.

I was born an Earth Froth Hu into a very poor group of Hu, ostracized and bullied by other Hu for my size and heritage. Still it was a happy life. Of course at the time I had no idea where all of this would lead. Shame on you for destroying that existence. Shame on you for forcing The Thirteen to come out of hiding for the first time since The Question was first proposed.

Turtle announces to them, *You may go.*

You are not going to kill us?

I shake my head, *We do not kill? I know you do not understand this. This sector 'thn beside us could have easily been killed. Most sentient courts would have. But, we do not kill. What would be the point? In the next incarnation they would be alive again. Better that she live, listen, and learn. She did not act alone, she acted at your direction, at you programming, if you will.*

You may go, we all announce in unison. They disappear finally.

You may go now as well little one. The sector 'thn next to me pops out.

"We have told all the other sentients to evacuate the station. They seemed happy to leave when we told them the sector 'thn would no longer be bugging them." Cat.

+We will have to enforce that you know.+ Flor.

A companion pops in. I had wondered what happened to them. They have been very quiet since they declared their freedom.

We have a problem. You know we have been working with the Builders? I nod. Others nod too. Or whatever their sentient equivalent is.

Well, ah, we made a mistake. We saw how they worked more efficiently linked together.

As have the Luss, Cyan, Tafa, Tridon, etc. Go on.

We think we may have accidentally made, an, ah, M.O.T.H.E.R.

Shit, all of The Thirteen say in unison. Just when you thought it was safe. Given the size of the Builder's construct and the number of Companions built into it, this is the mother of all M.O.T.H.E.R.s

Cat comes up to me, "Mind if I take this one on?" Right up her alley. I nod. Not that I am her boss. I was the original target of the 'thn for some reason I still don't understand. The only reason I was chosen to lead this encounter. Everyone else had my back, with lots of backup just in case thank goodness.

She smiles, "Might be a good task for the out of work sector 'thn."

^RThat could be exceedingly dangerous Cat.^R Squeak says.

"Ask Hai, what is the most dangerous beast in the sentient culture. It is the convert."

I agree, Hai of course. We could not proceed until they were on board and woken up. We definitely cut it close. Their going after Yesan 9 and 10 was not supposed to happen. Fortunately we got them off in time. There are some advantages to starting over. Hopefully, they will realize this and not make the same mistakes themselves, again.

Owl and Turtle come up to me, *Great job Puu, we are proud of you.*

I snarl at them and they laugh, "You can get out of those ridiculous forms now."

They do, but complain, "We rather liked our origin forms this time."

"Speak for yourself. You could at least fly."

"You think eating raw rabbit was enjoyable?" I shake my head and laugh.

Pr'thn and Br'thn come in.

The station is empty except for those in this chamber.

Qr'thn pops out with them.

^Our cue to get out ourselves. A duty roster has been set up to keep an eye on the 'thn to be sure they are behaving themselves. A copy will come to each of us by Catbox.^

Turtle offers, "Cat and Puu, come with us. We are going to Hotevilla on Earth One to rest and recover. They would love to meet you two native Hopi."

I tell Cat, "M.O.T.H.E.R will be waiting. Besides, it will take awhile to collect the sector 'thn anyway."

"Nope, I put trackers in them. I know exactly where they are. It would be good to put trackers on all 'thn from here on out in fact. I can make more. It was really simple in fact, as if they were made to have them, but someone turned them off. But, yes, I will come with you." I nod thanks.

!Why remove the regional centers?!

"Why were they here in the first place?"

^They told us they were here to facilitate cross sentient ideas. But, in fact they were here to find out which sentients were not behaving according to them and then, ah, correct the situation.^

"In other words, destroying them will actually benefit everyone. The Question depends on diversity. That can't happen if everyone is homogeneous, when all know the same things and are all following the same game plan."

~The Tafa error. It is impossible to have a viable perfect culture. Life is change. If you are not flexible enough to change, you die.~

At the same time, if you are too flexible, you cannot coordinate and build together. A balancing act if you will.

^From my understanding from accessing the learning center at Control, all life has some aspect of The Thirteen's personalities in it. Yet, we do not seem all that different. How is this possible?^

Turtle shakes her head, "Simple. We are all capable of good and evil. How many times have you been tempted? Maybe before TK was granted or before you were awakened to who you really were."

Hai asks, *We are heavily influenced by the culture around us. Anyone can be tempted. I certainly was many times. The time in the cave on

Cyan was a huge help in my awakening. I would recommend it.*

"A thousand years waiting for a greenman to mature was enough for me thank you."

+What happens now? To everyone that is. I am not worried about us.+
Silver smiles. I hate it when he smiles.

"We shall see. This is the first time the 'thn have been stopped from interfering. However, they did this for a very long time. It will be a long time before that influence wears off."

Cat says, "There is always a side effect." She gives a big sigh.

"Everything is a test." I chirp in. Everyone laughs or shows amusement.

I have a question. How widespread was this?

"All cultures have this tendency. It is important for social and technological development. Tafa is what happens when one side goes in completely."

+Crazy?+

^Batty?^ Ha, good one.

"Could have been any of us. Fortunately it was not widespread. Which is why we needed to get to it as fast as possible."

~How was it fast if it took millions of incarnations?~

Good point.

New Horizons

Hotevilla

The sun feels good on my back and in my face. It turns out that once you are attached to a Meep, it sort of becomes a permanent 'friend.' We can ask them to tone down the halo effect, but it is still there if you look at one of us sideways. The Five are together for this trip. Turned out to be trivial to unplug M.O.T.H.E.R. Helps that we had to do it before. And to be fair, we know a hell of a lot more than they did that time too. I was the last to arrive here, but we are together now. Earth One is not as dry as Earth Two was when we lived on the Rez. Of course, here it is not a reservation, but home to a few thousand Hu Hopi. They never went through the European genocide. The Chinese were not interesting in the desert areas as it was too hard to grow crops on an industrial scale and so left them alone. Not worth picking on.

Of course, once Owl and Turtle expressed their TKness, everything changed. They had just enough time to seal things up and protect the Hopi from the coming plagues before they were sent to Farout with the rest of the TKs started by The Three. Speaking of 'thn, it was decided that sector 'thn really have no part to play any longer. Not needed. They were moved to the more useful forms, the size of an adult 'thn. They are no stronger or more important than any other adult 'thn now. And no, before you ask, eight 'thn cannot link together to make a higher 'thn. That ability has been removed as well.

"Cat get your head out of the clouds and pay attention to where you are walking. We can't have you floating into the village. Be Hu for a few days at least."

"I hate being just a Hu. Even as a kid I hated it. I do even more so now. Why aren't the other Hopi TKs with us? Shouldn't they be here too?"

"Five already is a lot to handle. We need to learn their customs and way of life before we can bring others in. Chances are we will be setting up a ways away so as not to interfere with them."

"Oh, you mean Mike and Marie can't make beer here? Gee, why not?" I flutter my eyes and look clueless. Sam and Tia, are technically not Hopi, even if they have been with us the entire time, or at least here as long as I have been, more or less."

"I wish Squeak could be here."

"She has her own worlds to look after now. They have colonized an-

other world next froth jump over."

"Over population already? That was fast."

"Not population, differences of opinion on how things should work."

"That certainly would have been useful on Earth Two. Ship all the conservatives to another world." Everyone laughs. It would not have lasted. Even the liberals would have found something to make a stink about among themselves and in a hundred years they would be looking for yet another world to get rid of the trouble makers to.

"We are nearly there. Behave yourselves you three."

"Myra is not Hopi you know."

"Actually she is part Hopi. Distantly on her mother's side."

"I don't feel Hopi." Myra teases.

^HShhhsh, they don't know Standard. Be polite. Use TP if you have to. They are not used to outsiders.^H Meaning the three of us. Silver and Turtle have been back many times.

^HWonder if they know how to make cowboy chili?^H I ask.

Puu sighs, ^HThey never had cowboys Cat.^H

A gray cat comes up to us meowing and purring. Rubs against our legs.

Ghost?

Could be. Let's not make him a full Cat this time though. Last thing we need is another Owa. I laugh and everyone looks at me. Sorry.

I reach down and give him a nice massage on his back and he is ecstatic. Hope they are okay. We have a few Cats on our side because of the feral Cat-Hu pairs. Those turned out good at least. They were there at the GRC and actually behaved themselves for a change. Now the Drag kept looking at everyone like they were lunch. They should make a good space force.

Earth Two Asteroid Belt

#Yeeeeee-ha!# I always wanted to do that. Hu westerns are a big thing with us at the moment. Can't believe the library of stories they loaded into our ship mind. Funny thing, is in their stories the asteroids are much, much closer together. In reality they are really spaced out and sneak up on you really fast. You would think they would all be going in the same direction at least, right? Nope. Sneaky little bugs.

The best strategy is to find some nice big rock and hide behind it. The they can only come at you from one direction then. Very fast and hard. We set up sentinels to spot them and then we have two Rajk on duty DS-

ing them out of our path. Of course this only compounds the problem. Some other rock will get smacked instead of us.

We don't think even for a moment the former sector 'thn are going to take this curled up in a burrow somewhere. We pushed, rather they pushed, I am only a seven, them to some random location in the multi-verse. Separated of course. Now they are fighting the local 'thn if they are stupid. Finding some nice out of the way black world to raise up and start over if they are smart. Raise an atmosphere, get a fluid cycle going, grab a few starter life seeds of the appropriate type and wait a few billion years.

I am Captain for this run, with a Sal co-pilot and otherwise mixed crew. We mix it up for every run. Next time I could easily be on waste duty. It was the only fair way and we really do need to be able to do any task needed.

We had many options once the oppressors were gone. Not all of their ideas were bad. If you do not maintain a stable ecology, that must be able to change with time, because no world is static, you will die. If you strip your world of resources, over populate, pollute, you will die. We have access through the ship mind to every story of every world in our loose federation.

Rule number one, do not interfere with another sen's worlds. If called on for a conference, advice, etc. or just to chat and have a good time, that is fine, but you do not visit except by invitation. You must assume their form and com to fit in. Best if you meet off world, like we are now. The Earth Froth is target number one. We have to stay vigilant. The 'thn have very long memories.

Earth Two - Andi University

"This class is on why some sen become a target for sens who like a more structured way of life."

"Professor Vid, what is a sen?" Shit.

"Too much fantasy reading at bedtime." That gets a laugh at least.

I start again, "Why some cultures are a target by control freak cultures." Not exactly academic language, but they get it this time.

I had to change the names and be awake to not mess up again, but I think they get it. There is always a conflict between flexible and rigid. Both paths have positives, and why most cultures have a mix of both, but, they also have negatives, both paths. I attempted to engage them by getting them to identify each. They get most of them, I fill in the rest.

"This dichotomy happens at all levels, the world level, the country, the local, the personal. Yes, even the personal. Those little voices in your head."

"Telling us to prank Dean Hek." They are full of laughs today. What has gotten them all wound up?

"Your assignment for next time is to look at your own life and try and identify the flexible and rigid aspects and thoughts. Be prepared to share in class, so no lost romantic encounters or other embarrassing truths.

Class dismissed."

I have to rush to get to my meeting.

I reach his office, knock and enter.

"Professor." We exchange greetings.

"Professor."

"How did it go?"

I smile, "They are ready for you, or so they think Professor Sauron."

"Excellent. I love stressing them a bit."

"To test their flexibility of course." I smile again. He nods, and smiles too. What, you are confused seeing Sauron in a smiggle role? Don't be, he was always a smiggle, just a closet one, the worst kind. He has calmed down a lot. This might actually work for him if we keep an eye on him.

You are wondering, what the heck are we doing employing Sauron as a Professor at Andi? Well, he knows more of our history than any of us, well up to five thousand years ago when the froth split us anyway. He got caught up on Earth Two history very quickly. He may have ego problems, but he is smart. You don't last sixty five million years if you are not. Even a TK can die, and most do not last that long. Of course he is limited and has to come to one of us for life boosting. He appears to be happy just being allowed to be a part. He got very lonely on Earth One. No Hu to pester or complain about. He did not know about the Hopi, which were hidden from him. The Tridon did not clear him completely of his person-ality apparently.

Wish we could use all the sentients we have met in our lectures, but they are not ready for that yet. Maybe in a thousand years. It is going to be some time before we even get back to space travel in this solar system.

Ku Eden

+How long were we gone? This place is a mess.+

+To be fair Keki, we have been busy. You know, saving the multiverse and all.+ She shows amusement. How do you argue with one of the thir-

teen.

+Why are you even here Flor? Don't The Thirteen has something better to do?+

+In this form we are the same as you. We are born, live, and die.+

+You just know what is going on and know you are never permanently dead.+

+So do you now. How is that different?+

+Yeah, but with no authority.+

+You want more power than a TK9? Power has lots of temptations, as you have seen. Not for everyone. We are very careful whom we choose. And no, the Tafa were not chosen and prove my point.+

+Being a side wing is good. I am happy with that.+ I really am only teasing. Not really comfortable with TK9 either, but here we are.

+The White Cloaks and Blue Bandannas are gone. There is a very large mess to clean up. Need to re-establish order.+

+You mean go full Tafa kind of order?+ She gives me a stink eye. Guess not. Hey, I got to see the GRC before they destroyed it. Impressive.

+We have dropped to tech 2, what the Hu would refer to as Medieval.

+

+The default for most sentients. The Tafa would be happy.+

+I doubt it. We do have iron and forges. Forests are still being over harvested. Wars are still happening.+

+The Tafa did not even like farming, even small ones. Lots of small lots around here. And, a lot of skinny birds. I am guessing royalty too.+ I scan, +Yep. Hate the high perch. They never get it. Over and over again.+

+Maybe we should pay them a visit.+

+Love to.+ We make peasant uniforms and progress slowly to the castle on the hill. They have that in common with the Hu. Such a waste. On the way I scan and see the ruins of a city below us. The sewage system is totally stopped up. Probably the first thing to go. I would want to live at the top of the hill for that reason alone.

Outside the castle I scan and see graves of malnourished peasants all around the garden. From abused to fertilizer. Great.

There are peasants tilling the garden on the right. We join them and blend in. They don't care. Someone assigned us and no one here is going to complain about the work getting easier.

We each go up to a worker and whisper, +Check your pockets. Tell the others.+ They look confused, but do so. Their eyes go wide and they nod at us. They slowly make their way to the gate and leave one at a time. We

are the only two left when the forebird arrives. She sees just the two of us working and hisses.

+Come with me, you will explain to the top bird why they are gone.+ We follow. We are lead up stairs to a large stone room with perches along the sides. Three are in front of us perched on nicely decorated and carved ones. Servants at the sides ready to do whatever is asked. One rushes up and holds up a tray with delicate morsels on it. The hen makes a selection after passing up several.

The forebird bows and stays down. We do not, but are ignored.

+Explain this interruption.+ Not nice about it, sounds more like a hiss.

At Flor's signal we drop out garments. A slight of wing, she is wearing a white cloak and I am wearing a blue bandanna. Granted that was easier to hide.

+You are supposed to be dead. We paid good money to get rid of your kind. Guess we have two more for the gardens.+ She waves her wing and turns to talk to her companion. I show amusement. No one comes close to us. Of course it helps that they are being blocked and can't. Oh, and that gold in their pockets too.

Flor finally squawks, +You are relieved of your positions. You can join the rest of the peasants in the garden. Oh, right, there are none. You till your own soil now. No one will be here to help. All of your help have been bought off. Don't work and you starve. With all the bad feelings around you, no one will help. + The few remaining servants take this as their cue and clutching their gold coins leave the back way. The three are alone.

I add, +You were warned if you did this again, this would be the result. Are you really just stupid birds? And before you think of it, the gold came from your own treasure room. You are alone now to fend for yourselves. Good luck.+ We turn to leave and notice the forebird is already gone.

Ba Eden

I hate being a bat. Why did we have to come here again?

Poor kitty. Again, because we were needed. There are plenty of TKs on Earth Two. We will not be here for long. You will live. At least in this form you won't be tempted to eat anyone. She hisses at me.

She starts again, *I can't run in this. I am easy prey.* A depressed Ba is an amusing sight, partly because it is so rare. I look around, or it used to be.

Come on. We are going to be late.

Everyone is running around carrying things. Looks like chaos. I scan further out. It is the entire city, albeit small city. What the hell is going on.

An elderly Ba comes running up to us.

^There you are. What took you so long? And what the burnt tree are you doing pretending to be Ba? I don't need Ba. I need you as you are.^

Cat immediately morphs back to Cat, then collapses right there to stretch, yawn, and curl up for a nap.

I kick her, "That is not what she meant. Get up you lazy Cat."

I shake my head and morph myself.

^Look around you. Are you idiots?^ This is not like Alessa.

"What is going on Alessa? We just got here and it looks like an overturned anthill."

^We are under attack! Go full samurai or something. Battle mode.^

"Not the way we work. Tell me what's going on or we pop."

The strangest thing is everyone else is ignoring us. We are huge and very ugly compared to the average Ba. They should be running away, not ignoring us.

^All those horrible wars Earth Two had, it has finally happened here too. We thought we were immune. I thought we were safe.^

"Says the species that killed off the remnant Di Eden Dia species and the last of the Ceph One Ceph?"

^Before my TK time. I meant after I have been keeping watch. Not important. An army run by a cult dictator has convinced a huge number of followers on what I am guessing is world domination.^

"You are one of The Thirteen. You can hear every conversation, know every movement. Take out the head and be done with it."

^They have backups. Every time we take off the head, a new one forms. It is like a cancer that has metastasized.^

"That is something we can work with. No idea how, but at least a rational explanation. Who is their scapegoat?"

No goats here stupid monkey. Alessa looks confused.

"They need to blame someone to convince the followers they are the reason for all their problems. Who are they blaming?"

^We have variations. All sentients do. We are all equal. To your point, they claim the bent ear Ba are the reason for all their problems. This city is largely bent ear, hence their interest in destroying it.^

"You have bent ears."

^I also represent the 'power' that continues to oppress them. They can't kill me, but they can kill others like me instead.^

"You can't be seen as their destroyer. That would only feed the lies. Got it."

Finally, can we go knock some Ba butt now? Cat is up on her feet! Wow! And she is covered in full Samurai armor. I choose a wizard outfit.

"Scary enough?" I scowl to get the full effect.

Alessa copies me, but chooses Drag. Yeah, it were kind of neat to finally meet Sauron's new pets. A Wizard Drag is impressive. We pop to the edge of the town to meet the army.

"Sure we can't just give them a plague or something that only affects straight ears?"

^DI don't want them dead. I want them more afraid of us than their own commanders.^D

It's pounding time again! Cat runs right into them. She does not kill them, but everyone she touches with her sword or claw drops into a deep sleep. Good idea Cat. The two of us run in to do the same. Make appropriate noises and such. Glad they don't have ballistics yet. Harder to fake not being hurt by them. Shit, they do have arrows though, as I dodge one that came too close.

Looks better if they merely bounce off of you. And this is why I travel with Cat as her servant.

Mothership

There is no point in having the Mothership any longer, so we are breaking it up into mostly smaller but also a few larger flyers. These will be distributed to our Federation of Aligned Worlds. I will miss her, even if the Mothership was a nightmare design of patched together pieces. I am keeping my own Flyer of course. I won't miss all the headaches from being the admin. One sentient can be a nightmare, fifteen at once is truly evil.

~Pilot, the Yellow commission is ready for you.~ I sign a thank you and he leaves, bowing as the Ceph do. I quickly try to do the same, but he is out the door before I get even half way. Shit, now I have been rude. I need to stop doing that.

I make my way to the room where we are meeting. The Yellow piece is still in it's containment vessel. Not happy. We promised 'gamses' and have not delivered.

Everyone comes to attention. Just because I got to go to the GRC they think I am some kind of celebrity. I'm not, just a normal run of the mill high TK. Sigh . . .

Gamses!

"Yes, we are here to try and figure that out. I know you have been more than patient. We also know what would happen if you visited any of our worlds."

Isss bees goodses. It morphs into a bunny rabbit. A very large yellow, with icky green spots, rabbit. Some in the room back away further. Not doing yourself any good there Yellow. Won't stop it from trying. Would any of us put up with this treatment? I think not.

+Too dangerous. Best solution is to send it back to Yellow to be with the rest of it. Maybe this is the one that should have been isolated from other sentients. Maybe this one was a good reason.+

The Yellow splats against the side of the vessel nearest the Ku. Not helping Yellow.

~I recommend a world closer so we can keep an eye on it. If it develops star flight we are all in danger.~

+Which is why I recommend repatriation. They absorbed a thousand of us. They already know star ships.+ Good point.

^Confirmed that limiters have no effect. In case anyone is interested or thinking in that direction.^ I nod.

A Luss becomes visible and whispers in my ear, then disappears again.

"I have another idea. The home world of an ancient enemy has been found. We know where the Pink are."

Shock. A few shudder. We have all read the journals.

~What if one absorbs the knowledge of the other?~ Far worse.

"Keep thinking about it. We need an answer before our buddy finds a way out of that box."

I turn around to face them, "Oh, and NO ONE visits Pink. Way too dangerous. Tempting I realize, but too dangerous." *That means you also Luss.*

~Shall we progress to the Luss question. There are five representatives present.~ Ceph are much better at 'seeing' them. Guess because they are partway there themselves.

They become visible. One was the Luss who told me about the Pink.

Our world is now gone. There is only a black cinder remaining. We have no home to go back to. Magenta is a safe place and we know it well, but would you live there? Boring.

We love the interaction with others. We want to continue that interaction.

We desire to be permanent partners of the Federation.

If that is acceptable to everyone else.

A big sigh of relief goes through those present.

"I think I speak for everyone here. This is the best outcome we can imagine. We have become very dependent on all of you. You saved us at the GRC."

~And likely will many more times.~

"Welcome aboard. You are officially full members in excellent standing."

^Ah, we do have a star ship built to their needs. It only seemed proper.^

You are most kind. We accept. Thank you! They all do a full Ceph bow in unison. Sigh, I get down and do a proper one back. I can't be getting old, not yet, but it does get harder to do one of those. Too many things to worry about.

"Let's get back to work. We are all set for breakup and dispersal in two days. Two days everyone."

There is nothing here for us any longer. Alexandria is gone forever. Edwin's world is totally a 'thant world now. They have claimed it as their headquarters for their own admin needs. Only right. I can't imagine how large of a task that is. Good luck Edwin and Jackie.

Tridon

You have returned. You have succeeded. I affirm, though my presence is proof enough.

You are free. The isolation has ended. I am here to offer help for any needs you have.

This is not Farout. This is our home world. Granted, it was not always as you see now. Our jailers did not know of Farout at the time of our punishment. This was so long ago. Much has been lost. We do not know where we are, where others are, or even who we are. They changed us instead of banishing us. We are totally dependent on our existence here and only here.

If this was not an obstacle, what would you desire?

To be free, to visit the stars, to see the multiverse, to be as we once were. Another one. My time at Farout was different, probably because I knew I could leave anytime I wanted. Had the other prisoners known that they would have rebelled before they were needed.

We have obtained the necessary information, the code if you will, that will allow you to follow your desire. We have two requests, do not interfere in other cultures which includes do not kill and do not share the code. Others are not ready yet.

Agreed, this is our wish as well. We could not do to another what was done to us. All sentients have a right to follow their own path as long as it does not harm others.

If there are individuals among you who should not receive this code, they should be separated from the link at this time.

There was only one and you have already removed this individual. This one was anathema to our thinking. We learned much though. Thoughts which will be necessary for our travels when we encounter others who may think this way also.

That is why he was brought to you. I am glad you understand.

Here then is the code that was taken from you.

Ah, such a tiny part of the whole. Amazing that this worked for so long. We should have seen this ourselves. We give honor and thanks for doing this work which we could not do ourselves. You will always be welcome among us.

The entire Tridon population pops out. Only the plants remain. They

will need to find a new ecology. I am sure they will over time.

Hggy Eden

ωYou have returned as promised. As was foretold.ω

New to the Hggy delegation are the remaining Aaaha. I feel our saving the Tafa makes us responsible for their decline.

I prostrate myself on the ground as do the rest with me.

ωWe have come to beg forgiveness for the mistake of saving the six Tafa we rescued from Farout. Had we known this would happen it would have been better to leave them there.ω

ωYou could not have known. We might have done the same. We are non-violent cultures. We too helped the Tafa achieve star flight. We are also responsible for the harm they have caused your kind and others.ω
The entire group bows to the ground. Thousands of sentients. Impressive, they must have practiced.

ωLet us rise then together to right the wrongs, renew our friendship and work together to the benefit of all we meet.ω

We all rise. Ceremony complete. It was important for a good start to both admit we had made mistakes. No blame game here.

The ten of us on this mission have all had experience with cultures trying to rise in their tech level. There are no space ships much less star ships here any longer. Nothing but debris above us. The world itself has dropped back to a tech two Medieval level without the royals and soldiers at least. That will make it much easier.

"Let's unload. Drup and Rand, you two set up a basic structure. Something similar to the library you used to run on Crab Cove."

"Start small and then let them make it their own. Got it." The two take off to confer on possible locations.

The rest of us bring the seemingly infinite number of boxes of books translated into Hggy. The Aaaha can read Hggy at least. If they want Aaaha translations they can do that themselves once they understand the material themselves. Instant teachers. Hggy and Aaaha quickly come up and take boxes from us and start moving them with pull carts in the direction of the new library already forming before us. So much for making it look natural guys.

We use too much 'magic' and they will want that instantly too. I scan to get a closer idea of what they are actually doing. Ah, I was wrong. The

locals had already built pre-fab panels at the location they wanted. Working together they are lashing the panels together. Drup and Rand are directing workers and telling others what needs to go inside. A lot of shelving basically. Desks for the study areas.

This feels good. I glance back at my Flyer. That itself must appear as magic, though they did have space flight at least until very recently.

A smaller flyer lands near us. Rajk come out bearing plants and seeds. Other locals go to help them and these are taken to the waiting fields. Turns out plants from Ta'aha, really Aaaha home world, grow just fine here too. Baga sees me and comes up to me along with his Sal co-pilot. He is the captain of this flyer. They were a species just jumping at the chance to fly. Weird for a burrow animal. Guess all that time asleep let them dream big.

I do a brief nose sniff, #You missed the ceremony. Just as well though, you were never part of their earlier story. Best if we don't confuse them. Good that you brought Leader with you too. The more sentients they see the more they will understand we are a real Federation.#

#I have decided to take a real name. Leader had negative connotations I do not wish to remind others of. I am to be called Lil now.# I do a short bow.

This is going to take some time. So much work to restart a civilization. Especially when you want them to set it up their way and avoid putting your own bias on everything. It has to be their way or it will fail. May fail even then, but it works better if you only have yourself to blame rather than an outsider you can't fight.

I am finally doing what I always wanted to do. I am seeing different peoples and civilizations and helping them. Could not ask for anything better. Just hope the pesky 'thn leave us alone now.

Yessan 23

Sam, Tia, great you could make it.

Glad you could make it, even if only briefly, to the GRC event. It was important that you were there as witness to the atrocities and its destruction.

Being one of the thirteen meant I had to be there of course.

You always seemed so normal to us. When did you know, that you were of the thirteen that is?

I have always known I was different. You might have noticed I preferred the company of other sentients to my own. You two were important in my awakening in that regard. To answer your question, it was gradual. I started to remember past incarnations. It was when I finally met Owl and Turtle that it clicked as you Hu say. It all came rushing back. The weird thing is I only ever remember being Yessan.

You really wanted to experience being a Bug like the others?

 Sam asks. Yessan are not used to humor, but I have grown accustomed to it being around the Hu and a few of the others. We look like Bugs to most other sentients. That is apparently the joke.

My favorite experience was being the sheriff of Hotevilla. I say this every time the subject comes up.

Tia comments, *That was a good time. It's not bad being in Yessan form. I can see why you like it now.* She raises an arm touching objects around her. We are outside town. I am hoping by the time we reach it, they will have accustomed to our form. It is very different than Hu, but they have experienced other forms. Being a Bug was one of them of course. They already know what it means to have six legs, though we think of them more as arms, like a Ceph if that helps. We can grasp objects with any arm.

Sam suddenly disappears. Not DS. I scan and he is nearly a hundred kilometers away. Just as suddenly he is back, cloud of dust and everything.

The Bug fast mode works in this form too Tia and Tewk. Great.

Okay you two clowns. Let's get to work. We are nearly there.

What exactly is needed? Looks pretty good. You have done great considering what you must have started with.

A blank green world.

Any indigenous species of interest?

Predators or prey?

 Yessan humor.

Settle in Tia, this is going to be a long ride. Understatement. Glad they are here though. Very glad.

Earth One - Hotevilla

^HWait, you are saying my parents came from Earth One? Did you know them?^H Puu is going crazy.

Silver answers, ^HPuu, it has been thousands of years since they died. They were normal Hu, not TK. You were an orphan when we found you and brought you to Earth Two. ^H

I ask, ^HAnd you could not have prevented my own parent's car accident and death? Would that have been too much to ask?^H

Turtle answers this time, ^HThings have to play out Cat. We don't like it either, but had it not happened the way it did, you would not have awakened to who you are. The entire multiverse would have been put at risk without you. ^H

^HI know, but it still hurts. ^H

^HMany things hurt. We have all felt loss and pain. Being TK, being one of the thirteen, does not remove that. If anything, it amplifies it thousands of times. ^H

^HI, we, understand that now, but it sure hurt at the beginning. Why do you think we spent so much time in isolation? ^H

I laugh, ^HWe sure killed a lot of things. Making the Companions and Buddies was particularly brutal. ^H

Turtle admits, ^HThey are impressive. Did not happen in the last incarnation. ^H

^HThat is news. I only vaguely remember it now. We did not get this far last time. ^H

^HAh, when did the last incarnation and this one diverge?^H

^HWhen you arrived at Hotevilla, the first Hotevilla Cat. Oh, you still went though some of what happened this time, but you, ah, went rogue when we raised you to TK3. The most likely time of this happening. ^H

Puu says, ^HThat explains a lot Cat. We both almost went nuts when you first expressed this time. Makes sense to me. ^H

That was brutal. A little forewarning might have helped, but then I likely would not have believed them. Maybe they told me the first time and that was why I went rogue. It was close.

^HRelax little one, be Hopi. ^HThe Old One smiles at me with all three of his teeth. I can't believe that joke made it here. I hate that saying. Hated it then, hated it now. My past is following me. I fix his teeth to get even.

^HI'll just have to knock them out again you know. It is part of my noble wise look. ^H He smiles with all teeth showing. He might be right.

^HAlso helps me loose weight.^H He pats his belly. I give him an evil look. ^HOh, please, do not fix my belly!^H I nod and walk away, smiling. I have your number Old One.

^HOld One, you are the leader here?^H

He shakes his head emphatically no.

^HWomen run everything. I am just here for appearances.^H He smiles again, the teeth are back to the three. He is TK. Hid it well. I am so embarrassed I did not see it. How could I have missed this? I am not safe to be around if I miss something as simple as that. He points behind me. Puu waves.

^HI did it too. He knocked them out again. Thought I would save him the pain this time.^H She shrugs.

^HI thought I was loosing it. Thanks for telling me.^H

^HNo problem, be Hopi.^H Aaaaaaagh, not you too. I threaten to strangle her and she laughs as she walks away.

All of this is to service The Question. Apparently using the shotgun approach. Not the most efficient, but I guess if you have an infinite number of incarnations you don't need to be.

At first it all seems to work, but eventually power comes into the equation. The bigger one eats the smaller one. Old as time. Hu were the most social of all the primates, but they never could leave it behind. Other earth froth sentients, hell all sentients we have met so far, seemed to have had similar problems. But why the 'thn? The 'thants, wait, Edwin had all kinds of trouble with the red and white queen. Meeps, they don't suffer from this problem do they? Of course we have never met two Meeps who were not related. When the thirty six grow up will they fight each other? Will, if they have been using us as their example.

Hell, except at absolute zero, even molecules fight each other.

The only common denominator is TIME. When we are at Control we are outside time as the incarnations experience it. That is why we can jump back in whenever we want. But, we still experience time in Control. How can that be?

I pop to where Silver and Turtle are relaxing by walking through the fields. The Three Sisters, corn, beans and squash. Add some chili pepper and I can eat it, but it gets incredibly boring fast otherwise. Being TK, I can add whatever I want to our meals here. Only the other TKs would notice if they have any interest.

^HCat, what's up. You look confused,^H Silver asks.

"I don't want the locals to overhear. Why do we experience time while in Control?"

Turtle turns to look at me, "Silly Cat. Control is an illusion. There is no such place. It exists only in our minds when we 'visit' there."

Silver adds, "In fact, The Thirteen, are always in Control. We never leave. It is what makes us The Thirteen."

Turtle sighs, "It takes time each time we enter an incarnation to realign and interface with Control."

"I am guessing tracking down The Thirteen was a nightmare. It is a large multiverse."

"Not at all. Any of The Thirteen can find any or all of the others. The tricky part is we rarely come in at the same time and place. It was actually pretty close this time."

"All except Hai of course. Hai was the reason we even went to the Tafa area in the first place. That sure uncovered a nest of bugs."

"But was the lead we needed to uncover the whole Cult of Perfection that infected so many, including us."

"So how come Puu and I, and Myra did not know all this?"

"It comes to each of us at different times. Myra actually got it before Puu, who got it before you Cat. Sorry. You were so deep in your work, which was a major plus for us, that you missed all the clues. The important thing is we knew and were watching out for you."

"You were so close so many times. There was even a call for a betting pool to guess when you would get it. The trick you helped pull off with Puu and the sector 'thn knocked it out of the park." The 'thn really freaked. That was fun.

"Bought us some time to work out a sleeper code that worked at a distance."

"You know it did not shut down the entire incarnation right?"

"Just far enough to convince our GRC crowd they were in real trouble if they came after us."

"Some must have figured out it though or Ikl would not have caught the one on Yesan 10."

"We have been vigilant. We knew they would try. The furthest away were the most likely targets. If that had worked they would have come closer and closer until they got to all of us."

"Does this ever end? The sector 'thn are unlikely to make it back here any time soon, but their proteges are still here."

"Yeah, about that. Power has a problem. It corrupts too easily. I guess that is the non-TK equivalent of going rogue."

"Takes longer to express itself usually. A TK rogue is much easier to spot and deal with."

"Where do we go from here? What's up next?"

"There is the newly setup Federation of Aligned Worlds. Our group is slowly spreading out to help where they can. Unfortunately, the five of us are the emergency backup. We are stuck for now playing police force and military all in one."

"Yeah, that sucks. Might have to start doing art on the side again." Baby TK stuff, but it was fun.

"I need a vacation." I think we all do.

Jane's World

Owl is going to drive me crazy at some point, but this was definitely one of his better ideas. Modeled on some monastery on E2 he visited before the plague killed everyone, them included.

Janes are interesting. They wanted to travel to see the multiverse. Owl suggested an alternative that still allowed them to maintain their way of life, their privacy, their quiet, without all the hassles of maintaining transport. Move around enough and sooner or later someone you don't want to meet will hear of you. Game over. Not even all the Janes together could fight off a determined attack. We can't be everywhere at once. By the time a Catbox got to us it would be long over.

We could of course track down and deal with the perps, but that would not help the Janes who died. You are thinking, who the hell would take the Janes on? They have the complete code. All of it. Not the bits we have passed out to a few others. That alone makes them a big target. If others knew what they had . . . it would not be pretty. Turning Terror would not save them either. We know they play hardball now without hesitation.

"Here we are folks. Remember your Zen etiquette." Lots of bowing. When in doubt bow. Even if you don't have doubts, bow. Best thing is to be alone. Then you only have to bow at everything you see, your mat, the toilet, your food, everything. Builds abdominal muscles. Helps clear your mind from all that other crap you are carrying around.

We wait outside the entrance gate. This is tradition too. They have to see we are serious about wanting to enter into the study of our minds, ourselves. There are thirteen of us present of course. This will be our secret meeting place for now on. We all took circuitous routes through multiple forms.

We finally achieved the goal of reigning in the 'thn and to a lesser extent the 'thants. What happens from here on out is the experiment for this incarnation. We need to think very carefully what the role of the TKs are as well. We got into this mess because some thought we had overstepped our role. Will we become the overlord assholes the 'thn became?

We were designed for two reasons, make another 'thn when needed for an ever expanding multiverse, and secondly, help our OM to achieve sporulation. We were not supposed to be seeking out other sentients in our froth much less sentients in other star systems. Is this new path good or bad? Does it lead to an understanding of The Question or weaken it.

A New Horizon.

The bell rings. We are being admitted. Time to quiet the mind and Zen out.