



# The Guardians of Br'thn Watchers

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# Janes World

The Abbott comes over to me as I meditate. Mediation is a fluidic concept, but then I am not a normal solidic any more. I am honor bound to try.

"Do not worry, meditation is difficult for us as well. It takes many years to learn. Some never get it and leave." She smiles and bows.

*Get many super 'thn here?*

She laughs, "No we do not." She pauses then continues. "There are thirteen of you. Interesting. We do not normally get such auspicious guests." Did not take long for her to figure it out. The Thirteen is supposed to be a myth, but it obviously got passed around. We don't exactly advertise.

*I would not recommend spreading that rumor around. It would put you in extreme danger.*

She laughs, "Dear, we are already in extreme danger. I am sure every knowledgeable sentient sees us as a target."

*And you have some nice friends.*

"True. Remember, just let your thoughts flow through. No attachment." She leaves to see to the others.

When linked the Janes could take on any 'thn easily. They also have escape portals, pre-arranged DS sites and one hell of a punch as the Hu say.

None of this could have happened the way it did without my being one of The Thirteen. It was prearranged for me to find and use Sauron, have Br'thn made, then lost, to raise Silver and Turtle. A very well coordinated dance. All of that was just the spark to set things in motion. There were incarnations where this did not happen and we had to start over again. If anything The Thirteen are very patient. More patient than any 'thn.

I go to where the others are gathered. The Abbott is there. She bows and leaves without anyone saying anything. Very perceptive that one. Of course our small monastery is a tiny fraction of their structures on this world. They have spread out well. All continents are covered. Though there are not any immediate plans to increase their population, they are very suspicious and want all areas covered from a surprise attack. It also turns out that linking while separated in this way actually makes for a stronger, more sensitive network. They can sense something coming from many light years away. They are not sure yet how far, as this is still new and in the testing phase.

"Everyone is present. Let's go."

# Earth Two, Hotevilla

This location on Earth One was where I met with Sauron and took him to the GRC where Br'thn was awoken. He was not my first choice and I was willing to wait longer for the right sentient. But the froth waits for no 'thn. Each time this happens we need a doubling of 'thn to prepare for the next wave. It takes time to raise a new 'thn to consciousness. In this case I was right. Sauron neglected his duties and let Br'thn languish without proper exposure and training. I had to do both our duties waiting.

I was very fortunate to finally find The Owl, whom I already knew. He was the new incarnation of a plague survivor from a previous incarnation. Worlds that do not contain sentients are much easier to guide through the froth wave. We can cover many worlds in this state. The black and brown require almost no effort at all. Green worlds with sentients have to be handled with much more care. Absolutely cannot have a gifted sentient duplicated. One carries the gifts and one does not. This is important so that at least on one world events run the way they were intended. A control as the Hu scientists referred to it.

Earth Two is the control world. The ONLY difference between one and two was raising the owl and the turtle. There has never been a sentient turtle like species. The owls are pretty smart but not normally considered social enough to form the necessary high functioning networks. The two knew each other of course. Raising them freed them from normal constraints. I told them where I had hidden Br'thn. Sauron was not worthy of such an honor. Thus the story already related began.

The Cats ran this part of the world, then the Terror overran it. Not much has changed here. It was wetter back at the froth event. Been a desert pretty much since then on both worlds. Without all the industrial activity, the world is returning to the default climate. Forests are growing again. Mostly prairie northeast of here. Herbivores have been reintroduced. All from the other continents of course. The Terror ate everything else that the Cats had not already killed and eaten. But here at least, it is still mostly desert. Some of the ruined old structures are still visible. This was once a very special place. It is where we taught Br'thn to begin from if she ever needed to reach the GRC. To reach Safety. That was before I knew about the sector 'thn having broken the rules.

They have a fire going. Sentimental reasons are my guess. Hu seem to really like fire. Only the five are here presently. The other seven have gone to take care of their own.

"If I remember right, there was a fire when the plague reached here and the cultural center burned down, not that a wood structure could have lasted this long."

"It is a desert Puu. How often does it rain? Look the crater where the still blew up! Remember, Mike and Marie's beer factory? Never understood how they could drink that stuff."

"Remember the miles and miles we ran back then?" Cat nods.

Myra does not care about a history recall. I don't either. I am much more worried about the 'thn who were partnered with the sector 'thn or were hoping to become one themselves. My mother would be one of those. And her mother. They are both in sleep mode currently so not a concern, but used to illustrate my point. The multiverse is large, but so far this is the only location when the 'thn ran amok. If this was an easy trap to be caught in, why did it not happen more often? Of course one could also ask why The Five happened at the same time. There is much The Two have not told me.

The Meep offspring are dispersed to be sure we are safe. One always stays with Myra, not that she needs any help. I believe she is the strongest of the group, though she would never admit it. It is interesting how Hu set up rank order. Silver > Turtle > Cat > Puu > Myra. The true order is likely reversed. The only advantage Silver has is knowledge of many, many incarnations. Are there any level differences in The Thirteen? Our time is from outside Time. Now that I have awoken completely I can remember so much.

A portal opens and elders from Earth One come though cautiously. The Five rise to greet them. They have made rugs to sit on and food to serve to them. The portal remains open. Others are peering through, but not coming through. The first time a sentient encounters TK tech is disturbing. I am sure my appearance is not helping. Welcome to TK training.

We learned from the Yesan 9 destruction to always provide an escape route. Some of the Hu will come here to help set things up, such as starting fields of squash, corn and beans. What they refer to as the three sisters. They will remain here to safeguard this world. An open portal will draw attention to them, so it will remain closed most of the time from now on. I am certainly not needed here. Time to find out what the kids have been doing. One thing all sentients have in common, don't leave the kids alone too long.

# Mars

Was I gone that long? Squeak is next to me, in Martian form. Not having a good time of it either. Our long term partnership will be stressed by this visit, but I had to know what happened.

It is good to be freed of the Builders though. Especially when it was the Companions who accidentally formed the M.O.T.H.E.R. Nasty things. I read the journals and hoped never to meet one. I was that close to having done so. How far along were they when we left? Close, very close. We left the Builders in the Companions care. Scary.

I come back to the present and resume my scans. It is like a different world. There are plants and small animals all over, near the equator at least. Crustaceans or arthropods mostly, have not done the DNA yet, are in abundance. May not matter, different evolution paths produces different creatures. They fill a niche, a needed one. They likely taste good too. This might explain why everyone appears to have put on some weight. We are the thinnest ones around at the moment. I based our forms on what I remember. The poles are still lichens mostly of course. They seem to grow almost anywhere.

Carbon dioxide is still high. That helps keep us above freezing part of the year and helps the plants, but it also means most sentients can't breathe our air without aid. This also means our skin looks a shade greener because of a complex copper/iron blood protein. Not a lot, but definitely green. I am sure the racist earthers would love our pale green skin and come up with all kinds of insults.

It is warm enough in the summer now to walk around without extra clothing. Sunbathing has even become popular. Most houses have sun decks on top now. Water concentration is much higher, to the point of having an occasional short rainstorms. They call a festival day when it happens and everyone dances in the rain. Not my style at all. I am afraid I am old school. Squeak loves it of course.

My new temporary office is deep underground. I am introverted, as are most TKs. Being one of The Thirteen is a huge responsibility too. I suspect it will mean a lot more boring meetings. It is a simple affair, a desk, a chair for visitors, a covered pitcher of water for the required greeting ritual. My Buddy keeps all notes and paper work sorted inside its database.

The atmospheric density is nearly ten times what it was. The major reason we can now get rain and snow further towards a pole. This also has reduced the number and intensity of sand storms. The plants and low ground cover had helped there tremendously. For animals, the crab form is the most abundant. Provides protection from dehydration, easy digging

in when necessary, pincers to hold on to the plants they eat or the smaller forms when they can catch them. They used to be rare. There is a small garden near my office I like to visit. Some of the local life is present and provides opportunity to observe them closer up. As we don't try to eat them, they have grown habituated to our presence. Some even give them treats. I don't approve, but I am not in charge any longer. Just visiting.

My feeling is that I am no longer needed means we will leave soon. The multiverse is vast and I am sure there is someplace we will fit in and can offer assistance. Sometimes that is all it takes, like with the Builders, to push them to the critical point of an advanced civilization. They are nearly there now on Mars. They are even making crude attempts at space craft. There are already objects in orbit. Of course I have emphasized that all earths are off limits. Last thing we need is invaders from Mars in the earth mythology again. This time for real.

The only changes we needed to make were placement of more advanced sentinels to help alert the people here in the event of a 'thn or other sentient attack. The froth Mars close by are uninhabitable, but we were able to find one some DS distance away that will work in an emergency and have set up the necessary portals to be used, only in an emergency. It would be tough going on the new Mars if this were ever to happen, but we have been through worse. Some will survive. I hope.

The TKs present have all gone sleeper or the new term of Watcher. We need to know if they can do this on their own. No more mother TKs to comfort them every time they make a mistake. Even TKs make mistakes. Let's hope this is not one of them. I scan and find Squeak meditating on a distant volcano. I pop over. Nice view. I sit next to her. She has reverted back to Rap form.

<sup>R</sup>Time to go?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Sure. Nothing here for us as I suspected.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Where to?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Do you want to visit Rap Eden? Only fair.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I guess. Not really excited about it of course, but it gets it off our list.<sup>R</sup>

# Rap Eden

"Let's take this nice and slow. We are no longer Wizards to solve all their problems."

"We are Watchers, just to observe and record. Why com Hu?"

"Do you think anyone overhearing us would understand that after all this time?"

"And in this thick air it is easier than Martian at least. But, in Rap form?"

"Nothing is perfect. We do the best we can. Feel like a run? We need some believable road dust before we meet anyone."

"Looking like us, you are worried about dust? I think you just like to run, admit it."

"Are we going to run or not?" I smile and take off. Can't really run on Mars. In Mars gravity, it is more of a bounce and of course, not enough air. Lots of air here. It feels so good. I turn and Ron is trying to keep up, but is quite a ways behind already. He will catch up.

There are trees, streams, flowers, sort of. We never had full color flowers on Di-Eden. They are better here, but not like growing up on Earth Two. This feels like paradise all the same.

There are critters here too. Lots of food for a Rap who wants it. Wild food always tastes better. The farmed ones have too much fat. Heart disease must be worse for the town and city dwellers. Too much fat and too little running. Not good for Hu or Rap.

I stop at a small stream in the shade and wait for Ron. Slight breeze causes the leaves to rustle. Black was hot and steamy and Mars dry and cold. Here it is perfect. Finally.

I guess as a TK we take a lot for granted. Normal life for one. Certainly a lot simpler. I hope with our new role as Watchers, life can be simple again.

"Thanks for waiting. I need to rest and get some water." He goes to the stream and wades right in. We don't swim well, but he is up to his neck before he stops. Amazingly he starts to swim around in the pool.

"Ron, Raps don't swim!"

"Says who? Have you ever even tried? Think like a dog and keep your head above water. Not fast, but it works. Won't win any races, but good to know."

He gets out and purposely shakes his body to dispel water. Does not work all that well, but the air will dry him fast enough.

As soon as he is dry we run. We can swim? In all this time I never tried! And a Martian shows me it is possible. There is not even enough water on Mars to swim in. How?

# Enterprise

Technically this is still the Flyer. We don't use antimatter and dilithium crystals, as much as we tried to get that to work. It had a tendency to blow up, even using superconducting 'thn metal magnets to contain everything.

We use good old fashioned DS instead of transporters. However, it was a good idea to have a 'transporter' room to avoid collisions from all the comings and goings. Allowed us to log everyone's trips too, so we had some idea where everyone was. Having sen DS from everywhere on the ship at any time was a logistical nightmare. Yes, it is slower, but, really, we have time now. Nothing has to be done quickly except during an emergency and then and only then, you are free to do whatever you need to do to save self and others.

Sickbay is more for research of newly encountered lifeforms than our own needs, given that everyone can heal themselves. Lots of environmental chambers that "Bones" never had to deal with.

Yes, we do have engineering, both to keep things running and to continue to research new ways of doing it.

Each crew member and passenger has their own space, though not as large as in the vids. We don't sleep, so not really needed for anything other than a quiet space to think.

With the GRC closed, Library, now called Libby, was hired to be our information officer and chronicler. She filled in the database and then left with White for Di Eden. Each explorer has a copy.

With the sector 'thn gone or reduced in rank back to adult 'thn with no ability to advance, our primary mission is to find other Farout refugees and attempt to find their worlds again or set them up on a new one in their froth line. Fortunately so far only the Earth Froth sen have had to suffer their entire worlds being cored. But, depending on how long they were in Farout, their home world was not always inviting any longer. Time is change. Given enough time and there was a good chance that your base ecology no longer existed, especially without you in it.

A few decided to come along with us and help where they can, having nothing left to go home to, or having been at Farout so long they have largely forgotten their birth world. It was decided early on to only accept those who could live under our environmental and social conditions. We help them build their own ship if they still want to explore and help out, but kept immediate crew to those who could live together with a modicum of adjustment.

We currently have a crew of forty eight. We are in Farout and the psi-otic field is still limited. This was to prevent inmates from escaping. Ah,

did not work all that well. The earth froth 'cheaters' made a mockery of their prison system.

Our mission is to find other inmates and attempt to return them to their home worlds, if they still exist, and if they are not a hazard to others. The jury is still out on the Yellow and Black groups. I am leaning towards putting the Yellow back at Farout and keeping an eye on the Black, the Builders Collective. Others may still find some place for them. Both of their origin worlds are gone. That can make it easier or harder. Plenty of non-sen worlds out there waiting for some OM bait, but they usually want at least related genetic material. Sort of the point of 'reproduction'.

<sup>λ</sup>Captain to the bridge.<sup>λ</sup>

Daydreaming over. The Laissen (La) are an interesting sen. Definitely NOT earth froth. They can breath our air, but pretty much everything else is different. They prefer a bit cooler environment and make their own chow. Fortunately they don't need live prey. Can breath in air or oxygenated water. The Luss are fascinated by them and are working hard to learn how to mimic them. It takes more than looks and com though. You also need the culture, mannerisms, ability to eat their food, etc. Keeps them busy and the La amused. Fortunately they get along with others. So far.

As I have already said, most decided being with us was just too risky. When the entire 'thn collective hates you I can't blame them. It is the ones who wish to remain, but we are not sure of, that are of concern. Anyone abandoned at Farout has learned to be patient. Look at our own, how they betrayed us repeatedly. We have several sen on a trial period, like the La. This benefits both of us. They get more time to decide if it is a good fit for them and for us. We learn from their culture as well. The 'consolation' prizes are excellent, minimizing the consequences of a bad choice. We either find their own home world or help set up a new one. We provide advice and training in whatever tech we feel comfortable sharing.

We have time. We can leave them on their Farout world, which does support them, albeit at a low level, until details are worked out. We take on a small subset, for our own safety, for training and searching.

This is not to neglect our own chosen purpose. We want to see what is out here. An essentially infinite multiverse to explore and learn from. This sen baby sitting is a distraction. Interesting, necessary, honorable, but still, a distraction.

Shit, the La has left a slime trail again. Really? If Cats can be trained not to leave their waste everywhere, why can't the La? And yes, they complain about our smell too.

<sup>λ</sup>Captain present!<sup>λ</sup>

"Relax." I hate being announced, but some of the tasks require a great deal of concentration. Having a 'captain' sneak up on you, even uninten-

tionally, can be unnerving.

"What do we have ensign?"

"We are in standard orbit around a Class M planet orbiting the expected Farout white dwarf. Average temperature is 10°C in the inhabitable zone. Poles are frozen. Surface is largely land with approximately 31% water cover, not counting the poles where it appears to be perpetually frozen. Air is breathable for current sen on board. Water is typical Farout low salt content, with a higher than expected lithium concentration, 0.01%.<sup>π</sup>

"A cold one. Set up the standard array of sensors. Go into watch mode. I want to know everything about the life down there. No offense, but I don't want another Luss surprise."

"But we are so beautiful." That gets the sen equivalent of a laugh from everyone and an exaggerated grin from Luss Li. The only thing you can see is s/he's grin.

<sup>λ</sup>We have structures. Buried, heat signatures suggesting chimneys.<sup>λ</sup>

<sup>^</sup>Deep analysis shows the likely fuel is a concentrated carbon source mined from approximately fifty meters depth.<sup>^</sup>

"Now what the hell is coal doing on a Farout planet? There were no buried resources on any of the others. Helped prevent escapes. Unless you defeated the limiters you could not make transport."

+Easy to see why they would use it though. Likely they did not evolve on such a cold world.+

<sup>^</sup>Not that cold by some sen standards. They are mostly at the equator anyway.<sup>^</sup>

"They were so nasty that they put a warm sen on a cold world? That is cruel."

<sup>θ</sup>They are not there on vacation.<sup>θ</sup>

"There are two reasons to get sent here. One, unjustly convicted by the Tafa or someone like them. Two, they really were a threat to others and needed to be isolated."

<sup>^</sup>In a sense, we still don't really know where any of us fit on those questions, especially the second.<sup>^</sup> True.

+Pilot, you were never sent to Farout, correct?+

"No one currently on board, of the earth froth species, was. The only ones currently on board we removed from a Farout world are all here on the bridge, the three of you." A Luss, a La, and a Sal.

<sup>λ</sup>We all hope that was not a mistake for any of us. I personally love the chance to meet others and learn from them.<sup>λ</sup>

+The question is, why was that seen as so evil? Diversity brings understanding.+

<sup>^</sup>On my world it usually brought oppression and war.<sup>^</sup>

"That too unfortunately. Please let me know if any of you feel like

pursuing that direction while on board. I would be happy to set you down on some nice secluded asteroid." Nervous amusement shown. They know I would do it and have full authority to do so.

An image appears on the screen of the configuration of the most likely sen species below us.

"We have enough diversity in this room to make some conjectures. Though it does not appear to be like any of us, think about the Tridon to Hggy line. They all evolved from the Tridon and diversified over millions of years. Without doing a Wayback probe we have no idea when those below arrived either."

+A possibility the ones below are far removed from the original ones sent here.+ True.

^Farout is thought to be nearly 20 billion years old. That is a lot of time for change.^

^My understanding from the journals is that Farout was not originally set up as a prison for wayward sen, but as a structural component of the froth multiverse. A sort of limit structure. Is this correct?^

"So it would appear to those who have visited Control. The problem is, is that Control is impossible to comprehend by an incarnation occupant. Our minds do the best they can to make some sense of it, but I see no possibility this can be correct for anything other than a visit."

^Do The Thirteen comprehend it?^

"Not clear, or they are not saying, or it is impossible to relate to any of us mere TK immortals." Shows of amusement. We are anything but immortal, just look that way compared to a norm.

^Only tech one found so far.^

^That makes it hard to interact with them. To them, we appear as gods. Never a good place to be.^

+The question is, how long have they been in this state? If thousands or even millions of years it might be best to just leave them alone.+

^However, if they only recently arrived and have stories of what it was like 'before' it would be cruel to leave them as they are.^

"Don't forget, we need to know why they are here as well. I am still having a hard time believing that the GRC only did this to sen the Tafa didn't like." Yeah, this means you too La. Why were you sent here? What is your story?

I don't mean the one you told us, but the real one.

# Rap Eden

I really do not want to be here. This is not my world. These are not my sens. I was born on Di Eden and raised on Hu by self admitted not exactly sane individuals. I would not trade my life for any other, but I am not a normal Rap, if you can even still call me a Rap at all. Yes, both Ron and I are in Rap form at the moment, but both of us have been in many skins, many cultures, showing and speaking many coms.

"Ron, it is critical to my sanity that we take this slow and easy. We are no longer Guardians."

"We are Watchers. That name says it all. We do not change, save, or interfere in anyway."

"I get it. We watch. But how close? We can scan from orbit, why even be down on the surface?"

"Oh, your scanning is so good you can 'see' everything with your mind and don't need eyes any longer? Might was well become a Comp and be done with it. Bodies are messy, why bother?"

"We can't interfere, but we need to interact. We can't do that in solidic form."

"Try to blend it, but don't mess them up. How exactly do we do that Squeak?"

I grin, "By being nobodies. No one notices the lowest ranks. Why invest in any interaction with no chance of return? We are both small, that will help."

"We also need to appear old and feeble as well." He ages and stoops a bit. He makes a walking stick to hang onto.

"A little nuts will help too. Speaking Hu will help there."

"And very poor. Make all our belongings look well used, lots of small defects from a lifetime of use by many Raps."

"The discards. Got it."

"Guano, we have company. Coming up the trail towards us. Single individual. Show time."

"Nobody will believe a wild tale from one individual. Think of this as a trial run. We might want to move to another continent afterwards to be sure." I nod. Not a Rap gesture. Do I even remember how to be a Rap anymore?

*Young fem, well armed. Step off the side of the trail and let them pass?*

*Agreed. Bow your head too. We are not worthy of notice.*

*Got it.*

She is coming fast, but stops right in front of us, looks us up and down, sniffs us, then takes off again.

"Okay, that was weird. She had blood spatter all over her. Her weapons have seen use. A warrior of some kind."

"Curiouser and curiouser."

"She left when she saw we were not a threat. What is going on here that they need warriors like this? Running patrol or messenger?"

"We are only here to observe." Right. I have such a strong urge to jump in and stop the fighting, whatever the cause. Before our time with the Builders, I would have. Something about watching a coordinated ecology all working together calmed me down. It is interesting, they became what the Tafa were always striving for, total perfection with their ecology. The Builders have no leader, no ruling class, no species above another. Something the Tafa missed completely. Are Raps becoming Builders or Tafa? I am leaning towards Tafa.

On E1/2, the Di, Rap, Dio, Dia, and Diu sen never happened. Supposedly we are descendants of velociraptors. I looked them up in the Hu archives. Much longer necks and tails, smaller brains, bigger claws and teeth. They apparently also worked in packs. Are we devolving back to that state? When we were with the new Di and working together we were achieving great things. We were tech four. We had primitive trains, mail, beginnings of electric works. Fortunately, we did not have money and avoided that Hu trap at least.

What happened? This was one individual who passed us. Maybe a criminal, paid assassin or some other explanation? We need to know more. It is going to be hard to stay out of it.

"She pretty much ignored us as you said. Bet it would have been different if you were still in full battle gear. That would have more interesting though."

"No fun picking fights with inferiors. No challenge." Ron smiles, but it is true. It is definitely going to be a real challenge to keep silent and just watch.

"This isn't going to work, not with us. There is no way we cannot affect our surroundings. We have been TK too long."

"And we will give ourselves away the first time we speak."

"Likely before that even. It will be how we walk, present ourselves, and of course speak as you com."

"We can read a local to get most of that. You want to give up before we even try? How do we learn without practice? We did not learn TK in one day either."

We keep going for a bit. There is a small collective before us. We stop and watch. This is polite as well as a safety measure. You just don't run into some other pack's area without an invitation or escort. I hand Ron some rat jerky while we are waiting.

Someone finally comes out to confront us. A child really, but they are

armed. Old enough to be named is old enough to work.

We remain where we are and wait for them to come towards us.

We bow and look submissive. The young male looks us over, sniffs us like the warrior did, then backs away.

<sup>R</sup>You are not welcome. Leave our area immediately or be fed to the rats.<sup>R</sup> He turns and walks back towards the collective.

Ron exclaims loud enough to be heard, <sup>R</sup>We have coin. Silver. We just want supplies, for which we will pay.<sup>R</sup>

*What are you doing Ron?*

*An experiment.*

We each make some silver coins. The male comes back with a huff. Clearly did not want this task.

<sup>R</sup>Coin is illegal. Are you with the authorities?<sup>R</sup>

Ron looks down at himself and at me, <sup>R</sup>We are nobodies. Just need some supplies and no one will help us. We are no threat to any one.<sup>R</sup> Ron waves his hand around. <sup>R</sup>You have done well. Surely you must have some excess that can help two old Raps.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>How we have done is our affair. Wait here.<sup>R</sup>

He goes back to the collective and returns an eighth later with a small sack. He drops the sack ten meters in front of us. Ron holds up two silvers, but he ignores us and goes back without even acknowledging us.

I walk to the sack and pick it up to pretend to examine the contents. It is full of left over bones, skins and tails. Partially rotted. I drop two silvers on the ground and walk back to Ron holding the sack like it is precious cargo. We turn to leave.

"We can circle around to get past them. There is another settlement eight kilometers away. Could get there before sunset."

A large fem comes out from behind a bolder.

I confront her, <sup>R</sup>You here to steal from us too? You can have the coin, no one wants those. I doubt even you would want what is in the sack.<sup>R</sup>

Looking right at me, as fem have higher standing in most packs, she asks, <sup>R</sup>What did he say?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>He wanted to know if I intended to share the meal I was given?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Do you?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I believe that is our concern, not yours.<sup>R</sup>

She draws her sword.

<sup>R</sup>Pretty feisty for two dead Raps.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are not defenseless.<sup>R</sup>

She huffs, <sup>R</sup>Could have fooled me.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Come and get it then.<sup>R</sup> I hold up the sack.

<sup>R</sup>Probably better than what is on your old bones.<sup>R</sup> She reaches for the sack and finds herself on the ground looking up at the two of us.

<sup>R</sup>You were warned.<sup>R</sup> Ron says.

I add, <sup>R</sup>If you don't mind, we will be on our way. We want no trouble. Just want to be left alone.<sup>R</sup>

We continue down the trail as she scrambles to get back to her feet. She then stares at us as we leave. She picks up the sack though, then drops it after one sniff.

<sup>R</sup>Take me with you!<sup>R</sup> She shouts to us.

Ron nods to me. I turn to face her, <sup>R</sup>Coming with us will mean much pain and little happiness.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I can be your defender?<sup>R</sup>

Ron sighs, <sup>R</sup>An old Rap threw you to the ground while you were armed and ready. What could you possibly do to help?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Look good?<sup>R</sup>

I shake my head and wave her towards us.

*We will learn more from this one than trying to get into a well armed collective as total strangers.*

*I agree. She might not like it though.*

*Life is like that.*

*How long do you think she would make it without us 'interfering'?*

*Looks awfully hungry and no one seems to care about a lone Rap. I am guessing it would get ugly very soon. I don't think she can hunt well alone. It is much harder alone, even for Raps.*

*Rap chow?*

*Of course, I do so love torturing the young ones.*

*This just might be fun after all.*

<sup>R</sup>Hey, Ronin, are you hungry?<sup>R</sup> Ronin?

*An unemployed Japanese samurai. You studied ancient Hu history right?*

*Ronin it is. I like it.*

# Sal Eden

θWatchers. This is going to be hard.θ

θYou don't want to go back to being the leader certainly?θ

θNever again. If you ever see me going in that direction, just put limiters on me and drop me in the deepest ocean. You were at the meetings. All of us got into trouble because of using tech or TK to 'solve' the limitations of the sens under our care.θ

θAs I understand the whole thing, The Question was designed to try as many ideas as possible. 'thn, OM, TKs were all helpers, but only in a support capacity. No experiment works if you manipulate the outcome to your desired goal. They have to get there on their own or not at all.θ

θThere is a desired goal?θ I got him there.

θThe only task is to continue to play the game. It is how we get there that is interesting, not the gaining of any goal.θ He was paying attention. Baga and I make a good team.

Rajk Eden was not that far gone, in either illegal tech, or fear of Farout leading to the Cult of Perfection. Unfortunately Sal Eden did go nearly full Tafa on us. On me.

All of this was explained to the 'leaders'. It has been eight by eight years. We are here to see if anything has changed since. Granted after thousands of years of being good little Sal, change will be very hard. A sen in power does not give up power willingly. The Tafa trained us well. All the time I was leader I had never met one. It was not until I was drafted to help with the 'rogue' TKs did I learn the truth.

I liked our multi sen community on Edwin Land. We learned a lot working together. Too bad it had to be destroyed to hide us. Baga and I have been together ever since. From our newsletter we learned that most elected to stay as pairs. Interestingly never two of the same sen. We learn a lot by seeing another perspective. We have saved each other so many times. True, it was a blast, as the Hu say, to fly around in our mini flyer visiting all kinds of different sen and cultures.

There are so many ways of doing cultures, yet, it always comes down to the basics. We are all mortal and of course we hate that. Instead we try to live the best life we can. Power, money or equivalent, good health, sex or equivalent, the best of everything. Does not buy immortality, but it makes the trip more pleasurable. Then there are the controllers. The Cult of Perfection. The thought is that if you do everything perfectly you will achieve immortality. Just another lie. Most find out too late. Was almost true for me as well. When it only affects ourselves, like monks in a monastery, fine, but when you try to extend it to everyone, not so good.

How many lives were ruined on Sal? How much art, science, music,

stories, could have been shared if we had not succumbed to that lie? We have seen some of the best each sen has to offer and it is impressive. Granted we Sal run on a different time scale, but time is irrelevant. We did not all start the race at the same time and there is no time limit to the end. It is, in fact, not even a race. There is no set point we have to get to, no accomplishment we need to achieve, no understandings we need to gain. It is a path, not a goal. You only lose when you stop trying.

I am sounding 'preachy' again as the Hu say. I have a past too. It is so hard to let go of what you were taught as 'perfect' in thoughts and way of living. I was warned it was very easy, when confronted with a truth, to then make this your new idea of perfection and be just as rigid and stubborn about this new belief as you were of your old one. I think this is the major reason we are no longer allowed to assist or interfere in anyway. None of us can claim to know The Truth for all sens, for all time. Not even for our own lives, right now.

θLee, you were in the clouds again.θ

θI know. I can't help it. You have slowed down to Sal time at least. Guess we best get started. Up ahead is where I served and where Rand and Drup first entered our world. The gates look the same. They were not welcoming then either.θ

θDoes not look clean. Very aged in fact. No one has been taking care of this structure. Beautiful stonework, but lots of lichens and weather wear.θ

θIn my time, Sal would have died for such a presentation. I am glad they overcame at least that aspect. Stones are not immortal and should not be presented as such. Let's go in. The gate appears to be open with no guards at least.θ

There are plants taking over everything. I learned at Uni that this is normal. In a million years you would never even know an intelligent sen ever existed. Humbling.

I know these halls, these pathways, these walls. We enter the hall of justice. There are holes in the ceiling. I feel the walls. The surface of the stone comes off in my hand. It will not be long now.

We make our way to the high altar. The center of pain. We thought it was the center of truth.

θWe do not get many visitors.θ

θI would imagine not. We have come a long way. Tell us a story?θ

θYou clearly know this place. How is it possible? At first the curious came. The victims that survived came. That all ended a long, long time ago.θ

Baga jumps in to save me, θWe heard the stories. We love stories. Hearing a story is good, but seeing is far better. We came to see the place where it all happened. Did you know the Leader personally? That would

be so cool.θ Can Sal give a dumb look? Baga is going to make me laugh, and Sal do not laugh. Our host would think I was dying.

*I don't think she works for free.*

*When did they learn about money?*

*Food might work.*

*Know anyone who would eat Sal Chow besides us?*

*I won't eat it willingly either.*

*Gold or silver?*

θWhere did you two come from? You are not from around here, yet you know of this place. θ

θWe are just two curious travelers. We heard this was an important part of our history. If you can't help us we can ask someone else. We have nothing of value. We only carry trail food, which we are willing to share of course.θ I hold some of it out to her.

She reaches over and takes a small piece, then spits it out.

θCome with me. You two are in worse condition than we are.θ We? I quickly scan and find a small community hidden among the ruins, all watching us. She waves them out and they all come out, in ones and twos. They quickly, well for Sal they are quick, set up a space with bowls of fruit, bugs and seeds, laid out of large leaves. Water is brought in jars with a smaller cup next to each.

We offer what we have and are politely turned down, but instead invited to participate with the others.

After eating, our host starts, θWe are the caretakers of the temple of lies.θ Good name for it. θOur purpose it to help insure it never happens again. It would be helpful to know what you already know of this place so we can fill in gaps and correct misunderstandings.θ And know where we stand politically.

*Let me try. I will be less involved with the story.* I nod. An expression we never used. The sun will set before he finishes. Rajk love to tell stories.

θIn a time before remembering our people lived their lives without much thought to the future. Slowly we advanced in our understanding of our world and the rules for living in it. Some were impatient however and wanted knowledge and abilities faster than our culture could absorb the knowledge and use it wisely. These 'gifts' were very tempting and many were tempted. There was a danger to this knowledge we did not appreciate. Crops started to fail. The weather changed. People started dying or failing to produce any young.

When we thought this might be the end, a being appeared who claimed to have the answer. We would have to give up all our knowledge and learn to live simply again. We were desperate and agreed to try this path. At first, it was just simple changes we could all see the wisdom of

and could be affected easily and quickly. However, the rules, as they were called, became more numerous. Failure to obey them became more painful.

Eventually we became a culture totally frozen in place. No one dared say or do anything that was not sanctioned by the priests and leaders. Many 'disappeared' never to be seen again. This seemed to happen more frequently when food supplies were low, but people were afraid to complain. Those who complained, disappeared.θ

They all appear to be attentive to Baga's story. Is this good or bad?

θTwo strangers appeared from places unknown. They questioned the wisdom of the priests and leaders but gave no instruction. They left. Soon afterwards special wood gift boxes started to arrive. No one knew how to open them, so they were gathered and placed in the then current leader's tomb as part of their legacy and what would become their tomb when they died.

One day the leader and all those condemned to die that day all disappeared at once. Upon inspection, the leader's tomb was found open and all of the gift boxes that had arrived were open as well, and empty.θ

They are still attentive. How different is this story from their own? Will we be executed for spreading lies when we are done telling our version of the tale?

They just stare at us.

Baga finally says, θWe don't really know much about what happened after. That part of the story never reached us. We very much would like to know what happened next. We need to know what happened. Please.θ

θCome with us.θ

*We follow I guess.*

We are in the middle, but everyone is coming with us. I quickly figure out where we are going. We pass chamber after chamber. Some have been broken into. Not easy at all to do. They were intended to be permanent. I look inside the 'open' ones. Everything is still there as far as I can tell, never having seen the inside of any chamber but mine of course.

And, of course, that is where we stop. Closed at least. I scan the chamber. The boxes are still there. Someone has tried to get through the lock. Part of our training was to design our own lock. Only we knew how to get through. Some make it easy and their chamber is empty until just before their death. They fill it, seal it, and die. Our bodies are supposed to be in their too, but we do have the option of dedicating our bodies back to the ecology. My chamber was left open when I left. Who closed it?

θI am guessing the sub leaders were not happy about the disappearance of the Leader.θ Easier to say they died and elect a new Leader.

θWhy are we stopped here?θ Baga asks.

θThis is the chamber of the last Leader. His body was never found,

nor the bodies of any of the others who were condemned that day. We are hoping you can help us open it.θ

Baga looks confused, θOur story ends with this chamber being open. Besides, there is nothing inside but a bunch of empty wood boxes.θ

They are silent and look at each other. Finally one comes forward and walks up to me. Why?

θPlease open the chamber.θ

I try to look totally confused, θWhat? Why? Me?θ

She taps the key around my neck.

θThis metal decoration? It has been handed down in my family for generations.θ

I am gently pushed to the chamber door. Not leaving without at least pretending to try. On the other toe, does it matter? I personally saw all the papers disappear. The lids are open, there is nothing inside. What is this about?

I pretend to fumble with the lock before finally it clicks into place and the lock releases. I open the door. The boxes are in a random pile. They nearly fill the space. I step aside.

θWe have been waiting for you for a very long time.θ Others push past us and remove the boxes carefully. They turn each one over to see the bottom. The numbers are still visible. Some chamber. Wood should have turned to dust by now. The chamber is soon empty and the boxes are being arranged in order along a now cleared hallway. Each box is carefully closed. I am next to the first box. One of them is at the last box. There are many more boxes than sen present, but they space themselves out.

*Now what?*

*Don't they have to be opened in the correct order to work?*

*Do you really trust The Five that much?* Baga smiles. Totally hideous.

Last time, I touched the last box and it opened to tell me to go to the first box. Do I do the same now or skip the stone and just hit the first box lid? I hate the games those sen play with us. At Uni it was horrible. Baga likes games. I hate them. I just want to get to work.

In turn each Sal taps the box in front of them. Nothing happens. I am the only one left. I expel air and tap my box. Of course, it opens. I look inside. There is a slip of paper like material inside. I reach in and remove the paper and place it next to the box. I rise and tap the top of each box in turn. They all open, except the last box. Nothing happens. Strange.

I rise, θI believe the last box is for you Leader.θ

*We need to go. This is their world now.*

*Took you long enough "Leader"*. Baga gives me a dirty look.

We both bow to the new Leader and leave. She taps the box and it opens of course. And no I don't know what they say. Don't want to know.

# Crust Eden

Another request has come in. Standard mix of species to fill in an ecology. This is getting boring even for me. Why are only the crust so burdened? I like helping, but I prefer being alone in the deep. The ultimate introvert. Unfortunately it was revealed that I was one of the thirteen, yes, lower case 't' for me. There is always one unwilling participant in every group. I will do what is needed, but that is all I will do. I just want to be left alone.

It is time for a change of venue. New place, release my pets, com with the resident OM for a few thousand years. VERY hard to find someone in OM time. Awaken to a new world full of life, my kind of life. Perfect. Poor choice of words. We don't do perfect here. Good enough works just fine. The Tafa were really creepy.

I pop off this world. I don't have possessions. Just me. Good enough.

# Bug Eden

\*Wait, you set us down in the middle of the cold side!\*

\*We are TK, relax. Let's run!\*

\*The plus side is no one else here is out and about.\*

\*Think of it as an adventure. No trails to follow. Lots of hidden hazards.\*

\*Can we just run already before I freeze in place!\*

Of course Cat figures out you can slide down snow covered slopes on your back. Soon we are all doing it. Turtle just waves her antennae. This is not what she had in mind bringing us here. Owl shrugs, flips on his back and slides down after us. Turtle pops to the end of the slope to wait for us. Cheater! No fun at all.

\*Puu, this way!\* I follow without thinking. We are in an ice tunnel and moving fast. I scan ahead. This goes a really long way. It can't keep going, right? Well, yeah, we still have TK. They promised no more limiters, etc. training period is over. We have no actual assignment here. Just wasting time till we are needed again. Could be eighths, could be thousands of years. Only the two really know and they aren't telling.

Why here? The frozen side of Bug Eden of all places. My guess is this is training, for what I don't know. I really hope this is not training for some frozen world with demons set on killing us all and have TK8 abilities. Yeah, that would not be fun. We can still die, not forever, but it still hurts.

We finally come out in some gigantic cavern. We stop to look around and try to understand.

\*I don't remember this from before.\*

\*Silly Puu, we are kilometers below the surface. You know, gravity only pulls you downhill.\*

\*I heard it works that way.\*

Myra pops in, \*Whoa. How did you find this place?\*

\*Accident. Really.\*

\*Ah huh. Don't believe you. You do realize it is heavily shielded from above. Unless you came down the ice shoot you would have missed it.\*

Silver comes in on his back having had a great time apparently. Turtle pops in pissed as usual. She definitely has an attitude problem. We just survived total destruction of the multiverse. Lighten up.

Silver makes some glow spheres and the place lights up. There was an old earth two movie, Raiders or something. This looks like the last scene from that movie, row after row of ten meter high shelves. Lot of boxes and other containers. We are in the center isle.

\*Welcome to the Library.\*

\*As in E1/2 or the GRC?\* Myra asks. Good question. Silver just smiles. Shit. I try to scan but reach limiters a few hundred meters away.

Turtle turns to us, \*This was meant for a later lesson. We should leave.\*

Cat goes full Cat, \*What the hell? We are all of the thirteen. Stop that shit. Really. You don't want me to go rogue on you. This hidden, secret, not ready for it, crap has to end NOW!\* Silver smiles. She is right though.

\*She can end this incarnation with a thought. You really do not want to upset the kitty do you.\* Not a question. Silver raises his antennae at Turtle.

Turtle leaves. Silver begins, \*We needed caches of knowledge. Just in case. They were kept secret in case sen, who knew, where compromised. Part of the training here was to familiarize all of you as to their locations and ah, entrance requirements.\* As in traps and surprises I bet.

He continues, \*A lot of this knowledge is what we would call forbidden knowledge. Every sen, every culture has such knowledge. Good to know it exists and how to counteract it, but hazardous in the wrong claspers. Turtle and I have known we were part of The Thirteen for thousands of incarnations. The three of you, only this one. You are here to get caught up on what we have found and learned.\*

Myra states the obvious, \*This is going to take forever.\* He shows humor. Guano.

I come in, \*Relax Myra. We do not have to memorize it. Just learn the basic categories and then come back to a stash to get the details when we need it. In most cases cultures don't change overnight. We can tag team if we have to as well. Just gives us another knowledge set in case we need it.\*

Silver states, \*With all that you know already on your own, there is a very good chance you would never need any of this. That is why we did not see it as a priority.\*

I come in with, \*Besides, I thought we were watchers now, not changers. We are not around to prevent or interfere any longer, just observe. Still, the library could be useful to see where knowledge could ultimately lead.\* Silver nods a thanks. I don't think we have placated Cat though. She hates surprises. Bet she makes an exact dupe of everything here. Of course, this is not the only cache. Bet they move all the others now.

This is like those old Ben and Jerry cartoons I watched as a kid. The mouse always won. Good luck Cat.

# Builder's Collective

There is no route to translating this aspect of the journal into Standard or any other sen language. Ceph might be the closest. Think of this as a Ceph with millions of arms, each with a brain capable of independent thought, yet still work in synchrony. Keeping it simple we proceed.

The Companions were setback by accidentally initiating a M.O.T.H.E.R. The problem has been resolved. As the Comp are now able to replicate, it was a relatively simple matter to rep the computational aspects without the conscious/sentience interfering.

This gives us full run of the entire multiverse. Unfortunately the multiverse is essentially infinite. This might be overwhelming to some. To the BC it is opportunity. We are not dependent on individual lifespans. We can adapt very quickly. Each of the new forms can continue the mission independently. Each bud then shares what they learn so all may benefit. Think of it as a mega BC. Or better would be the old concept of a fractal intelligence. A limited term, but works for this journal entry.

The BC only agreed to the journal because of a knowledge exchange. The Watchers information will be of limited use, but the cost is low as well.

We were put at Farout because we made the same mistake as the Guardians. We got too intrusive, trying to 'fix' the cultures we encountered. They were messy, not efficient. We were only attempting to help. Now that the The Question has been explained to us, we are happy to make this small change in our purpose.

We are most interested in any culture/sen that might or may incur the same interference we suffered. We are not to interfere, but we feel honor bound to offer some simple advice to avoid a misunderstanding in their future. Most cultures have something equivalent to an oracle. A simple implanted suggestion in multiple recipients should suffice. If they choose not to use this knowledge, we will still have fulfilled our obligation.

Given the size of the multiverse and relative smallness of Farout, it is likely we will never encounter a culture that meets this criteria at the time necessary to prevent a misunderstanding. The sector 'thn are gone, but we believe this is only for a short time. They will eventually figure out how to raise one of their own again. It is what we would do. It was how this incarnation was configured as it's default state. It will be where it returns to given enough time.

More in our next entry.

# Send in the Clowns

"Why do they call us the clowns? Does not seem fair to me. They mess up from time to time too. Granted we are not at The Five level, but there are thousands of other TKs who are not also, but none of them are called the 'clowns'. Hey, we found the Sal, massaged the SyWg pairing. Okay that was mostly the Comps, but we where there and helped."

"Rand you are talking to yourself again."

"Oh, like you never do? We are all alone again, on some shit assignment no one else wants. How can we not be talking to ourselves. We are not respected. We earned our TK9 status, same as everyone else. No one hands that to you. Just because our methods are a bit unconventional, but we do get there. Diversity is not just a catch phrase right? The Question does not even work without diversity. We put the 'D' in diversity. That makes us a plus right?"

"Whatever you say Rand. Can we get back to the task at hand, or are you going to whine all night?"

"Night already?"

"It is a nocturnal sen Rand. Time to Rock and Roll."

Sigh . . . .

The Paak have huge eyes that give me the creeps, eight of them. Very long fingers with sucker pads on the ends of each hand like appendage. The arms and legs are identical and they can use any/all of them. The 'fur' is greenish blue to hide in the foliage. There are also poisonous spines hidden in select locations. Defensive purposes only of course.

We are in Paak form at the moment. We are Watchers. Not too bad. Not as much fun of course. Going to go over great at the next all hands TK meeting. Hopefully we will get into less trouble this time.

"Rand, watch where you are going!" I run smack into a tree. I hate it when I do that.

"I am ahead three to your two now."

"That is not a good thing Rand."

)Shouldn't we be speaking Paak? Need to blend in after all.(

)The linguistics are hell. No wonder they have a tri-part tongue.(

)And three vocal cords. Bet we could sing a Bach concerto single handed.(

)And cause a riot. You know what all that would translate to?(

)There is that. Oh well, maybe at the TK party.(

)Think we will even be invited?(

)Not if we don't complete this assignment in the next century.(

)Pessimist.(

)Realist. Let's get going.( Party pooper.

It is very humid here. Everything seems to be wet. I wonder. There is a slick rock wall. I place a hand on it. The suckers work well. I try to climb the wall. It works!

)Hey, this is fun! Try it Drup.( He comes after me. Being heavier he can't move as fast, at least not without some TK assist.

This form is amazingly flexible. I move randomly to see how it works. Nice. I start to dance on the wall face. Drup catches on and starts to dance too.

)Race you to the top!( Drup exclaims and we take off. Several hundred meters at least, but we can't really fall.

We reach the top at the same time and come face to face with a whole line of faces. Oops.

*We can pop out and scare them even more or just go with it to see what happens.*

*Can't get much worse right?* Of course it can, and if there is a way, we will find it.

I raise a hand and wave, )Hi. I am Rand and this is Drup. Hope we did not disturb you. We, ah, can leave now. No harm done right?(

They are still staring at us.

Then one comes down to the rock face and tries experimentally a few steps. Soon others come down and do the same. Soon the entire troop is on the rock face dancing. We dance with them.

Everyone eventually tires, we pretend to be tired too. They take off over the top of the rock face and we follow. How bad could it be right?

Being in the rear of our troupe means we can watch and learn. It is one thing to suck the language and culture from multiple sources, a totally different thing to actually behave properly. There is a trail of sorts if you count pheromones and fractal carvings on the foliage. That will definitely take longer to learn and use.

We come to a rather large circular smooth surface. Maybe a hundred meters in diameter. We gather in the center. No one moves or says anything. Suddenly we are a large chamber of similar diameter, but not on the surface any longer.

*They have DS or something similar.*

*You think? What gave it away?*

*The question is, do they have this ability or some construct? I did not sense anything on them.*

*Nor I. They hid this well. Nothing shows from orbit.*

*This is what we were warned about. A high tech TK culture. Shit. I really thought we were safe this time.*

The others part and leave through multiple exits. A single Paak comes forward.

)Welcome to Paak. Please follow me for your orientation.(

*We could just leave now and avoid the hassle.  
This is the most fun we have had in hundreds of years.  
Ever since the GRC and The Five declaring sector 'thn illegal.  
Which means what the Paak are doing here is no longer illegal. We  
have no right to interfere.*

*And we can't help either, even unintentionally.*

No one said it would be easy. Can't sigh in this form. They know we are not natives. Maybe just not from around here? Too easy.

*Orientation means they have had other 'visitors' like us. Shit.*

*Double shit. We have been set up.*

*The Five?*

*Who else?*

)Stay here. Someone will be with you shortly.(

*Yep, limiter field is active. Play dumb.*

We move slowly around the chamber pretending nothing has happened. We finally start our dance again, on the floor and on the walls. This devolves into chasing each other rapidly. We collapse in the center pretending to be exhausted. We curl up as if taking a nap.

An old one comes in and sits next to us. We sit up and assume a position like it has. Gender is not expressed until needed and can be either. Actually a really nice arrangement. Wish Hu had evolved that way.

)We know you are not from this world. How did you arrive?(

*Told you the lack of a ship in orbit would be a giveaway.*

Drup answers, )We are here. Does it matter. We are just scouts. No one important.(

)What is your purpose here?(

)Learn of new cultures and see if they have solved some problem that might help others. We are not here to interfere or save you. Ah, of course, not us personally, but our group.(

*You are just digging the hole deeper Drup.*

*I know. Something about always being expected to fail that causes me to fail.*

*I get that brother.*

)What gifts do you possess?( Right to the heart.

)Gifts? We brought no gifts, not knowing what was appropriate.( We have no pockets or packs or clothes for that matter.

I try and save this, )We were trying to stay on the edges observing until we figure out enough to come in. This is all happening faster than expected.(

)You were not aware we are an advanced culture? Yet you arrived by unknown means, are not upset by this space, have no weapons, lack even the ability to interact with us in a polite manner.(

It reaches into its belly pouch. Wait, we have belly pouches? And

pulls out a device of some kind.

*Silent mode!*

)You do not register as having any gifts. In fact you are so low you should be dead. You can drop the subterfuge.(

*Maybe we should just leave?* Drup asks.

*What can they do to us? We have not revealed anything yet. Play along.*

)We are low caste individuals who only act as scouts. We have no idea how the ship works or how we got here.(

)How did you get your current form?(

)We woke up with it and the ability to understand you.(

)What were you before assuming this form?( Note, did not say 'our' form. Shit. I do a quick pulse scan. There is tech embedded all over in it. Cyborg?

Drup answers, )That knowledge was removed to prevent contamination. When we return, we will be assigned a new form and the process will continue. Neither of us knows how many forms we have assumed. ( The last statement is true at least. I only remember the interesting ones.

)We have reason to be suspicious. Many have sought to harm us. Take advantage of us. To remove 'the contamination' as it were.(

)We are familiar with the 'Cult of Perfection' and the former leader of that cult, the Tafa.( The last words freaks out our interrogator.

)Please don't hurt me!( It curls up into a ball.

)I think it knows about the Tafa.(

)Really, what gave it away?(

I raise my voice and tell our guest, )The Tafa are gone. They won't hurt anyone ever again. Sentients who were harmed have been sought out and freed from the Cult of Perfection.(

Drup adds, )You are free to pursue any course you want as long as it does not harm other sentients, including any sen on this world.(

)They have been known to assume our form to gather information on us to use against us in trials at the Galactic Regional Center.(

)The Center is gone. It has been destroyed. Sector 'thn are no longer. They have all been demoted and removed from our section of the multi-verse.(

It sits there staring at us.

*Did we break it?*

*Maybe. Would you accept any of this without evidence, given the consequences of failure?*

*Nope.*

)Who are you really?( The doors open. Cute, invisible before they did. Good work. Others come in and sit before us.

*Limiters have gone down. These new ones might have TK.*

)Do you have any proof of what you say?( A new one asks.

We look at each other. *What would work as proof.*

*I have an idea.*

I had made a Tafa High Priest medallion once I saw the pouch feature. Sort of a good luck charm. Fortunately, this was before the limiters went down. I pull it from my pouch and present it to them. Useful thing that pouch.

)My understanding is this can only be removed upon death.( Drup adds. Good, I had forgotten that part.

)Our sensors indicate that this medallion was just now made. It is worthless as proof of anything.(

)And how would I know the pattern down to the quantum level if it was not a copy of a real one, off a dead Priest's form. There were nine priests in all. They are all gone. One of the sentient species they oppressed killed them. There are no Tafa any longer.( Well, not technically. The Cyan were once Tafa, but that just might confuse them. )The Tafa were not the only ones.( No sentient has any power but that which is given to them by others. How many were playing along to save themselves and how many sought power themselves is near impossible to determine. Even the Paak might fall into the latter. Someone allowed them to have all the Psiotic tech they apparently have. The Tafa would not have allowed this.

)And for all we know you are followers of the Ta'aha as well. This could be a trap to catch us and obtain information before destroying us. ( Good luck there.

)Trust works both ways. If you know of the Ta'aha, then why all the psiotic tech? This would never have been allowed by them.( Drup adds.

They look at each other. I do not listen in on the TP.

)Their last few check-ins never occurred. We assumed something went wrong. We are deep underground in a well shielded facility. We did numerous tests and they never found these places. Our research continued. You two are the first outsiders we have found in five hundred of our solar years.(

I bow, not knowing if this is respectful or not, )At last count we know of nearly fifty sentients who were harmed by the Tafa, directly or indirectly. We represent two species who where. You are correct, we are not just scouts, though that was our purpose in coming here. We really do want to learn from your culture. We hoped to do this unobserved. Diversity is the key in understanding The Question.(

Drup asks, )How would you like to proceed from here? You have psiotic tech. That allows us to talk openly. I am sure you have many questions.(

*We just totally blew our assignment Drup.*

*I think we were set up. This is where we were told to go, we did not choose this location.*

*Send in the clowns.*

)We should talk with your 'thn helper before we proceed any further.(  
They look confused.

)What is a 'thn?(

)Sphere about this big. Transparent. Floats about. Can appear and disappear at will. Thought to be sentient.(

*Careful Rand, the same could be said of us.*

*They are a pain. I refuse to think of anything that painful as sen.*

*That would include most of the sen we know.*

*And your point is? I am not feeling charitable at the moment.*

*Touche.*

)How did your psiotic tech come about?(

)And how do you know of the GRC but not the 'thn. They run the place.(

)No one has ever been to the GRC. Forbidden. If these 'thn things run this place we would not know.(

Another one answers the first question, )Knowledge of psiotics is limited to a few individuals and never anyone you will meet.(

)When you need a new device or repair one, whom do you call?(

)Forbidden knowledge. Do you know how to make every piece of tech in your own culture?(

*Found them. There is only one.*

*Ah, the standard one allowed TK to help the local OM, but no more.*

)The two of us are not usually involved in the design, but yes, we can make anything we want.(

Drup asks, )Has your culture had a green one event yet? Your local OM sporulating? ( Again they look confused.

)What part do all of you play in your culture?(

)You said we could ask questions and yet you are the ones asking. Strange culture you come from.(

Drup gets mad looking down, )If you are going to watch us, you might as well join us!( A very nervous 'thn appears suspended before us.

*Let me go! You have no right! I am claiming interference in a local culture! Drup has them limited and hanging in the air.*

*TK8, has not mated yet.*

*Might not ever get the chance if the 'thn don't get over their sudden loss of dignity.*

Both Drup and I rise, )You really need to sit down and talk with your local 'wizard' first before you will be ready to talk to us. You have the tech, the rest should not be a secret.(

We pop out. What a waste of time.

# Earth One

"I am still amazed at how much the mesa looks like the one we grew up with on E2."

"Geology is the same. But you are right, I would have expected Hu industry, etc. to have done more damage. It is missing the road up the side we used to use."

"In this much time I doubt the one on E2 still exists either. Especially considering how much The Cat hated the place."

"Because of Owa's constant battle with Silver you mean." I nod.

"Fields look good. Harvest will be soon." And all the festivals that go along with it.

"As long as you don't get to play the Moogi part again I will be good."

"Hey, I made a good Moogi!"

"Neither of us is technically Hopi. It should go to someone who is."

"Can't argue with that. They just choose us for parts because of our abilities. It does add a spark of realism to the stories."

"And gets the young ones to behave."

"We grew up with Santa Claus. Let them have their own."

We are both in traditional E1 Hopi attire with walking sticks, looking to be about sixty. Age does not always mean respect, but it does get you out of some of the more strenuous chores. Oh, and a closer spot next to the fire.

We are halfway up the trail to the top of the mesa when we hear something honking behind us. We turn to see an adult Drag running towards us at full speed. We step aside to let it pass. It waves a thanks and keeps going. They have been invaluable as a sen message service. They do like to run. You have to watch for the tail whip though. Can knock you off the mesa trail.

"That was some carrier pouch. They are getting better at each visit."

"Or someone spent a lot of time making it."

"Nothing wrong with taking pride in your work. Besides, not much else to do around here."

"Ah, poor Sam, are you missing your video games again?" I smile.

"I am not addicted. I can give them up any time. Really." He twitches his fingers as if still playing. I laugh and nudge him.

"Actually piloting a Flyer was more fun."

"Hours and hours of boredom interrupted by a few seconds of pure terror. No thank you."

"Hey, I knew what I was doing. Really."

"Ah, huh. I think we were better on the ground at the general store."

"No stores, no money, nothing to sell, no buyers. I like their way bet-

ter."

"We never were into the whole capitalism thing. It was more the social aspect of meeting new people on their way to the Uni. Hope Tewk is doing okay on New Yessan."

"We taught Tewk, how much trouble could there be?" We both laugh. A lot likely. To think I used to spend so much time on a bus knitting baby clothes for nephews, nieces and who knows how they were related. It passed the time on a long uncomfortable bus ride from San Jose to parts in New Mexico. Then I met Cat, then Susan. So long simple life.

This is not bad. I am used to the heat. Diet is very limited though. Too bad they went the same way here, on E1 that is. Going to miss the cowboy chili, and if you tell anyone I will have to kill you. Kidding.

<sup>H</sup>Incoming. Our courier made his drop and is returning.<sup>H</sup>

I thought he would just run past us, but he stops and bows.

<sup>D</sup>You are expected honored ones.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I am guessing we need to walk a bit faster.<sup>D</sup>

Our Drag shows amusement and runs off. Not many Hu can speak Drag. And we do walk faster. Hu are so impatient.

As we come up over the rise we see one young person waiting for us. She bows, turns and walks off. I suspect we are to follow. The problem with pueblo construction is they never figured out how to do a wide beam. No tall trees here and they never figured out laminates, therefore space is tight. At least they are not cliff dwellers. We climb a rickety wood ladder, single pole in the center. Takes practice. On the roof is a hole in the roof with another pole ladder sticking out. Sigh. We descend. Our elders are waiting below. There is a small fire giving us some light.

We sit and arrange our wraps. A period of silence, then prayer chants for peace and success in our endeavors. Whatever that is. Pushes the point that we are here to help. We have to be careful. It was explained we have fallen back to the role of Watchers and no longer Guardians. Qr'thn pops in without her kids. Shit. This was supposed to be an easy, almost a vacation, assignment. The elders get up slowly. Bones and joints creaking. Must be important for them to go to all this bother.

Alone.

*We did not need to meet here. You could have found us anywhere in the multiverse. Are the kids okay?* My first thought.

*They are on assignment. This concerns the Hu on Earth One.*

Shit.

I pop scan. The enforcers and sentinels are in place and active. Did something sneak in?

Sam finally asks as the silence prolongs, "What part do we play?"

*The population is insufficient to insure long term survival.*

"I have seen kids all over. They seem to be doing fine."

I nudge Sam, "Genetic diversity is insufficient in the long term. Mutations are coming together and not in a good way. The elders are only forty years old. Some should be living to eighty given the lack of stress."

"They need fresh breeding stock."

"Surely you do not mean us?" I ask Qr'thn. She pops out. Shit.

"Did you hear an answer? I am too old to be a father."

"They need much more than the two of us. I don't want to be a mother again either. Hate changing diapers."

"They have diapers here?"

"No they don't. Do you even do any scans at all?"

"Was not looking for diapers."

"They don't have fry bread here either you know."

He sighs, "I know. Wheat was never here. Not here now either. In fact, because of the Cats turned Terrors on E2, there is a general lack of diversity there as well."

"And Yosemite blowing did not help either."

"Taking seeds and animal stocks from E1 helped save E2. Now they need help in return."

"Seeds are not the same as adult Hu speaking a different language, with different cultures, habits. etc."

"Not to mention smell. They stink."

"There is that too."

"We don't need the entire body."

"Eeeuu! Never liked that idea. We set up a clinic for artificial insemination? Do we tell their husbands? They are going to notice the kids don't look anything like them."

"We tell them. It does not have to mean every pregnancy. One per couple should be sufficient. The Hopi do not have the same prejudices E2 Hu carry around with them. All children are valued. We don't need a clinic either. We use TK. We don't need to embarrass anyone more than necessary."

"Guess we better get started. We will never get another vacation at this rate. So much for not interfering too."

"We best get topside and start to set this up."

We climb the ladder and find the entire village waiting for us. The men leave, the children with them. The old ladies leave next. Only the fertile fem are remaining. They have already been told. Shit.

# Di Eden

!We only have a year of freedom left Hez.!

!I hate that name. At least we will get adult names.!

!Like Pys is any better. You heard about the old ones in the woods?!

!You wanna go there? What about school?!

!I heard in the old days there was no school. We were totally free until naming day.!

!Right and then go through hell school trying to catch up? I don't like school either, but that sounds worse. One day gone won't matter though. I am so bored I could shed right now and call that excitement. I hate shedding. It itches so bad. They say it is because of teenager hormones, the itching that is. I just want it over with.

!We run!!

We are in the forest very quickly. Most towns are close to nature of some kind. I love the smells, the freshness of the air, all the wildlife and sounds they make. I could live out here if it was possible. We know from school that it takes a lot of area to support a single Di in a hunter gatherer lifestyle. Add a partner and young ones and it goes up, way up.

!How do they do it? How do the old ones live out here?!

!Pys, you believed everything they told you at school? We all used to live like them. We all lived in the wild. If they did it back then, why can't we do it now? Ever eat a raw fresh caught rodent?!

!I am no Rap. I like my food cooked.!

!You should try it, makes you feel alive.!

!When did you have raw meat?!

!Me? Never. Just heard about it. Ah huh.

We stop at a small stream to get a drink. There are small water snakes, burrowers on the banks, and lots of insects below, on and above the water. We both gorge ourselves on what we can catch. Most catch on and escape. Mostly we just get all wet.

We dry off on a large rock in the sun. Running on a dusty trail while wet would turn us into mud.

!We had better move if we want to get there before dark. Hez reluctantly rises and we are running again. A lot of people go into the forest looking for special plants for healing, cooking, or just because they like the look and smell. The trail until this point is pretty well traveled and easy to see, but as we get in further it becomes less obvious.

!Maybe we should turn back. I don't want to end up lost with the entire town looking for us.!

!Afraid they would hold us back a year? Would that be so terribly bad?! That motivates me to run faster.

When we come to a break in the trees I can see the sun is past half-way. We are going to end up spending the night out here. Glad it is not winter. Takes forever to wake up in the morning. Brush is too dense here for a fire. Last thing I want to be known for is the young Di who burned down the forest. Until we are officially recognized as adults we can get away with a lot, but there are limits.

!I see something up ahead.! I chase after Hez trying to catch up. Separated we would be in even worse trouble.

We break out into a clearing. There are rows of planted crops of all kinds. Much further in there is a small stone and wood house with smoke coming out the top. We have both stopped to gain understanding. A checker runs up to us to check us out. We weigh a hundred times what it does and are definitely in no danger, but it seems totally unafraid of us.

It squawks at us, !Follow!, then turns around and runs towards the house.

!It would appear that we have been noticed. Hope we are not on the menu. I have heard stories of old people eating wayward young.!

!Would anyone notice or care? I say we check it out.! Can't believe I said that. Hez is the brave one, I am super cautious most of the time.

As we get closer we smell something wonderful cooking. Bugs and such are fine, but hardly a full meal. Could be the previous young they caught and prepared?

We hear a voice behind us, !Keep going, we don't want to be late.! I jump at least a meter into the air. There is a huge adult male covered in dust behind us carrying a weapon of some kind. We both scream and run towards the house.

And old fem comes out the front opening wearing a cloth front cover for some reason. She sees the situation and admonishes the male behind us, !Please stop scaring our guests to death White. We get so few. Now everyone get in before it gets cold.!

The giant behind us says, !Sorry Libby dear. It was not intentional.! I would hate to see intentional. I am still cautious and watch mal White set down the weapon next to the door and then motion both of us in.

!You come up from behind two young ones carrying your hoe what did you expect would happen?! What's a hoe?

!Just getting the winter field ready for planting. How could I know they would see a farm tool as a weapon? We got ourselves some jumpy ones.! He turns to us, !Please find a stump and make yourselves comfortable.! He takes the largest one and waits looking at us.

!I am Hez and this is Pys. Our young names. We still have another year before we become adults.!

!And you decided it would be a good idea to skip school and visit the haunted house in the woods.! Not a question.

!Haunted! That's alright. We can find our own way home. Really.! I exclaim and start to rise.

She looks at him, !Stop it. They are scared enough as it is.! She turns to us, !Sit down you two. You are safe here. I am sure you are hungry. Bugs only go so far to satisfy the hunger of young ones.! How did she know about the bugs?

The checker comes up next to me and sits on a smaller stump. Almost like it is part of the family and expecting to be fed too. A tame checker? Sort of cute in a checker sort of way. It turns to look at me and fluffs up the feathers on it's head. I reach out to pet it when it hisses at me.

!Yeah, I would not recommend it until she gets to know you better. She can't kill you obviously, but it can still hurt.! A lot I suspect. Those teeth do look sharp. She is still glaring at me. Creepy.

Food is simple, but better than what we get in school. That is why all of us 'hunt' on our own time so much. I suspect they know and probably approve. Every Di should be able to feed themselves. I sneak choice bits to checker. She does not refuse them. I see Libby watching me. She does not say no, so I guess it happens with other visitors too.

Hez and I do clean up. Only fair. We had lots of practice at school. Di are messy eaters. Checker does not miss a crumb.

!Does your checker have a name?!

White shows amusement, !Ask her.! I feel so stupid.

I turn to checker. She expects another treat.

I look right into her eyes, !What is your name?!

She looks confused, !Name Checker.! Hez laughs and I can see White and Libby smiling.

!To be fair, it made it easier. She is the only one here. Got her as an egg from an abandoned nest.!

!You two must be tired.!

!We need to ah, go outside first.! They wave us out and we run. Checker comes with us. Three ladies all doing our business behind the nearest tree. Checker bumps up against me and I smooth her head feathers. I think I have been accepted.

Hez bumps me, !Just a feeling, but I don't think we are going home any time soon.!

!Where is home?!

!Wherever you are.! I nod.

Checker says, !Checker school.! She jumps up and down clearly excited. I can't feel the same. We ditched one school to end up at another. Does it ever end?

# New Edwin Land

Rather than find a new world to settle, we decided to make our own. One that is not on any star chart or known to any sen or 'thn. Not as elaborate as what Cat and Puu would do, but we don't need a world that other sentients would love. We just need one good enough for us.

It took us an unfortunate length of time to find an asteroid belt of the right makeup in the right zone around the right star. All it took was time and we are a very patient species.

Assembly is well underway. We have reached they point where gravity does more of our work now. We just bring the pieces close enough and let them get pulled in. Impacts heat the surface. Compaction does the rest. We gathered the iron heavy asteroids first, as we want an iron core to set up a magnetic field eventually. Atmosphere will be more difficult. We can't wait a billion years to attract enough gas to work or the rocks to out-gas. We did learn from the others and will place the generators we made as soon as we have a hard surface.

In the mean time we are in the ships we came in and bubbles we have made since. They are linked together with portals. We learned not to put all of our 'eggs in one basket' or in one place at one time. Spaced through multiple froth locations as well.

Should have been sooner. The 'thn already cored seven worlds that we know of so far. Ours was done after the sector 'thn were demoted. That was the surprise. Granted any TK9 could figure it out and even a baby 'thn could manage. It takes more than high psiotics to pull it off though. I am guessing the asteroid field we are harvesting was once one of their practice sites. The right mineral mix in the right orbit? After searching millions of systems, this seems too unlikely to be natural.

We will not be caught out again. Outgoing portals are set up in multiple locations and can only be activated by a 'thant of our genetic code. Our entire colony is never here at one time. We have protectors and sentinals set up covering the systems we are using. We used the leftovers and a few small moons we found around non-viable black worlds to make them. To avoid the MOTHER syndrome we kept the sentience low. Similar to the old earth AIs. Dumb, but effective.

<sup>th</sup>Another false alarm.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Check it out anyway. Sooner or later it will be real. We can't afford to miss them after all this work.<sup>th</sup>

Unfortunate side effect of dumb. A MOTHER would be worse. I have been accused many times of being too cautious. It has worked though.

Being one of The Thirteen has a lot of responsibilities that go along with it. Also makes us a target, not so much for death, as we can't be

killed forever, but as a source of change. Everyone has an idea of how things should be, usually to benefit themselves or sen they know.

All the time and space we are responsible for it still disturbs me that given the time of the universe/multiverse, the vastness of same, the time constants for the different life forms, from OMs to plasmotics, why are we here and why have The Thirteen assembled? What is so special about us and now? If our group of sen were taken out of the time/space equation would it really make any difference? Alternatively, given the disruptions to everything we have done so far, have we made any difference? Silver and Turtle play the long game. They said they have gone through this scenario thousands of times before it got to this point. Why? Why don't they include us?

The only reason I can think of is this is the first time they have gotten this far and are not sure themselves where it goes from here. Or they might even have finished the task and this is just the left over time playing out for amusement, given we can return to Control any time.

I look out the window. We never had windows on any 'thant constructs before. Of course we never had star ships before either. We live in burrows underground, albeit with some nice portals, and only go to the surface to feed, when safe. Windows were never needed. I do enjoy watching our new world being assembled below. All it takes is patience. 'thants have a lot of patience.

# New Yesan

Our tech is coming up, slowly. We can't afford the same mistakes the other sen made. People are impatient though. The pollution is gone, what does it matter, the world will take care of it, for a time, right? I have clearly been with the Hu too long.

Tech requires energy. Energy has side effects. There is always a cost. Even psiotics have a side effect. Use too much and the life force is drained. Best to keep psiotic use to star ships well away from life worlds. We are not ready for star ships. Wind, solar, tidal? All contain toxic metals extracted from fragile ecologies.

We need some variation on the Tafa. Not the strict perfectionist prison they fell into. Their method is based on fear and more fear. That is not life. We need something that is freeing, but safe. Well, as safe as life can ever be. Accidents, mistakes, unwise choices will be made, but learned from. No one learns anything at the point of a knife or a stone to the brain.

"Watchers" is our new label. Never liked labels. I see the wisdom, but also worry about a culture not taking advantage of past learning. That's what libraries are for. You can express wisdom until your arms fall off, but if no one is ready to accept it, nothing will happen, or worse, the exact opposite will happen instead. Knowledge has to happen at the right time and place. Knowing that is true wisdom.

We need to be as patient as a 'thant. This does not come naturally to us, to me. We are used to acting and then waiting to see what happens. "Tweaking it from there" as the Hu show. Watch, don't interfere. That is going to be very hard.

@Teacher, your class is ready.@ I am a school teacher, for the young. Can't get into much trouble there. I am a language teacher. I know you were thinking history or tech, but we need to all be able to understand each other. Since coming here and spreading over this world, we have gotten sloppy. Each area has new plants and animals that need to be named. New skills to be learned. New social arrangements to fit the needs of the group. That can destroy a language very quickly. Without the tech to instantly com, there is no incentive to all com the same way. I am trying to fill the ocean, one seed gourd full at a time.

# Rap Eden

These two are weird. I have been with them nearly a year now. At first they asked all kinds of questions. I would say they were not even Rap, but they look and smell like Rap. At least I get enough to eat, though the food is often strange. They seem to be able to find a rat from hills away. No Rap is that good.

They train with me in self defense. I learned the trick that the fem put me on the ground with. I call her Alpha, no idea what her real name is. He is Beta. They call me Ronin. They said names, real names, are not important. We are nobodies and will remain so. Never powerful, always at the edges. It is where I have been most of my life.

My pack was destroyed when I was young. I was going to get a drink from a nearby stream and came back to everyone dead. The sword was one I found on the ground nearby. I learned how to hunt and keep myself alive, living at the edges, and off what others had thrown away. Or when I got desperate, steal from weak targets. Big mistake or good fortune is still to be determined.

We walk into a small community at the edge of a much larger one. We never go into what they call a 'City'. I don't like City. Too dangerous. Too easy to be caught. Small is better. Still everyone looks at us like we are monsters about to eat their eggs and then them. The old ones are not who they are looking at. Never thought being young would be a disadvantage. They made me hide the sword back in the woods. I can feel the wisdom. I doubt even the old ones could take on everyone watching us.

Villagers do not accept coin, but they do accept metals or the rocks containing them. Iron is particularly valued. The old ones find this amusing for some reason. Iron rusts and is hard to work, but you can make weapons from iron. The soft metals, though pretty, are not very useful. Copper being the one exception. Items stored in copper are safe from small ones searching for food or anything else to chew up. Oh, and mold. Though I have to admit I am well used to mold, having eaten so much of it, though not willingly. The old ones funny food is better than that.

As coins are not trusted we carry copper in the form of nuggets. The old ones again, seem to always know where some is to be found in small caves, under special rocks, streams and somewhere out there they found some. I stopped asking. I never find any, though I have tried. I am so tired of pushing over ever larger rocks. They said it helps build muscles, but I never see them lifting rocks, always me.

<sup>R</sup>We are not looking for trouble, just looking for food. We have metal ore to trade, copper.<sup>R</sup>

I hear a voice in the distance, <sup>R</sup>Go suck rat guts.<sup>R</sup>

They all say the same thing. I can smell food cooking.

<sup>R</sup>And you won't mind my telling others you are hoarding while others go hungry. We are three, but there are many more hungry Raps waiting outside. I really do have copper to trade and we are only three. Your choice.<sup>R</sup>

Again, one comes out with scraps and places them on the ground. I wait until they leave and are feeling safe again. I go up to the bag. Putrid. I leave a copper nugget anyway, but leave the bag.

When I get back to the old ones I say, <sup>R</sup>They never learn or are all the same?<sup>R</sup>

They shrug. I ask, <sup>R</sup>Did you get what you want?<sup>R</sup> They look at me confused. <sup>R</sup>Oh, come on, I know this is all for a reason. I appreciate the protection and food, but I am not a dumb Rap. I went through a lot before I met you two. The truth this time please.<sup>R</sup>

The Alpha answers, <sup>R</sup>I am Squeak and this is Ron. We are here to do surveillance on New Rap Eden to see how they are progressing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>As in from the legends they tell hatchlings? Right. I don't think so. I get it. You are not going to tell me. What's next then?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Same as before. We go west this time. Need to 'scan' the larger community in that direction.<sup>R</sup> They are going to tease me for lunas now. Both are showing amusement of course. I snort and fall into step behind them.

All those abilities and they eat Rap chow and beg for rotten scraps. They do seem to be lucky in finding copper nuggets though. Not ever rock, but enough to be better than most. I wonder what it would be like. You could be alpha of the entire world. Silly idea. You can't herd Raps.

<sup>R</sup>Ronin, who is your favorite hero from the age of wizards?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Squeak is pretty high on the list, but she always seems too innocent. Maybe Ma'ree. She did not take hits from anyone. She taught Cat and the others how to defend themselves.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>But she is not even Rap.<sup>R</sup>

I give them an angry look, <sup>R</sup>Rap have not been kind to me, why should I show them any favors?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are Rap?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Really? You sure don't act like any Rap I have ever met.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That is a very sad commentary on our culture.<sup>R</sup> Beta

<sup>R</sup>Not commentary, fact.<sup>R</sup> Alpha. They get it at least.

<sup>R</sup>My question to you two, is what are we going to do about it?<sup>R</sup>

They look at each other, then at me. <sup>R</sup>We are powerless. We can do nothing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That is not what you taught me.<sup>R</sup>

Something is not right. Not making sense. They start to walk down the path to the next town. I follow, but my mind is going wild, then it hits me. Most Raps are associated with a pack at least. Most packs consist of at

least five and many some younger ones. Less than that and survival odds are very low. Too big and there are constant fights for dominance. A big weakness in my opinion. I know the stories. I know we used to be much more than we are now.

Finally I just ask, what could happen right?

<sup>R</sup>How come we have not seen another Rap outside a settlement in the last year? I used to see singles and sometimes doubles all the time, well, maybe not all the time, but at least once in a while. Granted, they usually ran into the forest to hide from me.<sup>R</sup> They each give me a dirty look.

<sup>R</sup>Okay, I ran into the forest to hide from them. But I saw others. Now we only see a single low Rap bringing out the waste to chase us away. Please explain.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>What do you think is happening?<sup>R</sup> Alpha looks like she is going to eat me.

<sup>R</sup>From that look, I am guessing you scared them away. But you are two old Raps, I was not scared of you at first. Why would others, until they actually met you anyway?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>An interesting question Ronin. Very interesting.<sup>R</sup>

Not sounding so interesting any more. I feel like I have just stepped in a dead rat who has been decomposing for a week. Maybe even has some mushrooms growing on it. Distracted again.

# New Ceph Eden

~Why are we here? This is the last place I want to be. I hated it last time. All it did was make me depressed.~

~You think we can become Watchers without training? Have you ever learned a new skill set without practice? What better place than the one we already know?~

~Sort of. I certainly don't recognize it. I don't think I recognize a single thing. Do you?~

~I was not hatched here. This is your world. I am just your conscious for this trip.~

~A Watcher watcher. Not sure I like it.~

~It is very hard for any of us to completely give up the idea of fixing everything. We were all chosen because we were good at thinking outside the tide pool and coming up with solutions. Then we were actually given the ability and what did we do?~

~We magged it all up and made things worse. Great nauti, we even had the overlords of the entire multiverse after us.~

~Until they found out who all of you really were.~ She shows amusement. I am having a hard time accepting my role as one of The Thirteen. Turtle pulled me aside and showed me, it really was not that different than any ordinary TK, we just know we do not die, that we always have had a choice and can come back as many times as necessary to try different swimming paths. Certainly I am allowed some feeling for the sen world, or rather people, as this is not the same world, that I hatched into this time? Is that so hard to accept and understand? I hate even the concept of being a watcher. I was bullied most of my life and now I can fix that and am told to let it be, even when I see myself in others, being bullied and mistreated for no other reason than they exist. I hate that.

~Your temper is showing Rooi. Calm down. I am sure we can find you a nice cool mag bath around here somewhere.~ I go blisteringly colorful on her and she just shows amusement. Great. She is holding a limiter that will shut me off for a time and she knows I cannot do anything to her. Not that I want to. Our roles will be reversed when we are on her world, if we ever find it. It cannot come too soon.

~Fine, let's just get something to eat. Get my minds off being mad at least.~

~Forage or trade?~ Forage will attract less notice unless we are caught and would postpone my having to interact with anyone 'native' here, but I want to get this over with. What are they going to do to me if I fail? It will be what I do to myself that scares me. It was not just the Ta'fa who were and are perfectionists.

~Forage. Don't really want to meet anyone yet. Wish I was back on Magenta.~

~Peace and all the crabs you can eat. You really suffered. Here you have to catch them and they are few.~

~You weren't the one who had to convince the Luss to come out of Farout.~

~And behave? Not convinced they have achieved that goal yet.~

~One's nature is hard to deny. We suffer from some of the same.~

No point in responding. I am out of practice playing Ceph arm wrestling. We reach the tide pools quickly. No one else is about, which we already knew. Not much here but a taste. Enough for TKs. We don't need the calories. This is more emotional and mental than actual need.

I am procrastinating, that favorite of Hu sen behaviors.

~Let's go.~ I blank for a moment.

New Ceph Eden is not on any star chart or known by any 'thn. All of our worlds except the Earth One/Two set have moved or will be moving soon. We have the planet swapping tech, might as well use it. Luss and Ceph need to hide. It is of our nature.

In our case, we only moved our kind. The crabs here came from Magenta. Our knowledge came with us inside our brains. Clean start. Except for the TK check-ins, they are on their own. No com with any other sen we have already met. Lis is Luss in her native form. No Ceph but me has ever knowingly met one. Could be said of a lot of sen actually.

Before their banishment to Magenta the Luss must have led an interesting existence. Surprisingly, they have no interest in tech other than how to use it well enough to fit in and not be noticed. Magenta had no tech at all. There are minerals and energy available. They even had the knowledge to work what was there. No interest. They just like to observe others. My guess is they were sent to Magenta because most sen do not appreciate their peculiar behaviors. Ceph do not come across much better, but we are good at tech and trade gives a means of respect that just spying does not.

Every sen has dirty little secrets they are not proud of, especially when comparing yourself to others. Culture and needs differ. This is not a failing, but a necessity. If we did not eat the defective we would over populate in less than one generation. High TKs understand this, but norms of other sen do not. The plus side is it does not take hundreds of years to come back from a population crash, IF the infrastructure is still intact. All species experience plagues and other disasters. Nuclear war and other total destruction are not so easy. Glad we never went that route.

Yet. Have we contaminated our species by contact with the Hu and others? Do we become what we fear the most? We are a paranoid sen.

# Enterprise

More time has given only more questions. An eccentric orbit and a tilting axis means the world goes from nearly snowball to tropic jungle to desert. It is different each year and these affects are not synchronous. Yet, there is a sen down there. It has adapted to it's situation by draconian means of population control, encystment and warfare. What is amazing is that they still exist at all. The real question is why? What did they do that was so bad to end up here? Magenta is paradise compared to this world. Even Yellow is better than here. Hell is what we have taken to calling it.

None of us want to go down. Our probes are quickly found and destroyed. They have tech level five at least. A first for Farout. Somehow their manufacturing survives each cycle or is rebuilt. I am not sure our best psitech could survive all these extremes for this long. This is the reason that 'thn metal was invented. There is none below however and we are not about to start by accidentally providing them with it. Only AuC.

The vote was unanimous to record all we can and leave till we can figure it out somehow and comeback to help them. It took The Five thousands of years to get to their level of understanding. A few hundred is not too much to ask to help the Hell residents. We have our next assignment in Farout. Probes and scouts have returned. Each section is preparing and packing up for the trip. It takes time even for us to navigate Farout, safely. We are not The Five and we are not in a hurry. We would prefer to survive this time in our existence.

I have a holo of the life form on my desk. If this sen had shown up on the Blackwind II when I was there all of the crew would have jumped overboard and taken their chances. Now it is just a new sen to learn about. Heavily armored carbon fiber exo with multiple hearts, brains and organs we cannot even identify yet. Amazing healing abilities for a non-psiotic. That coal mentioned earlier, they can eat it to obtain energy. How it was never used up in this time is another mystery. So much changes in their cycle that carbon that is burned to increase warming must be absorbed again to cool them down and save it for the next time around. We are leaving, but I will be thinking about them till we come back. I hate a problem I have not solved.

λWe are prepared to leave orbit Captain.λ

"Roger that and proceed." On to our next adventure. May it be at least slightly easier than this one. Hell world indeed.

# Janes World

*New Sen check in is to the right. Please proceed to check in. All new sen please proceed to check in.*

λThis place is strange.λ

πAll places are strange La Tee. Where were you posted before here?π

λSurvey ship in Farout. Metamorphed on Farout and this is my first time in the 'real' multiverse. Everything is strange to me I guess.λ

πWe were not at Farout, but might as well have been. Our star was outside any galaxy or local group. What we now know as stars were only a faint fuzzy area in the night sky. I com'd that this place has two moons! We were all alone. Only world orbiting a lonely star. They think we might have been an early Farout experiment.π

λBefore they figured out how to set things up at Farout. They did seem to create each prison world especially for each sen. That does not get done instantly. Takes time and practice I guess.λ

πThe Hu are sure ugly though. Going to take time to get used to them.π

λEspecially the sound of their com.λ

πOr all the organics they exude.π Not that my La companion is a cool breeze of ocean air either.

We find the check-in location. Not something either of us is familiar with. Not part of either of our cultures, but time on star ships has gotten us used to strange patterns of behavior, especially the earth froth. Janes are sort of derived from Hu and Tridon according to the briefing. Both forms are repulsive of course and we are not sure which is more dangerous. The Terror kills and eats you, the Hu torture you first.

πAll the Janes look the same!π

λThe briefing said they are clones, but imperfect clones. No species can survive a changing environment repro asexually for long.λ

πThen I will complain about this place being too hot and humid.π

λWait until winter, cold and dry then. Can't win.λ

πFarout was worse. That is all that matters. Nearly died of boredom.π

λCertainly not boring sense.λ

We were both on the Enterprise and rotated off after the Hell World. That was a real awakening. It could definitely have been worse for us. Being here is a requirement to advance. Even The Five have spent time here. Rumor has it even the Earth 'thn have as well. Do the companions do this? Makes sense. They are sen. Certainly proved that with the Builder's Collective. MOTHER was the type of mistake I would expect the Luss to make, though we have a history too.

We feel better when we find the dark corners of other sen. When we

see others have problems in their pasts too.

There are other sen here as well. All kinds. Tee is looking at everyone. We can identify most from our orientation. There are new ones too. Probably since the course was last updated.

λUi Da, how did they ever find you?λ

πAccident was what we were told. A Ku made a bad calculation.

Guess we were close enough to Farout, or on the way. They took a cross path to get to your world faster, found us, stayed to investigate and here I am.π

λThe earth froth sen seem to be lucky for some reason.λ

πOr the luck was ours.π

λThat will remain to be seen. We are here. Wait, is that a Ceph? They are so interesting. But they have been in the Federation forever. Why would they be here.λ

πMust be a new TK. Everyone comes here at some point. Don't ask me to com with one. Never took the Ceph course. Maybe I will now.π

λThey eat fish and crabs, can't be all bad right?λ

πRaw or ugh, cooked? Hu are weird cooking everything. Just not natural

λAgreed. There is one dish they cook I am crazy about for reasons I cannot explain. Something called cowboy chili. They served it all the time on the star ship.λ

πNever heard of it. Hope they have it here. We should be private space mates.π

λI agree. Better the Ui you know than the Hu you don't.λ

*Welcome to Watcher University. After check-in, please proceed to the central meeting park.*

λHere we go.λ

# The Five

"That was the most boring archive I have ever been in."

"Agreed. What were The Two thinking?"

"They did tell us not to mess with it. Now we know why."

I finally comment, "The archive was not meant for us."

"Now you tell us."

"They told us when we found it. We just did not believe them."

"We do now. What's next?"

"What does it mean exactly to be a Watcher? Reports are coming in. It is extremely hard to be a Watcher without having some effect on the locals."

"The only way would be to be an ignorant Watcher. You can't give away information you don't have."

"Yeah, not ready for the brain wipe just yet."

They laugh, but she is right. Scary. Scariest than death, because it is essentially death. I don't think I am ready either. Our bodies died when we went to Control, but we never lost sense of self. This Bug body is not so bad once you get used to it. Being Hu was not so great now that I have experienced so many other forms.

"Anyone know why when we come back from Control we always come back as Bug? In the journals it happened that way too. Must be something special about this place."

"You are just now figuring this out Cat?"

"My head has been in the lab too long. Not sure I want to go back to Hu either."

"Gee, not on any star map, but part of the proper incarnation. Control clearly set this up so we could get where we needed to without messing things up when we arrived unannounced. My guess is that Bug Eden exists essentially the same in every incarnation."

"From the reports it appears that TK recruitment has slowed. Good, at least until we get this figured out."

"Do we ever really figure anything out? Every time we think we have, something hits us on the side of the head and changes everything."

"I hate that when that happens." We both give Puu a shove. A Meep pops in bouncing up and down to get our attention.

"Break over, time to get back to work gang."

"Los Tres Amigas!" I roll my eye stalks. Not that again.

# Silver and Turtle

"Remind me to never have any more kids. Ever again."

"You chose to be the queen. Not my fault." I give him a dirty look.

That is not what I am talking about and you know it.

He continues, "To be fair, we taught all of them how to fix problems, not just observe them."

"They will not reach the next step if they don't get beyond that."

"Understanding takes time. Not everyone is so enlightened as you are dear."

"We have been through too many incarnations. They still fear death."

"You have something evil in mind?" I give my best evil smile in Bug form.

I continue, "Next you will expect them to have sex. Oh my!"

"Sex is part of normal existence. Hard to avoid unless you are a smiggle and no one will mate with you."

"We always choose smiggles for candidates. The only way we get sex is by rape and that is not a good introduction to being a norm."

"We certainly learned that through Cat's experiences. But, if she had not had those experiences she would never have progressed. We know that from previous incarnations."

"Still don't like it."

"No one does, well except for maybe the rapists, but I don't think they do either. It is more a rage expression than anything to do with desire."

"And you know this because?" I got him here.

He ignores me, "I am convinced that culture / society creates rapists. Shove a rat into a corner and threaten it and it will attack a creature a hundred times it's size. Back a sen into a corner socially, economically, bullied to the end of their rope, then what do you expect?"

"Not to mention all the greedy capitalists at the end of E2 pounding into their heads what they are missing. Never mind it was all a lie."

"Add in nasty bosses and bad experiences with relatives and other bul-  
lies and it is almost inevitable."

"To whom much has been given, much will be required. Not just about money and power."

"True. Not many get that one either. I think some of the rich and powerful are actually worse. Certainly a greater number of victims."

"And a total lack of compassion."

# Smith & Jones

"Why do we have to do our training in Hu form? I hate being a Hu. They are so awkward."

"And ugly, stinky, slow, stupid."

"No sense of logic or decorum. I can't think of a worse form to be."

"Listen up maggots!" I understand from the context that this is supposed to be an insult, but it sounds like praise to us. Tasty too, maggots that is. Hu taste horrible. Won't touch one with a oct prod.

We have Hu names and decided on the two from the journals we wished to emulate, Smith and Jones. Took us forever to find the method for making cowboy chili. A lot of experimentation. Taste and smell does not work the same in this form. Would have been trivial in either of our old forms. Wish we could go back and forth, but that is forbidden of course. Nearly everything is forbidden.

A Jane is standing before us. They all look alike to me. I was told we would soon be able to see the subtle differences. They are clones. We know all about clones. We use them for menial labor. These are not menial laborers though. We learned that the hard way. One demonstration of the Terror is enough to convince any sen. Shaking in the Hu form was not a pleasant experience. Watching a huge angry dangerous carnivore being torn apart in a blink convinced us. Don't mess with a Jane. Ever.

"We have a problem."

"Even in Hu form we are still La and Ui." A very big problem. Do they really expect us to overcome our own basic natures? Our genetic imprinting, our cultural training. We both faced many deaths reaching our naming. Don't make friends before then, you may watch them die a horrible death. Farout was not forgiving. We were forever bumping our resource limits. It was supposed to be a lottery on La, but no one actually believed it. Important leaders were never chosen, bottom scrapers were removed in large batches.

We had an entire training on something the called "The Cult of Perfection." One of the interesting 'labs' was to find something perfect in the world around us. Some even tried using their talents to make the perfect solid shape. All failed. Our instructor was able to find imperfections, multiple, in every form, even in the cheater's attempts. Yet, we still live, we still function, the world around us works. It adapts, it compensates, it still works.

We will never be perfect Watchers. This training is not about becoming perfect. It is about good enough. Doing the best we can for as long as we can. Then moving on, just like contacts change in everyone's life over time.

# Cat Eden

*We did not ask for your help so you could insult us. Help or leave.  
Makes no difference to us.*

*We did not say anything and immediately you attack? You want us to  
go, fine, we will go.*

"Relax Turtle, they are just being Cats."

"I know that, but they should also know better."

"Been too long by themselves. Likely the entire problem. Not enough  
diversity. Predator top heavy."

"Fine, let them eat grass. I don't care." I give my best pissed off look  
to everyone. I really do not care. All the times Owa especially tried to as-  
sert dominance, play pranks, actually hurt others 'for fun'. I don't need to  
put up with that shit any more.

I finally hiss out, "The solution is easy. Stop being top predator. Life  
is too easy for you. It can be a plague or . . ."

*Tiny ones are an insult to our courage.*

"We could release a few Terror here. That should even things out once  
they propagate." Sylvy gives me a dirty look.

Owa comments, *Too easy, we know how to defeat them.*

"Salt water will not defeat them anymore."

"Does not matter. We have let a few 'friends' come visit that should  
give you some 'entertainment' for a bit." I smile. Silver raises his eye-  
brows.

We pop to the moon base. Owa can still see us here, but we are no  
longer directly involved. They should leave us alone till the trap is  
sprung. Which should be any moment.

"It will be good for the Luss as well. They at least recognize they have  
gotten soft. They don't even need TK above their base level to hunt the  
Cats."

"A lot of rugs coming up."

"All of us have had it too soft. Without any mortal enemies we will  
grow complacent. We will become weak and easy to dominate by some  
new group."

"There are plenty out there that want a piece of our hides. Made a lot  
of enemies."

"Always happens whenever there is change. Someone benefited from  
the 'old ways' and someone benefits from the new way."

"The Tafa did not do anything that Hu had not done to each other in-  
numerable times."

"Yeah, but do the rest see this yet?" We both smile.

# Hell World II

We dropped off the bridge crew trainees on Janes World for Watcher training. Good luck to them. Our turn will come, but they figured it would be best to start with those who had not been TK for very long. Not looking forward to the training when my time comes.

We are in orbit around Hell World again. This is no time or place for new ones. It was decided that we will not be making any more world ruler capable TKs at this point. We need to concentrate on our new role of Watchers. Still as yet to be defined of course.

In some way, as a Luss native, I am ideally situated to be a Watcher. Or at least I thought. It is very hard for us to not interfere when we see need of help. Case in point are those Luss assigned to Cat Eden. The entire point of being there is to let off anger emotions. To get it out of our system as the Hu say all the time. I am hoping that they quickly learn to be quite and observe rather than mess with their culture. The Cats have the same right to their own form of culture as anyone else. But, we were called in to help because everything had gotten out of alignment. They already crashed part of Earth Two and are well on their way to doing the same on Cat Eden.

Pre-TK, this was not a problem. They were not the top predator and could be hunted as well as hunters. All sen, all species need this balance. The Tafa were rabid perfectionists and their need to control every thought is not the answer either. Without flexibility and resilience a culture can crash just as easily. Understanding is far superior to blind obedience or rote rituals. The Hu don't understand this yet either. They keep swinging back and forth between the two extremes.

We were found at Farout too. No idea why we were sent there. Granted we have certain talents that would and do scare most sen. Was that enough to get us banished from the galactic family? It has been estimated we were sent there possibly thirty thousand earth years ago. The Way Back machine was inconclusive. Apparently we did not arrive all at once and never set up towns or anything tech that could be followed. And there is the talent. When confronted with danger or something new, we hide. We are very good at hiding.

And the reason we will be the first ones to transport below. We tried tech, but they always find it and destroy it. We even tried passive quantum tech. They tried to make something else out of it and destroyed it in the process. They likely know we are up here somewhere. We have seen advanced telescopes, radar and tech we can't even recognize. We could learn a lot from them. Is that the reason they are here? Could not get along with others. There is some indication they went heavy on the cy-

borg route. Part solidic and part fluidic. Logical in many ways, if one can overcome the revulsion. We Luss feel it would be a step backwards and it does not interest us. Many sen would see it as a plus though. Might be for a time. Being self contained is better, especially when the inevitable tech crash comes and it always comes.

The problem is, anyone but a Luss is spotted instantly and 'removed' from the gene pool. That of course sets off a series of hunts and purges to be sure there are no others. So much for not interfering. And I am only hoping a Luss cannot be sensed. Will find out soon enough.

"Luss Li, you are free to go to ground when ready."

"Confirmed Captain, leaving now. Wish me luck."

"You don't need luck, but it can't hurt. Good Luck Li."

We know they can sense TK. They know I will be dark until I return, if I return.

I pop down to the edge of a smaller 'town'. Not ready for a direct confrontation, I remain outside. There is very little that is technically 'outside' as it is nearly one giant city. There are 'edges' to areas of danger. These sen are similar to the Builders Collective in many ways, but the intelligence here is primarily one species, if you set aside the solidic part. I wouldn't. It is much harder to hide from a solidic. They are not fooled by emotions and TP suggestions.

I must appear as non-threatening as possible. I have been 'looking' around carefully. I know they have TK sensors. I definitely do not want to set one off. Fortunately there are individuals who for whatever reason do not adjust to having the implants. I will become one of these. They are ignored and despised. This is where I feel most comfortable, where all Luss feel most comfortable.

I join a group cleaning out a sewage problem. You can learn a lot from a sen's garbage. Garbage is an indication of failure. Especially if it accumulates. The Ta'fa had that part of the equation right. A closed loop is a happy loop. I spent time undercover in the BC. They closed the loop, in spite of their tech use.

You would have thought the Ta'fa would have been happy with them, but in reality the BC were so good they scared the Ta'fa. Their secret was they did not try and impose their 'order' on others. They search out others to learn from them, not dominate and control them. I think the Ta'fa have an inferiority complex. They justify themselves by making others be imperfect copies of themselves, so they can always find fault and maintain their dominance. And they do not allow tech. Tech in and of itself is not evil, just has a habit of making some nasty garbage. Closed loop mean you need to account for this as well. The BC did.

I have to wonder if these sen are the result of Ta'fa meddling. It would explain a lot. No time to feel sorry for them. I must fit in.

When I join the work crew, no one objects. It is interesting that cultures just can't stand anyone able bodied not working to receive basic necessities. We are doing work that could be done a hundred times faster by machines, yet here we are, essentially doing worthless labor. This is punishment for not getting implants, never mind that the scars show they did try. I have scars to match, not exactly of course, but believable.

There is no com between any of us. No point. We will be here until we die of malnutrition, exhaustion or disease. I am sure they wish it was sooner at this point. I catch more than one pretending to eat and then hiding the fact that they dispose of the food into a convenient ditch. Our species can last for lunars without food, but we were designed that way. I don't know enough about these sen to make a guess yet. The supervisors are functioning cyborgs and likely can detect psiotic activity. I dare not use my full range of abilities. We are patient if nothing else. I will wait and learn more.

# Di Eden

!It would seem that the first order of business would be to give you two adult names.!

!But we are not adults, we still have another year before we are named.!

White sighs, !Being an adult is not about the number of years, but of experience, knowledge, abilities and wisdom.!

I put on a sad face, !Then we will be kids forever. We certainly do not deserve adult names.!

Libby laughs, !No one deserves an adult name, and if you think you do, you do not.!

We both look confused.

!They passed. Hez from now on you are to be known as Slayer of Dragons. Slayer for short! I nearly choke. I can barely catch a rat and eat it. Dragons, no way.

They turn to Pys, !You are to be known as . . .! What?

!Dark Knight.! What? I don't even know what a knight is.

I ask, !So, Dark for short?!

!Works for me, since I have no idea what a knight is.!

!You realize that together that makes us either Dark Slayer or Slayer of the Dark.!

!Both sound good to me.!

We both look to them and say at the same time, !What's next?!

White says, !Jinx! What is a jinx?

!Sorry, a Hu term. Spent too much time with them I am afraid.!

!You already know you are going to be doing additional training. The problem is, we don't know what that means. It will be new for us as well.!

Libby continues, !We have ah, certain abilities above what would be called normal. We need to give these up, at least openly. We need your help to do that.!

White continues, !If you ever notice us doing anything, or anything around us does not seem quite right, tell us immediately.!

I have no idea what he is talking about. We live in the most boring area in the entire Di world. Nothing strange ever happens here. Cool names, but come on, what could possibly happen here? This must all be some kind of game.

# Hell World

*This is not going to be an easy one Li. Why here?*

*Humility.*

Turtle sighs and shakes her head looking at me as if to say I told you so. She is right of course. I have stepped into another one. Obviously.

*We have been set up again. I sigh too.*

*I have observed you for tens of thousands of sols. Not good to solve problems with force.*

I exclaim, *But, subtle is one method among many. It is not always the right choice either.*

*Subtle, as you com, is best when time is long. Breaking a sen only when absolutely necessary to save others. Yet, you always seem to prefer to break them as a method of choice. Waiting until this is the only choice.*

*Li is right Silver.* Of course Li is. Li is always right and I am always wrong.

*I disagree, I am merely give them a chance to figure it out themselves. It is only when they become a danger to self and others that I step in. I don't expect either of them to accept this answer and they don't. Don't have to TP to see that. They ignore me, as they always do when I com nonsense.*

*Step one, observe the sen, and don't call them prey. This is not hunting, this is helping. Subtle please.*

*For how long?* Turtle asks. Silly question, for at least ten thousand sol.

*May we at least start with what we have already observed?*

*Please.* They both look at me. I am guessing they have bets on how I will fail this time.

I step into it anyway.

*They are living and sentient. Never underestimate a life form that has reached this state of being.*

*They are different from any life form we have already experienced. In other com, we do not know or understand them, therefore it will be tempting to 'color' our observations with what we already think we understand and have experienced rather than go in fresh with no preconceived ideas.*

Turtle rolls her eyes, *You can do better than that. This is all from TK basic training and meant for cultures not very different from that of the students. Try again.* Li remains quiet, of course, as I am still under observation.

I shake my head and offer the com to Turtle. She smiles dangerously. I have been set up, as usual. There seems to be some kind of game with these two to see which can get me first.

*All knowledge proceeds from the known to the unknown. We start with our own experience, in our case, primarily the Earth Froth sen. In their case cooperation was barely enough above competition to avoid rapid extinction. Not always true, but as a generalization maybe.*

*I have a question. Was this because we were a mutation on the more usual plantimal setup? Even at conception cooperation is sort of built into the plantimal setup.*

*Turtle shakes her head. Not entirely true. The plantimal line is still not the ideal cooperative model. Like lichens, the plantimals are not entirely meshed.*

*But they must cooperate to survive. Otherwise the pairing would quickly break. That is good right?*

*To a point. They still must compete for space and resources.*

*Then what do we have below? We are still in standard, albeit hidden, orbit around the world we are observing.*

*Not plantimal. Light gathering is not as separate organelles in a cell body. We need a new designation, more integrated even than merely plantimal. But, to continue, they do not compete below, at least in no way that I have observed from here. They are not all the same either. Each sen has a task they are good at. They combine as necessary to satisfy a need and then disperse until another need is identified. And they do this with no apparent need for leaders or any authority or organization of any kind.*

*That is indeed foreign to us. How does it work? I admit that overt hierarchy is not efficient and tends to devolve to chaos at regular intervals as each element feels abused and taken for granted. I look at Li. Something I am missing. It is actually amazing that we ever came to the attention of the TK overlords.*

*We were not a threat to anyone but ourselves until something special happened. She is teasing me now.*

*Not until we were given high TK abilities.*

*And what did we immediately do with them?*

*I sigh, We 'controlled' their behavior, forcing them into a way of life foreign to their normal evolution, 'for their own good.' I shake my head.*

*Precisely. It was not our sen, it was our TK that made us a concern to the rest of the multiverse. Pre TK we were not a threat.*

*And what did we do with it? We confirmed their fear and took over, disposing the 'old guard' and becoming exactly what we disposed. Very naive to think we could do better than a system set up over billions of years in this incarnation, not to mention all previous incarnations.*

*Luss Li finally coms something, That is why you are being specifically trained to be Watchers. Something that should have happened before. But, because we also followed the more passive approach to the unknown, it was far too late by the time the threat was recognized.*

*Then why didn't you remove the threat. Destroy us. It has been done before.*

*Turtle comes in, Timing. We happened/evolved too slow to set off the 'fire alarms' and trigger instant annihilation. We know the high TK has done this before, when necessary. It took many incarnations and millions of years before we became a threat to the multiverse.*

*And by the time the threat was recognized, we were in charge and the former rulers disposed. Classic Earth Froth method actually. Start with a fifth column to learn about your 'enemy' and slowly introduce doubt discord and finally hit them when they are weak. Does not always work, but enough times to keep this as a method of choice.*

*Especially when the attacking force is smaller than the ones being taken over.*

*I turn to Luss Li, But, you did watch us, for thousands and thousands of years. Why didn't you see this coming?*

*We did. Now I am even more confused.*

*Come on Silver, think to myself. The diversity imperative. We had never happened before or at least not this way, they had to know what would happen.*

*I am thinking too short term. Even though we have lived many incarnations and millions of years. We know this is not the only incarnation. Every scientist knows you push things too far to determine what the limits are, what parameters are needed to safely run your experiment. Turtle nods.*

*Li gestures below us to get us back on task. I look to Turtle. Nice not to have to be the one who is always expected to run things. Why did so many Earth Froth sens cling to power? Fear of death, even of fear of not being in a place in history, was too much. They felt compelled. We are not under that pressure and can be more relaxed. Not an easy lesson to learn.*

*The best way I can come up with to describe the sen below is that they are a component culture. I must have looked confused. She smiles that 'cat got the mouse' smile I know so well from Owa*

*Just as useful molecules can be built from individual atoms placed in the correct locations, individual sen, of varying abilities and attributes, are gathered together to perform a needed task or series of tasks. Then the structure is separated and used for whatever the next task that is needed.*

*How do they handle redundancy? Too many of component A for instance.*

*She smiles, They have no fear of death. Redundant components are 'recycled' as needed to grow new components. You are still thinking in Hu terms. When you cut your hair, the individual hairs do not cry out in*

*pain begging to be saved. If you harvest seeds or cut the grass to prevent a fire spreading, no one cries out in pain. I don't entirely agree with this.*

*A better analogy might be leaves turning colors and falling off to be recycled at the base of the tree. She nods.*

Luss Li asks us, *What is the threat of such a sen?*

*Not really a sen as we understand it, more of a composite super organism, nearly an OM. Does not appear to be tech or TK capable, yet, at least.*

*Yeah, if they got either or both of those, they could do a lot of damage.*

*Just like we did dear. Gulp.*

*And that explains why we were chosen for this assignment. Not Watcher training per se, though that is certainly part of it, but more of an Armageddon alarm.*

*Watcher training is still needed here. We do not have the right nor the responsibility to 'play it safe' and preemptively 'remove' a sen we are afraid of. Yeah, tell that to the high TKs who destroyed worlds.*

Luss Li, *Now we may proceed with our assignment.*

*Slow and steady, both Turtle and I both com. Shit.*

Does not stop me from thinking about this though. Of course we have much more to learn. The TK have existed through countless incarnations and sentient experiences. This is also presupposing there is a defined goal, an end point. TK101, there is no end point, the point is to keep going, keep learning, allow variations to see what happens. Sort of like early versions of the theories of evolution. Way beyond that simplistic explanation now of course. All generalizations are false, including this one.

Yep.

"We all read the reports from the Enterprise. What do we do next?"

"I have noticed an omission from standard protocol."

Li looks at me confused. Turtle smiles knowing this drives Li crazy. Got to have some fun.

"We need to do a froth scan."

*But, this is clearly a Farout world, we have never experienced a froth event out this far. In fact, Farout is the very definition of the barrier to frothing. Not even possible.*

I sigh, "All the more reason we should check." I make a coin.

Turtle shakes her head and calls, "Tails."

"Fine, Heads I go froth up, you go down and Li, please remain here to keep a watch to be sure they do not react to this below." Turtle and I both DS out.

HWII+1: Interesting, the fact that we can says I was right to suspect this Farout world is an exception. Makes me want to go back to the others and check them as well. Magenta did not work, but that might be why we

could not escape Magenta so easily.

I scan below. At the macro scale, it does not look any different. Not surprising for a Tech 5 culture. Means they know about DS or stumbled on it somehow. Now the question is, how far have they gotten to?

HWII+2, ah, empty of sen at least. There is life though. It was a fluke that they made it to +1 then. Might be a tech limit. Takes a lot of ‘thn metal to make a portal. That would not be easy for a non-TK culture. Will have to scan to see how many portals are on HWII. My guess is only one. Yes, it would be switched to do multiple worlds one at a time, but having a receiving portal makes it less risky and ‘thn metal could still be a limitation.

HWII+3. Black. Interesting. No life at all. I pop to the surface. No air or water. Not even a remnant of life ever having been here. I scan for fossils. Nothing. It is the right size. No impact craters larger than expected for an airless world. Only a few craters actually. Not unexpected for a world in Farout. Not much of an asteroid field here. The sun looks the same. This makes sense for a Farout world. They are usually made as needed for a species TK needing to be isolated.

But, this could also explain why they did not make it to this froth world. If they did, it would suck the air from HWII till they closed it, possibly with a self destruct device. Not worth the trouble of trying again. They likely did not even know if they found a world or just raw vacuum.

I go to HWII+2. Carbon based, breathable air, though high in neon. That is weird. Can’t remember any other world like this. HWII is not high neon. Is this a world waiting for new inmates? No fossils again. Ecology looks reasonably stable though. Put neon sensors on HWII and you would know the moment they got here for more than a visit. Could be a passive sensor light years away even. Given the touchy nature of the sens, that might be a good idea.

Back to my hidden orbit location and I return to HWII+1. I do a better scan of what is below. I was wrong. It is not as populated, or polluted as HWII. They have not been here as long. Question is, did they ‘find’ this world, or did the ‘thn overlords make this world as an expansion, given the population pressures that built up on HWII?

Turtle pops in next to me.

“All this time and you are still only one up? Someone has been goofing off again.”

“I did not know we were in a hurry. Let’s get back to Li before we present findings.” She nods and we pop out.

Li looks at us, well as well as a Luss can stare in their form. Not happy. I don’t think Luss are used to being totally alone. Interesting. Never realized that about them. The perfect Watcher.

Turtle asks Li, *Anything below going on?*

Li looks confused, *Of course there is a lot going on.*

Turtle looks frustrated. Li should know us by now.

*She meant, anything new to report? I also have a question, any evidence of a DS portal below?*

*Impossible to tell, they are well shielded from probing.*

Turtle looks at me. I sigh.

*+I is also populated, though not to the same extent. One explanation would be, given their tech, that they somehow stumbled on portal tech, as we did on Earth.*

*Another explanation would be a froth event. Normally this would not be a consideration for a Farout world, but the fact that you have found a froth of this world says, an event did happen.*

*Question is when then, before or after their rise in tech. Oh, and there are at least two more froth WWII. A no sen 'green' one and a black one. Could be more, but came back here to check in before proceeding.*

*We have seen black ones before, could be because of a catastrophe that only happened to that one. Would be worth seeing how far out this goes. And there is no WWII-1. It starts here.*

*That also gives us a minimum time for this world, four froths means at least a hundred million years. And I would then expect at least one more froth world, unless the last froth has not completed yet.*

*No way of knowing at a Farout world that should never have frothed at all.*

*That could mean as little as over 33 million, not 100 million. Li notes. I think about it and nod.*

*This is assuming the froth is on the same time scale here. Not a given.*

*HWII+2 is weird. High neon concentration. We can breathe it, but no idea of the long term effects. There is life, plants and animals. We need to do a species list to see if related to the other two with life forms.*

Li looks at us clearly mad, then comments, *NO SPECIMENS. We are now watchers, not manipulators any longer.*

We both turn to Li, but Turtle takes the lead, *To watch is to know what you are watching. This is not just a one sense visual watching. We would set up remote sats to do that. No TK13s needed whatsoever. If that is the case, I will make the necessary tech and we can leave.*

I agree with Turtle. *This is starting to feel like a diversion and a waste of time.*

*It is true that I am in no position to tell either one of you what to do, nor how to do it. I am merely a humble teacher attempting to familiarize you with the Luss method of being a Watcher. We do have a record, going back billions of earth years, of doing this effectively.*

Meow! Is Luss Li part Cat?

# Earth Two

Silver asks, "What did you do with Luss Li?"

I shrug, "Left there of course."

"Good call, if you had not popped us back, I would have. What the freep are they planning?"

"Nothing good. We do not need 'watcher' training. Each of us has spent thousands and thousands of years watching without interference."

"No question this was a trap, but why? Jealous? Cleaning house?"

"I took the liberty of attaching a limiter to Li. It won't take long to defeat, but should slow things down." He smiles.

"Two limiters. I placed one as well, different design of course."

I smile. We have been played with so much this is tiring.

We walk up the path to the small Hu settlement. It is growing. I scan and it appears the Elders have gone back to E1, finally. They are on their own. Test or completed is yet to be determined.

"The fields of corn, squash and beans are looking very good. They won't starve at least." I nod. I am sure there is an emergency com for help if needed. I scan the surroundings. The Cats left the place a horrible mess. It will take time. Plenty of that. This is a good test. The desert is always a good test.

We change our forms to match the people here. Old of course. There is respect or at least a lack of fear when we meet others in this form. I do a quick scan to update my Hopi language skills. All languages change over time. Some more slowly, but change all the same. A few words from other sen crept in. Cannot be helped. I suspect the stories have evolved as well.

Silver has a silly grin on his face again, at least until I stare at him. He sighs and gets solemn.

*The Raps and others are gone. Their work done. Only Hu and more or less normal E2 species present. Crust did a great job on the oceans.*

*Well what the Cats left or E1 brought back anyway. Will take millions of years to establish a stable ecology again.*

*No such thing as a stable ecology. Life is change. Sustaining might be the best word to use, I think.*

*I agree. Do we go inside or pass by?*

*Pass. There will be something I see that I will want to tweak. Li was right in that we can't leave well enough alone, especially here.*

*It is much easier on a new world.*

*Do we get 'lost'?*

*They will try to find us again. They do not give up easy. If not Luss, then someone else.*

# Rap Eden

<sup>R</sup>I'm cold. I'm hungry. I am in pain!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Shut up Ronin. We are too. Just be patient.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>To be fair, Ronin was never good at being patient.<sup>R</sup>

And you both know me well enough now to know I have to say my pain. We were going to pass this settlement by, but it was the only one for several days travel and decided to take our chances. Boredom, at least from eating the same thing convinced me. Fresh rat is so much better than left over dried.

We were respectful. They did not need to treat us this way. We politely knocked at their gate and waited. And waited. Did not damage anything. Did not threaten, or say anything actually. Very respectful.

Just as we gave up and turned around, starting to walk away, It happened. They burst out of the gates to the side (hidden ones, but I noticed them), put sacks over our heads, beat us up a bit and roughly brought us inside.

We have been in this dark, smelly, cold, stone cage for at least several days. I have been licking the water off the walls, but it tastes horrible. I am too young to die this way. No glory, no honor.

We not hear anything. I fall asleep, nothing else to do.

When I wake, Squeak is gone. I feel about to be sure, but Ron notices.

<sup>R</sup>Yes, she is gone. They came while you were asleep.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Did they say anything? Why are we here? What are they going to do with us?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Nothing.<sup>R</sup>

We had nothing of value on us, though they took everything anyway. I am going to miss my sword, rust, dents and all. The smaller knives, not so much, though ensuring the right balance for throwing is not going to be easy. Will take some time to find the proper ones again. The sword is far less common. Might even be by they saw me as a threat. Little do they know.

Squeak has been working with me and my skills have improved tremendously since I met them, but I am not a one rap army. Two old raps and one young and stupid one are not a threat to anyone. I have learned to play up being stupid to put others at ease. Did not work this time.

A small amount of light has reached us. We were brought here in the morning, why didn't we have light then? Ron holds out a rat he has captured. I hungrily scarf it down. Tastes horrible, but I am so hungry I am hoping I will shed soon so I can eat that. Only a very desperate rap eats their own shed skin these days. We are civilized after all. Maybe not.

The light does not last long, but now that I know there are rats here, I

start hunting myself. Do not find anything. Even a rat would not be stupid enough to come down here.

I hear someone coming and look up to the hole they dropped us in. I barely see a shadow.

<sup>R</sup>Only the young one. Climb the pole. Don't try anything. We are armed and will kill you if you do not comply.<sup>R</sup>

A very thin pole that will barely support me is dropped in. Ron helps me orient it to the ceiling hole and holds it while I climb up. This is not easy. I suspect this is part of their plan to insure I cannot do anything violent. Even I am not that stupid.

They put a sack over my head again.

<sup>R</sup>Come on, what am I going to do?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>No talking. Move.<sup>R</sup> They give me a good shove and I pretend to almost fall. Best if they underestimate me.

The sack is removed and I am shoved through an opening. I hear a wooden door shut behind me. It is so bright I am blinded. I instinctively move several strides along the wall I can feel. My eyes finally adjust and I see I am in a large circular area surrounded by a stone wall. I look up and see only sky above the wall. In the center of this mostly sandy area appears to be my sword.

I walk over to it, but do not touch it. It is mine but I am trying to appear non-threatening. I hear another door open on the other side in front of me and a huge, I mean huge, Rap comes though. They make Raps this big? Could have been Di from his size, or so I have heard. Not pushed in like I was either. He is heavily armed and looks nasty. Lots of scars, some beaten up armor. The weapons look clean and well maintained though. Sharp and heavy no doubt.

I back up, all the time facing him. He snarls and charges, sword and ax raised. I calmly wait. He looks confused, but keeps coming.

At the last second I run towards him and duck just before reaching his outstretched weapons and go between his legs, grab my sword, which he has ignored and gently touch the back of his tail with the dull side. I then turn to face him, sword down. No threat.

He is clearly confused and looks for me. Finally he turns and sees me waiting. Calmly waiting.

I quietly say, <sup>R</sup>I touched your tail. That could just as easily have been your precious bits.<sup>R</sup> I remain calm, non-threatening. I am ready for him to charge again when he surprises me. He looks straight at me and bows. I bow in return. He turns and walks to an open door to leave.

Another much smaller Rap comes though the door, well dressed. No weapons. I stick mine back in the sand and step forward from it. I know I would never get away with the Squeak maneuver twice. Non-threatening.

Ron comes through next. What is going on? He is cleaned up, but re-

mains calm, not saying anything to me.

<sup>R</sup>My understanding is that you refer to yourself as Ronin.<sup>R</sup>

I acknowledge with a slight bow.

<sup>R</sup>Come with me, please.<sup>R</sup> Was not sure they knew that word.

Ron falls in beside me and we exit the sand space together. This is not the same door I came through. The wood is beautiful. Of course I know a cast system exists in most settlements, though this is a good indication it is much worse here.

Ron and Squeak did give me history lessons as well as defense and manners, not that I ever got to practice manners much. We never actually went inside a settlement. Rotten food was thrown down from the walls for us. When I asked why we bothered, as even I would not eat it, Ron said they were looking for a specific settlement. They never told me the reason.

<sup>R</sup>Ronin, follow them. They will clean you up and we will meet again shortly. <sup>R</sup>I am sure I stink, so I comply. He turns and goes another way. It is an improvement over the stone room at least.

My walking companion asks casually, <sup>R</sup>Could you have gotten out of the pit yourself.<sup>R</sup> I nod affirmative. <sup>R</sup>Interesting. Very interesting.<sup>R</sup>

I was taught how to jump, but I did not know what was above and I waited for permission from Ron, who could also have gotten out, though I am not sure exactly how, just was sure it was possible.

I am taken to a nicely tiled area with a steaming pool of water and several attendants waiting. My guide leaves and they motion me towards them. They pour water over me and scrub the dead skin, scales and dirt off. Lost a few feathers as well. Feels great, if a bit rough. Once they are sure I am clean they motion me into the pool. I am in Rap heaven, whatever that is. Heaven is not part of our thinking, but Ron told me Hu believed in it. Was I a Hu in a previous incarnation? Whatever an incarnation is. They confused me more often than not. Whatever a Hu is. Never seen one.

Once out of the pool, which I look back at fondly, I am dried off and led to another room. I am guessing my old cloths are gone, probably burned. They made a nice disguise though. Easy enough to find rags again if needed.

This next room is very strange. Lots of nice looking weapons. Makes sense they would have these, but why I am here is another question. It is the cloths that don't make sense. I go up to one to feel it. Ah, armor of some kind. Very nice. Have seen nothing like this ever. Black and red appear to be the dominant colors.

An older Rap comes in and bows to me, which I return on instinct. Squeak hit me every time I did not respond fast enough. Worked. I don't have to think about it anymore.

<sup>R</sup>I need to measure you<sup>R</sup>, he says. He raises his arms to indicate I

should do the same. Easy enough. I try to remain motionless at the same time follow what he is doing. He has a length of white cord which he stretches as he measures length of front arms, neck, tail even and so on. He leaves the room. I go back to looking at the gear that is here. Do they have an entire army outfitted with this stuff?

The bully who tested me in the sand pit did not wear anything like this. His was clearly well used. Maybe that was more to intimidate than to impress? Or are the ones here only for ceremonial occasions. Not that I have been to fancy bit like that, just stories that the two told me over a campfire and fresh rodents. Never knew if they were real or just stories.

A small fem, well smaller than me, comes in pushing a cart with a cloth cover. She bows, which I return. She appears startled by that. Why? She motions me to sit and then proceeds to offer me food from under the cloth. I do not even recognize it as food, except for the smell. When I reach for the food, she bats my hand back. I am confused. She pantomimes for me to open my mouth. Okay. I do so and she feeds me like a hatchling. Why? It is amazing! I quickly open my mouth again and look at the other bowls wondering what treats are in store for me. SLOWLY, she feeds me the food from all the bowls, covers the cart and leaves.

The one measuring me comes back with two others. They are carrying bits of armor. Not as fancy as what is on the wall, but still impressive. They proceed to try all the parts on me. I am trying hard to pay attention to order and how everything goes together.

They appear to be finished and stand back to assess. Wish there was a reflection glass so I could see. They then remove everything and leave. What? Why bother.

A small mal comes in. I can relate. I used to be his size, but fem grow larger. I instantly relax. He pulls out a knife and attempts to attack. What? I respond without thinking and he is quickly on the ground with the knife stuck in the wall. He gets up, brushes himself off, bows and leaves. What is this place? What is happening.

Ron comes in smiling, carrying a bundle of clothes. He bows, which I return. He hands me the clothes. I proceed to dress. Fancier than I have ever had, but at least I know what to do with it. Interesting, my name is written on the front. An emblem of some sort above it. No idea.

<sup>R</sup>Follow me. At least we are presentable now.<sup>R</sup> He is wearing a similar outfit. Same emblem as well.

<sup>R</sup>What happened? Why are we here? Where is Squeak?<sup>R</sup> He motions for me to be quiet and be patient. Not good at either.

# Cat Eden

*I'm bored.*

*Of course, but until the Luss leave we need to appear to be lazy Cats. There is no real prey here. We can catch anything that moves. No challenge. Even the kits are bored. We need REAL prey.*

*Something that bites back?*

*The only way they learn.*

*But it does not fit in with this new Watcher game.*

*They thought this up just to annoy us.*

*Of course they did. I am sure the stupid monkeys are behind it.*

*They always are.*

*They can always bring back the Terror. Those were at least a challenge.*

*It has to be Silver. The Luss are stupid and passive. Not even fun to chase. Good at hiding though.*

*Until you learn their tricks. Then it is easy. We need NEW prey.*

*Something that bites.*

*Something that can kill.*

*We should leave here.*

*You on that "Cats in Space" thing again. We hate tech.*

*So, we get the gophers to do the tech. They like that part. And if any get out of line, they are tasty too.*

*You want to be stuck out there with no tech support? We can get back, but not the entire colony without drawing suspicion on us.*

*Breaking the Watcher rules.*

*Yeah.*

*There is a way around it. I am curious now.*

*The 'rules' only apply to TK status. Any norm is exempt. We purposely limit everyone, but ourselves of course. At least for the duration of the hunt.*

*That could work very nicely. Keeps our population in check too.*

*There is something that can kill a Cat?*

*We both show amusement. The Terror did, but that was forced on us by the stupid monkeys. They promised they had nothing to do with this world. The Luss found it for us. No stupid monkeys involved.*

*Still don't trust them. Teasing is not funny! We don't do funny.*

*Stupid monkeys.*

# Smith & Jones

“Smith, Jones, front and center. NOW!” Both were formerly ambush predators. Sneak up and pounce, or bite, does not matter. Farout should make them good watchers, but for the fact they were actually there to terrorize the ‘inmates’ not just watch them. Been many generations since they had to assess any new ones. They think they know how it all works. NOT!

Not all sentients can be as good of watchers as the Luss. The reports indicate even they are having a hard time now that they are off Farout. Everyone has grown complacent, slow, and just plain stupid.

If these are the best of each sentient, we are in trouble. Only the elite were supposed to come here for advanced training. Once trained they would take back what they learned to their own worlds and train others there. We are having to push back our assessments of how long that will take. Generations likely.

“Smith and Jones reporting for duty!” Hmm, I walk slowly around them. Not perfect, nothing is, but they have made a good attempt. Frontier clothing, food and gear are meant to be all but indestructible. Out in the wild, you cannot take time to repair or replace essentials. Especially if it cannot be made from local materials.

“What is my name?” They stand frozen. Still can’t tell us apart. Hu senses suck, but the Hu have been successful to some extent. Never mind they have a tendency to do their best to extinct themselves. It was the reason all students must pass these Hu tests. Start at the bottom and work up.

“My name is Jane.” That confuses them, but it is the default for respect if nothing else. And, as any of us can give them orders and instructions, it really does not matter what our chosen names are. Smith and Jones though. We have had many in my time here. Those two historic characters seem to gather a disproportionate share of attention. Most are smart enough not to chose a major character like Silver, Turtle, or Rooi. Well Rooi does not count as she spent so little time in Hu form. Not important.

“Are you ready?”

They both yell in unison, “Yes Jane!” So cute when they pretend to be brave. These two have come a long way from their native forms, but still have many years ahead of them. Some will be painful. Their first field trip into the wild. Nothing above tech two, but they are not ready for more.

“Off you go then.” I believe the old Hu term was sink or swim. Not that there is much water to sink in here, much less swim.

# Bug Eden

Turtle was right. This is the only place we can be ourselves. Freedom!

Bug Eden is in a sort of pocket universe all to itself. Not easy to find and get to, if you don't know. The easiest way is to die and be reborn here, but like all juvenile stages, the Bug larva stage is not fun. We came here to relax and hide for a bit.

Turtle announces once we get our bearings and shake out our Bug forms to be sure everything is working, \*WE RUN!\*

It feels so good to be running again. We chase each other over hills and down valleys, hoping over streams and ditches. As we run from the sun and towards the ice, new life is coming up around us. Very easy to grab some plant bits for now and latter. Neither one of us wants to hunt other animals and we ignore them. They still scurry when they see our forms coming towards them. Turtle apologizes for disturbing them. I figure it is good training for when a hungrier pod arrives.

\*That is weird. Where is everyone? We are on a main route aren't we? Surely a sentry would have announced us at least?\*

\*We are. Overgrown, but still visible. We best scan to avoid surprises.\* I affirm.

We scan as we run. Running is the natural state for this sen. Trying not to attract any more attention than two Bugs running alone would normally do. Anyone seeing us would assume got cut off from our clan and either ignore us as minimal threat or decide protein is protein and attack us in mass to add to their larder. Nothing.

All the expected plants and animals are present.

\*Non-Bug predator population is higher than expected. It is as if the Bugs are gone and the world has reverted to the pre-Bug state.\*

\*Have we been gone that long?\* Turtle gives me a look like I am the most clueless Bug ever to have existed. Thousands of turns at least.

\*They are not gone, just all gone underground. All of the tunnels have been completed. They need not ever run anymore.\*

\*That is very sad. They were working on them when we left. I count three in the northern lats and two in the southern. They appear to have started doing some laterals between the tunnels.\*

\*And starting on the most difficult one, the equator.\*

\*Shit, they are Tech5 now! When did that happen? Why did it happen? Who taught them?\*

\*Silver, what do you think happened when they went underground and learned to mine metals? Simple steps to ceramics forging, circuitry and such. Pipes carry water, sewage, power, com.\*

\*They really have no choice but to open more tunnels. Why not cities

though? Why still use runs, just underground?\*

She shrugs, \*Cultural inertia?\* That makes sense actually. All the other sen we have encountered have similar quirks, especially Hu.

\*More freedom for ourselves to run!\* We speed up and chase each other.

\*Until a sentry spots us and get curious.\* Slow down and are being more careful. Not good to catch up with the ice anyway. At T5 they already know we are here. Unless their sensors are all directed inward and they really have abandoned the surface entirely.

I scan more carefully. They are raising fungi and plant species under controlled conditions in a vast array of chambers. There are metal support structures to allow many levels. Older regions use stone to keep the layers separate, but newer construction looks more like an underground sky scraper.

\*Scan for TK.\* I nod. If they are already T5, TK is the next logical step. I would be worried if they could easily leave this pocket universe with just TK.

\*Nothing I can find.\* I announce.

\*None by me either. Not sure TK would gain them anything. No froth worlds available. Tech alone would allow them to visit the other planets in this isolated solar system.\*

\*A bullet, missile, trap, poison gas, etc. would still be annoying.\* We slow down again. Maybe this was not such a fun place to visit anymore.

Mountain range ahead. We speed up. Running up to and over the top is a lot of fun.

We are both exhausted when we reach the top. Still ice on the shadow side. We have some time then. Beautiful though. We both settle down to enjoy the view. I already scanned, the library is still intact at least, but for how long?

\*Vat do?\* Huh? We both turn around to find a Bug with different colors than we have facing us. Alone, armed, as would anyone be in the wild, but not aggressive. Just curious.

*What did she com?*

*No idea. I suspect that the language has changed a bit in the last few thousand cycles.* I scan our visitor and pick up the new com characteristics. Too late to change our colors and gear to match. We are clearly not from around here.

Turtle finely tries, \*We run.\* Simple and true. Our visitor looks very confused. She looks around trying to see why we are really out here and gives up.

\*Why?\* Have they forgotten so much? Her muscle mass is low. Not used to the run herself. A tunnel bug for sure. I hand Turtle to let me try something.

\*Take us to your leader.\*

*Really, that is your great idea?*

I do the Bug equivalent of a shrug. *Aren't you curious?* She shakes her head. Not sure that translated to our guest, who is waiting for us to follow.

The hard part is going to not interfere. We are Watchers now, not Guardians. May have already ruined that possibility. What are two well armed 'Medieval Bugs' doing outside when everyone else is inside? We can't change our colors without notice, but can certainly exchange our gear for the local equivalent. Will that be enough? The problem with T5 cultures is they usually have high tech ID systems and rules as well.

Turtle nudges me and points to a carry bag our little one has strapped to her thorax. I scan the insides. Optical equipment and specimen bottles. Full of of this worlds equivalent of lichens. No way!

*Edwin?* I TP. Turtle shrugs. There are other curious introverted sens everywhere. Wasn't Edwin on some newly created world? No matter. As much as we might want to think we are special, personalities are not unique. At least not at the gross level.

The 'door' is surprisingly close by. Well insulated, half meter thick. Sensor activated. No TK, just tech. She did not venture very far.

Our host motions, \*Wait here to be processed. We do not find many randoms.\* Interesting how each culture comes up with a different term for the unexpected. She leaves down a tunnel. I sense others, mostly well below us. I doubt many come this close to the surface anymore.

*You notice she was not upset we could not understand her at first*

Or did not care. Probably just standard procedure. Bugs were well regimented before, I doubt that has changed that much.

We end up waiting for some time.

*They are testing us.*

*To see if we really are randoms?*

*Think of it from their point of view. Likely there has not been a random for quite some time.*

*We are an anomaly.*

*They would expect us to set up camp here. We still have our gear with us.* I com amusement, then start unpacking. We both attempt to hack off bits of the walls, doors, etc. Nothing to make a fire with. We have dried rations, so proceed to ingest that.

*Actually very surprised we are allowed to keep our weapons.*

*You have scanned, their stuff is so far ahead of what we appear to be carrying, we might as well be carrying toothpicks.*

*I have seen nothing to indicate they are still waging clan war.*

*And how do they maintain this order? Going against millions of years of genetic programming? Not likely.*

Being a Bug was not easy. Lots of control structures were in place. Needed for clan to survival. Not judging.

Someone is coming. Defensive stance. I show amusement, but comply.

*Best not to appear too dangerous, or they will just put us down to be safe.*

A warrior comes in with a tablet. Is clearly not impressed by our looking nasty. We both relax.

\*Clan and origin location?\*

We look dumb and she lets it go.

\*Strip and leave everything.\*

\*Or?\*

\*Hardware can go to a teaching museum. Bodies recycled. Does not matter to us.\* She is well armed, ballistics and high voltage taser like thing. Whether or not she would be fast enough is another question, but I am sure there are others who would come forward, or just gas this chamber. What I would do.

We leave everything in a pile and follow our new guide. We walk down a maze of tunnels, purposely confusing I am sure. Of course we both know exactly where we are.

We enter a chamber and are told to remain. Our armed guide leaves.

Two smaller, younger Bugs come in.

\*Please explain.\* Explain what? We must have looked confused.

\*This is a test right?\*

 Of what? Us, certainly, but not testing them.

\*We were just out for a run. No harm. As to the gear, there are still creatures out there who would eat us and the rest because we were living off the run.\*

\*Evidence says otherwise. There are no active forges that could produce your gear, anywhere, inside or outside. Not even remnants. Do you want to explain that?\*

\*In the old days, they often had to make new forges as needed.\*

One gets mad, \*Enough! What are you and why are you here? No one looks like you and hasn't for a very long time. You do not belong. You cannot exist.\*

We both look at ourselves and each other looking confused.

Someone comes in and hands something to the two. They access their tablets.

\*Want to explain this then? Your gear is clearly newly made, but tests say it is many cycles old. No one does work like this. Does not even match what is in our museums. Everything is wrong, alloys do not match any known surface or subsurface mineral deposits. Your bodies are not from any clan we know. No existing clan is your size and coloration. You cannot exist. Your gear cannot exist.\*

Oops. Now what? *I assume popping out would not be good.*

*\*Our next molt should remove the inconsistencies. We could not know how the old ones lived if we did not match them as closely as possible. As to the gear, we did the best we could with what we could adapt.\**  
Oh, that is good Turtle.

*\*This is all part of some research project.\** Not a question.

They both leave, clearly not amused.

*That only bought us time.*

*A pretty flimsy explanation. They will see through it if they think about it. We need to leave.*

*And popping out won't make more problems.*

*We go out the way we came in. The gear is still in the room they made us leave it. A few minor pieces are missing. Must have been what they did their analysis on.*

*They may have thought this would confuse us. Would not have confused someone from that time period. I show amusement. We are not from their world. We are from that ancient time period actually.*

The 'locked' front door was easy to get though. We cheated and used TK to activate the lock, bypassing all the fancy interface stuff.

Once outside, we run. Time has passed and it is getting very hot. We move it. Doubt they have the desire to follow us now. Probably glad we are gone actually.

So much for our 'vacation'. It started out nice at least.

*\*Wonder where Li is now?\** I had forgotten our shadow. Freep.

# Rap Eden

<sup>R</sup>Moons in a dark hole and now we live in a stone tower with servants waiting on us. What happened?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We were not in there that long. Just seemed like it, I agree.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We certainly smell better. What is going on with Squeak? I have not seen her since she was taken away from us in the hole.<sup>R</sup>

I feel the fabric and leather of my new covers. I have never even seen anything this nice. Granted we rarely got invited into a city. Spent all our time out outside surrounded by garbage and normally we dressed in rags and castoffs.

<sup>R</sup>You did really well in the arena Ronin. Very well.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I had good teachers.<sup>R</sup> And lots of bruises and sore muscles to prove it.

<sup>R</sup>ATTENTION!<sup>R</sup>

What the? Who is this Rap? Why are they ordering us? Ron snaps to attention, so I follow his example, not knowing what to do.

<sup>R</sup>A bit slow. We can fix that. At ease.<sup>R</sup> Ron relaxes.

<sup>R</sup>To be fair, he was trained in the field, not the royal court.<sup>R</sup> Royal court? Where are we?

<sup>R</sup>Did I ask for an explanation?<sup>R</sup>

We wait. She maintains her stance watching the two of us. I was much happier in the field. Rotten rat seems really good about now.

Squeak comes in and even our accuser snaps to attention. We follow her example. Whoa, Squeak has the fanciest clothes I have ever seen. Who is she?

<sup>R</sup>Close your mouth Ronin. Rude to stare. I taught you better.<sup>R</sup> I quickly shut it. She turns to the guard, I think that is what she is anyway.

<sup>R</sup>You may go Beebee. I will take it from here.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>As you command Ambassador.<sup>R</sup> Ambassador? To what?

Squeak turns to be sure Beebee has actually left and closed the door.

<sup>R</sup>Relax. We do not have long for me to explain, so pay attention.

<sup>R</sup>Ron and I were questioned by the local authorities. They been having trouble with some, ah invaders, and everyone they don't know has been going through the 'process' of interrogation. The three of us, for lack of a better term, have been drafted to help. We are the 'gentle' side of their plan. You can guess what the warrior side looks like. As Ron and I both know a few other, ah, languages, we were immediately brought in.<sup>R</sup>

She hands me NOT to let them know I know hand or Di. I hand back, I understand. I understood what she com'd, but not why. Are the invaders Di?

<sup>R</sup>I am assuming you are the official Ambassador, but what parts do we

play?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Ron is my assistant and secretary. He keeps things running smoothly and takes notes and orders to whom I wish to com with. Ronin, you are our private security. Our protector.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>But, you two can beat me every time. How am I supposed to protect you?<sup>R</sup>

Ron explains, <sup>R</sup>This is all about appearances.<sup>R</sup> He hand coms me that they needed a valid role for me to be part of the team. Do not tell anyone, ANYONE, they are better than I am at combat. Oops, did they hear what I just said?

<sup>R</sup>And the reason I was ‘tested’ in the arena. Is that what you call it?<sup>R</sup> They affirm.

<sup>R</sup>And the reason I was sent against the largest mal Rap I have ever seen, was so they could test me against . . .?<sup>R</sup> They both affirm nervously.

<sup>R</sup>And if I had lost?<sup>R</sup>

They look at me like I should know what would have happened. Dead. I may shed early this time. Freep.

I hand, I guess this means they don’t know I know Di as well?

No. Never let them know. Even if a Di insults you and threatens you just to test you. Never let them know. I have never even seen a Di, I don’t think so anyway.

Gulp. Rotten rat is tasting better and better.

The door opens and the huge Rap that challenged me in the arena comes in. Cleaned up and not armed. He bows. I return the bow, but I am still suspicious. He turns to Squeak, !They are ready for you now.! He turns to me and says, !You did well little one.! I ignore him. He shows amusement and leaves. I really think he is Di now.

<sup>R</sup>We only have a moment to prepare. Ronin, you lead, as our protector, Ron is next as the assistant. I follow last.

Ronin, no weapons are allowed in the Court. If challenged, which is very unlikely, you do the best you can. There are armed guards outside the court, so you only have to handle the situation long enough for them to enter. Even in our heightened status, we are still nobodies. Servants of a higher order if you will. Not worth the trouble.<sup>R</sup>

Ron grabs the necessary papers and writing materials.

<sup>R</sup>Proceed. Digon will be outside to lead us.<sup>R</sup> Wait, Digon, as in Di Gon? Di Gon is a Di? I have never seen a mal Rap that large before, huge. Starting to make sense. Never seen a Di before either. Interesting. I wish they would explain stuff to me. This always telling me afterwards is stressful.

We are taken down a series of hallways. They would have a hard time getting me lost outside, but I have spent so little time inside, I am quickly hopeless if they expect me to lead them back to our chamber. Don’t even

like being inside anymore. Outside and free for me.

I follow Di Gon hoping we are not walking into a trap. Does not help that we are led to a small strange chamber, but Di Gon does not enter with us. I was right about this being a trap! The door shuts. I am sure we are all dead.

Nothing happens. Ron and Squeak are not upset though. I have suspected for a long time that they can com with out speaking or handing. No one is that calm in a new situation.

Finally, a door on the other side of the chamber opens, a much larger door I had not paid much attention to in fact. We walk out. No one to greet us. I am still in front though.

We are now in the center of a much larger room. Doors open all around us and large ones enter. No Rap is this size, so are these all Di? I have accepted my own death by dismemberment. I had fun. I am at peace. One is very white in color. Guess it happens occasionally with Di as well. Interesting. I am beginning to see differences in appearances of each one present. The stories we were told about all Di being horrible monsters appears to be false. Not surprised. Until this moment I would never have believed even that they were this large compared to us.

The white one comes forward, !Welcome to Di Eden Ambassador Squeak.! Squeak bows. I do as well, still pretending not to understand. Ron pokes me to not bow. Confused I stand upright again. Everyone but four of the Di leaves. Not going to be eaten then.

# Di Eden

!I am Ambassador Libby. You have met my mate White. These are my two assistants, Dark and Slayer.!

Dark and I have been briefed on what to expect. It would appear the young guard has not. She will need to be watched to be sure she does not go rogue on us. Tiny little thing. Yet, she passed the test. Interesting. I had heard that Raps can be tricky and very fast. It will be fun to spare with her then.

!Checker! How did Checker get in?! Dark immediately goes to corner Checker to guide him out. Libby hands that he is okay.

Libby explains, !Checker is a part of our household. Been with us since hatching.! Checker runs up to the Rap Ambassador and receives a treat. Somehow she knew to be ready. Now that guard is curious. She rummages around in a pouch and pulls out a treat. Checker goes to check it out, makes a horrible face and runs away to hide behind me, hissing at the guard.

Dark asks, !What was the treat she rejected?!

The guard ignores her. Interesting, come on a diplomatic mission and does not know our com?

I say, <sup>R</sup>What treat did you offer her?<sup>R</sup>

This time she responds, <sup>R</sup>Field rations left over from the last time we were outside. My call is Ronin.<sup>R</sup>

That would explain it. <sup>R</sup>Checker has gotten very spoiled being in court. My call is Slayer. Sorry, long explanation.<sup>R</sup>I try to appear non-threatening.

She shows understanding. The entire time she is watching her Ambassador and not me though. She notices the two of us as well and whispers something to Libby.

The two ambassadors then leave together. Some things are better said in private. White and the Rap ambassador assistant then leave together. Leaving the three of us and Checker. Seeing this, Dark calls Checker and they leave together. Checker is still suspicious of the guard and her horrible treats. Guess I have been called to Rap sit.

Calmly I say, !Prepare to die a horrible death rat eater!! No response. Very good. I do not even smell a surprise reaction.

Finally he asks, <sup>R</sup>Is there a polite location to expel waste? I am used to being outside. Not used to this.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Of course, are you hungry? You eat mostly meat if I remember my training. I think I can find something edible. Is fish acceptable?<sup>R</sup> She affirms. I like fish at least. Always appeared strange to me when you eat something different than your guest. Rude in fact.

We make our way to the lower kitchens. Always lots of activity. We are ignored of course. Ronin suddenly stops.

<sup>R</sup>What's wrong?<sup>R</sup> I look around and see nothing amiss.

<sup>R</sup>Raps!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Of course. You have seen other Raps before haven't you?<sup>R</sup>

She looks around confused. <sup>R</sup>But we are on Di aren't we? What are Raps doing here?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not all the Raps left with the others. There were pockets about. They have found a place in our culture. The reason I can com Rap. Spent a lot of time with the staff.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>There are no Di on Rap Eden, well one that I met. I don't think there are any others.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That coms right. Let's find us something to eat. I can always eat. Love eating.<sup>R</sup> She looks at me like that is ALL I do with my time.

<sup>R</sup>Di are bigger than Rap.<sup>R</sup> Don't think she is convinced that is the reason. There is a section of already prepared meals for staff. I find two labeled as fish and get those.

<sup>R</sup>Let's go outside. I am guessing you would be more comfortable outside.<sup>R</sup> She affirms enthusiastically.

<sup>R</sup>We are on Ambassador Island. The powers decided it might be better to isolate all the outsiders in one place, just in case.<sup>R</sup> I show shame. Not sure she sees that though. We make our way down a short path to the beach.

<sup>R</sup>River?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Ocean, salty water, not drinkable. Pretty and nice sounds, at least when there is no storm.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>She runs down to the edge, sticking her feet in. Reaches down to taste it. She then comes back, removes all of her clothing and runs and jumps into the ocean!<sup>R</sup>

It is too late before I can stop her! Raps don't know how to . . . what? She is swimming, not fish swimming, head is above water. I come up to the edge, but do not go in. I will if I have to save her, but swimming is not my favorite activity.

A moment later the Rap Ambassador and her assistant come running down to the edge, strip and jump in. What the?

The Rap staff are watching us through the windows. I sign back I am as confused as they are. All of us spend time out here when we want a quiet space to think, but nobody swims in the ocean. Small creeks and ponds maybe, but there are sharks and dangers out there. No sharks in the ponds. What happens if Ronin is attacked?! Or the Ambassador? I strip down and run into the ocean. Fortunately they have not gone too far out. Ronin keeps going under, which scares me a lot, but she comes right back up, holding something new each time.

The Ambassador barks something to her assistant and Ronin and they come back to shore. I am the last to leave the water, looking all around me for hazards. We were lucky this time. I notice that small ones have found and taken our lunch. Great.

When we get back to the outer doors to the kitchen I see Dark sitting at a table with enough to eat for everyone. Saved again.

!Did you know that Rap could swim? In the ocean at that?! I show no.

I don't think we know as much about Raps as we thought. Simple easy assignment they said. Lay back, eat and enjoy they said. Somehow Checker gets out and starts begging from us. We know better and offer her nothing. Ronin does not, and keeps trying to offer her something she will eat. Mostly gets just hisses in thanks. Out of frustration she offers her some pastry. She almost takes her hand off! She reaches for more and soon Checker is sitting on her lap trying to reach the rest.

<sup>R</sup>Ronin, put her down and concentrate on your own meal.<sup>R</sup> She puts Checker down, who immediately jumps back up. Confused she looks to me. I come over, grab Checker and take her back inside. Can't get through doors without help yet. I will eat later. Dark will take over watching over things. I will get ready for the next activity. A definite advantage to having two assistants. Ronin is too easily distracted.

And I thought the Hu were bad.

# Magenta

This is where I am most comfortable. Without all the banned ones, it is very quiet now. Very peaceful. We were supposed to keep them here forever. How were we to know they could figure a way out? No one ever had before in countless incarnations. Yet, they did. How?

Of course I got assigned to watch them. It was what I was designed to do. They thought I was a new Luss, but I actually came to sentience right here millions of years ago. In this meadow in fact. I remember when the Hu arrived and we were given our orders to watch and learn. I remember when they suddenly left. The 'thn went crazy trying to figure out how and what to do about it.

It was peaceful then for a time.

Then they returned! Without the 'thn! How is that even possible? This time I made sure I was among them when they left for a second time. I need to understand how this is possible. The entire purpose of our existence is at stake.

When we were on a mission to a new 'Hell World', as they called them, I would be watching closely, alone with my clones. We would figure it out this time. But this time, they sensed the trap and disappeared before we could lure them in. Millions of years of preparation all to waste.

When, after an extensive search, we could not find them, I came back here. A failure. I will live out my days on this ground, worthless, shunned by all the others. The Crust left as well, so I can't even throw my worthless being into their claws to be shredded and consumed. I can't even be food for another. Worse, I can't even suppress the budding. Soon this meadow and all the others will be full of my clones. I have failed yet again.

I am worthless. I should never have existed.

# New Edwin Land

‘This is nice. I might like being a ‘thant now that we actually get to try it for real.’

The legs are not quite right, ‘Not the same as the Paak, but it should work.’

‘I think you are right. I see a nice flat spot on the surface there. Want to dance? I did enjoy the dance on Paak.’

‘Indeed.’

We do our best at first to dance, dance, dance, but I keep getting frustrated. Finally I experiment with the leg segments.

‘Finally, I think I have it. Perfect!’

‘Dude, you don’t look right. Never pass inspection by the Queen now.’

‘Shit, I forgot about the Queen.’

‘Requirement for all visiting TKs to present themselves.’

‘And we all know what happens to those who do not pass inspection.’ Ick! I reform to normal ‘thant configuration. Not the same at all.

‘Psst, here comes Edwin. Not as tough as the Queen, but almost I’m sure.’

We come to attention and say in unison, ‘Reporting for duty as requested, Sir!’

He looks us over, carefully. Can ‘thants shake their heads? We should be used to it by now. I am wondering what I missed. Rand seems to be okay, but he is extra suspicious of me. Been around Rand too much. His personality has rubbed off on me I think. Two of a kind now. I do my best ‘thant smile.

‘Follow me.’ Walk this way. We do our best Igor imitation. He turns around to look at us and we freeze. Smiling. He shakes his head.

‘We have existed since the beginning of this multiverse and from before then to the beginning of the beginning. We are ‘thant and have always existed to be the workers of the multiverse incarnations. In all that time, this is the form we have used. It works.’

Ah, understood Mi Capitan. Saluting does not really work either. I am beginning to see the limitations of this form. Horrible dancers, hard to smile. Can’t salute. I am sure the limitations will continue to escalate.

*Have we just signed up for Hell?*

*Indeed.*

Can ‘thants get bored? It seems we have been on this tour for years by the time we are led to the chow hall. Blasted TK memory means we will not forget it either.

‘Food, glorious food!’ Rand says. Edwin sighs again, well sort of.

We are led to a large space. Other 'thants are already eating. Well, eating is a continuous process. New worker 'thants bring in the food and everyone eats. Great. Guess we missed the new worker stage.

'What is this?'

'Where did it come from? Looks foul, smells worse.'

Edwin sighs, 'This is 'thant food. Has been for ...'

'Yeah, billions and billions of years. Heaven forbid you should enjoy life. No, can't have that.'

We each take one taste, look at each other, then look for a place to throw up. End up using TK to do the deed.

'Good, best I have ever had.' And please do not ever serve this again.

*Looks like we are on our own for food too. What exactly are we doing here again?*

*Paak is starting to look better and better. In fact, I think that was the most fun we have had, EVER.*

*Yeah.*

Edwin comes up to us and hands us something, 'Try this. Chow takes some getting used to. Helps if you were raised on nothing else since hatching.'

I doubt it.

'What was that anyway? Could not have been actual food for any thing living or dead.'

'A delicacy actually. Fermented lichens. First crop of the new season. Just getting started on this new world. Most of us are still eating duped chow.' It can be worse? I am looking at the 'treat' that he handed me. Very suspicious.

'Rand, try it! I am in heaven! I am really beginning to like being a 'thant if this is what it tastes like to them.' He looks supremely happy.

Still suspicious I try it, expecting the worst.

I can't believe it.

Drup TKs a lot more and hands me some more.

'It is considered polite to share.' I look around and see the entire room of 'thants staring at us.

I make more, Rand makes more too. We hand out a generous supply to everyone present. Anticipating a happy result.

Each and every one of them respectfully accepts the treat and places it in their carry bag. Then goes back to their normal ration. What the?

'We are in HELL.'

Edwin responds, 'Indeed. That is why I need your help. I asked for both of you specifically. You are our only hope.'

I am no Obiwan. Gulp.

'So, do you think they know we don't belong here?'

'What gave it away?'

‘Too early for a dance party?’

Edwin is not even sure what to make of us and just stares at us. How can you even tell in this form what a stare is?

He finally says, ‘Time for a tour of our humble home.’

‘Right, good idea. Learn the layout. Where is our space? Just office space will be enough. Don’t need a mansion.’

‘No one but the Queen has a private residence.’ He pauses, ‘With hundreds of attendants.’ Not so private. ‘And ‘thants don’t sleep. No possessions either.’ Not that stuff has been part of what I am for sometime.

‘Bummer. This is going to be a tough assignment Drup.’ I nod in agreement.

We get the TOUR. From Hell. This place is so incredibly BORING.

‘thants can’t sleep, but I think I could be an exception. Nearly dead now.

‘Next is some time spent on a work detail. Most get this from hatchings, so you have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘No rest period?’

‘Free time?’

Edwin looks at us like we are insane. Guess not.

*What say you we blow this pad?*

*Indeed my friend, indeed.*

*They have covered nearly the entire planet.*

*Not everywhere. They hate the cold and the surface.*

*Skiing!*

‘Of course Edwin knows exactly where we are, but did not pop with us. I suspect he was expecting us to do this. Hate to disappoint.’

‘I think he wanted us to do this. When was the last time anyone ever saw a ‘thant disobey an order.’

Oh, there are some nice slopes here. Yes, can make a nice downhill run here.

‘Let’s do it.’

Did not need a ski lift, we just pop back to the top. Not sure how long we spent here before we finally got bored with this too.

We make a final run and are resting at the bottom when Edwin pops in. He looks up and sees what we have been doing. Then pops out.

‘That was fast.’

‘Failed again. Add it to our list I guess.’

Rand nudges me to look up. Edwin is coming down the hill! He is skiing, well, the ‘thant version. He comes over to us.

‘This is more like it. Thank you. Keep them coming!’ He pops out.

‘What the?’

A portal appears at the top and ‘thants start coming down the slope. Very awkward and not pretty. Ooh, two ran into each other and are tum-

bling down now. Going to need an aid station.

‘Refreshments would be nice.’ I nod and we set up a stand, well, a very short stand, ‘thants are not very tall. Okay, more like large bowls they can sip from and crunchies to nibble on. Tamer than our first attempt. Hey, capsicum is great on everything.

Soon we have a line. Very polite, no cutting or pushing. Boring.

‘They are at least eating it this time.’

‘Probably ordered to do so.’ Yeah, I thought the same. Still, it is a start.

Another portal appears near us and the ones who have eaten enter and leave. Going back to their usual routines.

‘This was fun, but not really part of our task. We need to up our game.’

‘In the mean time, there is a frozen lake near here we can skate on. Got to be easier with six legs than with two at least.’

‘True that.’ We pop out.

# Earth Two

The majority us are on what is called Earth One. This, the ground beneath, is Earth Two. We are an artificial sentient. We are not natural. We did not evolve and are not integrated into the biosphere of either world. We are a mistake that should never have happened. All because of the ego of a sen who looked like us, but was part of an extinct world.

We were created to destroy a resident sentient. One who has evolved here. A sentient know as the Hu. They refer to us as the Drag, short for dragon, a mythical creature from their stores of old. Mythical, as in never really existed, at least not during the time of their awareness and understanding.

The Hu are ugly creatures with very nasty habits. They regularly kill each other. They pollute the grounds around them. They over eat to the point of endangering all life. Then, they move on and do the same in a new location. Nasty things. Try to avoid them if you can.

This is not to say that there are not some among us who would do the same, but we remove them as soon as they are known. The Hu do not do this necessary service. When, in our frustration, we attempt to do this for them, they get annoyed and try to remove us! We are doing them a service, doing what needs to be done, what should be done, and we are rewarded with death and destruction.

Fortunately, not all Hu packs are this way. There are a few, very few, peaceful, nature abiding packs. We do interact with them, in mutual cooperation. It was easy to learn their language and they understand what we com in Drag, but are not capable of speaking Drag. They can however hand Drag passably. It is enough for now.

They are teaching us how to survive in our environment without harming. We were designed to eat live prey. Plant materials do not sit well and will only be eaten at the point of starvation. The Hu have taught us how to raise plant material that is needed to feed the running prey we seek. We return the nutrients to the ground for the next cycle of plants. A complete and necessary cycle. These Hu do the same.

We are natural runners, much faster and longer enduring than the Hu. We return their help by running messages between packs for them and us. We meet regularly to adjust needs. They also com about times long past when life was different. On origins for both our kind. We have been told about our father who created us and the great shame he brought on both our kind.

Friendship have developed among and between our kind. Surely this is the best of times.

# Enterprise

*We will be showing the pre-plague Hu vid, "The Wrath of Khan" along with Bugs Bunny shorts, yes, that includes "The Martian". Translations will be available on a separate channel as usual.*

θNot that one again. Don't the Hu ever get tired of it? I certainly do.θ  
^Don't stress it, just join us in the heckler session. All the fun is in finding all the flaws.^

θToo easy. Seen this one so many times I could recite it from memory.θ

)Not like any other sen does fantasy work. Could you imagine a Ba work not based on their glorious past?( Hey, don't lump me with all the fantasy nuts please.

||Could be worse still, a Ku opera.||

All of us affirm and show amusement, even Ku Shi. To be fair, we are all here because we really did not fit in with our own sen any longer, if we ever did.

*All personnel to scanning stations. We have a live one folks!*

+Better be more than crusts jumping in puddles this time.+

A Meep passes us as we run to our stations. I can't tell them apart and they don't seem to care. The kids are nearly full grown now and that makes it harder too. S/he phases through the walls taking a shortcut. That gives me the creeps when I am helped through that way. I will go the old fashioned way.

Since the re-design, we really don't have anything resembling a 'bridge' as in the old Hu vids. Depending on norm abilities would make us dead very quickly. With TK we can be anywhere on the ship and get the information we need.

)Buzz, you are up for this away team. It will be fun. Lots of tunnels even.( Great. Yeah, I was given the name Buzz the moment they showed the first Buzz Lightyear vid. Hey, we were trained not to rely on TK alone. Shit happens. Can't breathe vacuum.

I grab the rest of my gear and make my way to the DS room. The others are already waiting. They have not learned the wisdom of a full metal jacket.

^You do realize all the weight you are carrying will be a hazard if we hit limiters Buzz.^ Someone saying Buzz in Ba sounds like an angry bee. A Meep phases in. I am very happy to see them. I relax a bit. Short of a high TK, a Meep is the next best sen.

I look around and see the standard away kit. Camping supplies and TK enhancers and non-TK sensors. Some sen are VERY suspicious of

TK and will attack if they sense it. Of course, any sen on a Farout world will be limited to some extent, which means anything new that shows up without limitations is by definition the enemy. Actually, anything new that shows up is the enemy.

Our Paak leader shows up. She gives me a look over and nods. She gets it. Paak are cautious.

^Paak Aga, why are we going down? Can't this all be done from orbit?^ Really asking why the hell was I chosen for this suicide mission?

Aga shows amusement and initiates DS. We land in a clearing in a dense forest. Nothing looks normal, but then, that in and of itself is normal for a Farout world. Normal is reserved for well, normal sen, ones that behaved anyway.

We spread out, already knowing our assigned tasks (and endlessly trained on them till we no longer have to be conscious of what we are doing even). I collect rock and soil samples. Nothing moves. With a forest this dense around us I would expect to find some crust decomposers at least. No one said this was a plantimal world. Don't think a single plantimal sen has ever been sent to Farout, that we know of at least. But even plantimals can move, albeit very slowly. Nothing. Samples collected and poke around a bit to see if I can find something moving, anything. Wish I could use TK, but not on this trip. There should be no sen where we set down for this initial assessment, but you can never be sure.

Aga does a whistle and we quickly come back together and DS back up to the ship. Once there we each deposit our samples into larger sample boxes which disappear immediately to their respective labs for analysis. Next is decom. The downside of this suit is I will have to go through it twice, once with the suit and again after I change out of it. I don't mind at all. Some really nasty stuff is out here.

Meep declares, *No parasites detected*. Thank goodness. We all wear the gold collars, but still, sooner or later we will find one who can get around that. The rest DS out of the chamber and I proceed to remove my suit. The air always smells funny after decom. Suppose I should ask what they use, but I really do not want to know, if you know what I mean. Don't need anything else to freak out over. It comes down to trust I was told. Trust is fine, but there are also pranks and worse, missed dangers. Those are the worst.

I go to put my suit back on when I notice it is dissolving at the attachment rings. Shit. I hit the emergency button. I pray this is just a prank, but I follow protocol anyway. I can make another suit, but I was becoming attached to this one. My good luck suit.

Several well suited sen DS in. I point to the suit. They affirm, package it up after examining it and then initiate full ship lock down. Not a prank then. Shit.

We go through another decom. This time we are told to harden ourselves with TK shields. That done, we wait. The rest of the away team DS in and give me dirty looks. Some are holding food in their hands. They and any area they went to will have had to go through decom as well. I would not be happy either.

Aga hands me something to eat, )Good call Bill. Initials say this could be a nasty one. Seems to be limited to the alloy used in your suit seals, so far. Nothing else on the away team used that alloy. If you had not been on the team it could be all over the ship before anyone noticed it.(

“That does not make me feel better. I am even more scared now.”

Aga shrugs, )Worst case we do a complete copy and transfer. A new body can be good, but I feel like I earned all the mistakes this one has gone through.( I affirm. I have the scars to prove it. Yes, TK can remove them, but if they don't interfere with function, I leave them alone. The initial pain happened and the scar reminds me when I was not paying enough attention.

Now we wait. And wait.

Finally the flashing lights go out.

The door opens and Pilot walks in. The door stays open, but we all immediately stand at attention and the Luss I did not even know was there de-cloaks. I never did trust the Luss. Too sneaky.

Pilot looks right at me, “Congratulations Hu Bill, this is the third dangerous organism you have found while on an away missions.” I sigh and shake my head. The rest are showing amusement now. Bet they never want to be on another mission with me.

Pilot raises her hand, “Without Bill this ship could have been destroyed and we would all be residing in duped forms at this point. But, we caught the creature quickly enough and we are safe.” She turns around and motions to something I can't see from this angle.

An amorphous undulating form sort of slithers in. White and rust swirls moving over its surface. A much larger version of what I noticed on my suit.

She turns back to us, “Meet our new sen form. Call to be determined later. Use TP for now. All of the alloy on the ship that matches its food source has been replaced and we are safe for the moment. As you can see they grow quickly. Having met us, we cannot return them to the surface as per protocol. At least not until our purpose here has been determined.”

)Appears to be a form of slime mold. Edwin should be notified.( Aga suggests.

“I concur with Aga. Our new sen looks just like a larger version of what was on my suit. How big do they get?”

Pilot shows amusement, “Way ahead of you. Dismissed.”

We shrug, above our pay grade and make to leave, when all hell

breaks loose.

A Luss uncloaks and hisses like a flock of Ku on steroids.

*EVIL, EVIL, MUST DESTROY. EVIL!*

Luss Ji is suddenly in a bubble, not of her choosing, and pops out.

)Never seen a Luss that upset. About what?(

^I think it is the new one. What kind of danger could a slime mold be, even a sen one?^

Was that Luss even one of ours or one that has been hiding here the entire time?

“Where did the Luss come from and why would this sen be so evil?”

^The Luss all came from the Farout world Magenta remember.^

+And our new guest is a sort of magenta in color. Coincidence?+

)Is that where the Luss really came from, or just where we first encountered them? I thought Luss Li was with Silver and Turtle?(

We are all just outside the door watching when Pilot announces, “Okay, you four back in here right now!”

How did we piss off fearless leader? The new sen is still here. How can you tell if a sen is curious or even paying attention.

*We do not have names as you refer to yourselves by. Since this is currently the only one present, you may refer to this one as Peppermint.*

Oh, as in the Hu candy treat. I get it.

+Pleased to meet you Peppermint. Welcome aboard.+ The rest of us all acknowledge the sediment. Pilot smiles.

^Sorry Captain, but what is going on?^

“Many parts to that question.” She smiles. Never trust a Captain that smiles. Usually means extra work. Or worse. We lost crew to the Yellow encounters. They were sort of slime molds too weren’t they?

)Do we have a sen designation for Peppermint yet?( We are all watching Pilot for her answer.

“They are NOT slime molds. No relation to the Yellow at all. More of a colonial tunicate. The individual zooids are small enough that outwardly they do not show. Their neural net is as complex as any sen we have already encountered, just nothing centralized that we would refer to as a brain.”

+Sounds like a good thing. Not to be gross, but what happens if you are injured Peppermint?+

*As in wounded or chopped into pieces? Whoa even I was not thinking that drastic.*

We have been reading up on your cultures to make it easier to integrate with the current crew. Wounded we can fill in the injured area quickly. However there is a minimum mass to maintain TK and higher thinking abilities. Each piece can regen the whole eventually. It means learning and training is likely to have to occur again to make up for lack

of cohesiveness.

“I am sure you all have a lot of questions. Peppermint will be bunked in your area, so you will have lots of opportunities to integrate each other to the new crew member.”

^What about Luss Li? I am assuming that was Luss Li and not some other Luss?^

“Correct. Luss Li was supposed to be on an away mission with Silver and Turtle. We know they have Tech 5 abilities, but limited TK below us. Still a challenging task. Silver and Turtle never arrived below, stranding Li.”

^Are Silver and Turtle okay?^ She nods affirmation.

“It would appear that the Pink, for lack of a better sen name currently, are native to this world. The other, tech sen, are not. As we have seen many times in the past. No, they have never been on Magenta as far as we or they know.”

*The Luss, as you refer to them, have been trying to exterminate us. We had to hide in the outer areas that they had no interest in. We suffered greatly. This one is the last of our kind.*

+We are sorry Peppermint. We would have helped if we had known.+

“The fragment on Bill’s away gear was a cry for help. It was enough of a clue for us to scan and find Peppermint. We have now heard their story.”

“The Luss were not sent here to help on Enterprise, but rather use us to find outcast species and eliminate them before we could find out what was going on. Silver and Turtle got suspicious and did not want to participate. They forewarned me to be watching carefully. Luss Li’s reaction to Peppermint convicted the Luss.”

+Silver did have thousands of years in proximity to the Luss.+

Pilot smiles a huge grin.

“It was from studying the Luss that they were able to figure out how to leave. Remember, Magenta is close to Farout, but not the same. There were Luss on Farout as well. This is NOT common knowledge and not to leave this room.”

^Very amusing that the jailers gave them the keys though.^

)It must be scary being the only one of your kind left Peppermint. How can we help you, ah, make more?(

“Good, then you already understand your assignment. And here I thought it be embarrassing to bring it up.”

*Why?*

We all show amusement.

^Come with us Peppermint. We will explain as we learn from each other.^

# Unknown

!Slayer, where are we?!

!I don't know, ask the Rap.!

!Hey, my name is Ronin, try it, even easy to com in Di.!

I stopped all pretense of not knowing Di. They both stare at me though.

!Ronin!!, Checker says. I point to Checker and nod. Then to them.

Snort, !Ronin!

!Ronin!

!That was not so hard now was it. What I want to know is where our leaders are. They are always leaving us to figure out things ourselves!

!They have names you know, but, yeah, we noticed the same thing.!

I hiss back at them anyway. !Different when someone is right in front of you. They are both larger than me. Checker never seems to let this bother her though and will stand up to anyone.

!Checker test!! I think the little one is right. Some new kind of torture test. I could have died in the arena and they just shrugged it off. Either they did not care or were very sure I would come out alive.

Slayer says, !We have a choice. We can sit and wait till someone returns to help, or we can do what we need to do to survive in this new location.!

I comment, !I doubt they expect us to just sit. Ron and Squeak certainly would not let me get away with that.!

They both nod, !Neither would White and Libby. Well, Checker seems to be the only one immune. She holds her own though. I would not worry about her.!

!Just don't give her too many treats. Nothing worse than a fat Checker. Checker looks offended, but they both look at her sternly till she backs down.

Dark looks to me, !We have had minimal training, but my understanding is you spent some time on your own before, ah, this all happened.!

I think about it and look around, !This does not look anything like Rap Eden. I need mostly protein in the form of live or recently dead animal life. Whereas you two can eat almost anything? Right?! They affirm. I think.

Dark says, !Checker is good at finding anything. This is certainly not Di Eden, at least no place we have been, so we need to work together. In any world, there are predators, prey and plants. I see plants, so I assume the predators and prey are here as well.!

!We also need shelter and most importantly water, water we can drink at least. I am thinking that swimming would be good too.

!Fish is live protein, so water is also good for me in that way too!  
!We all like fish. Good to know. Lots of plants grow near water as well. Sounds like we need to find water first. Stay together or split up?!  
I look around. There is a small hill nearby. I point to it.  
!We split up to search. Meet at the top of that hill before dark?!  
They both nod and take off. Checker stays with me. Good. Feels better with some company.

!Checker run!! Good, I like her better already. She takes off and I follow her. She has the advantage of being able to fit in tighter spaces, but I manage.

Takes only a few minutes for her to find a small creek. I test the water. Cold.

!Let's go down stream a bit. With any luck it will lead us to a larger stream or river or even a lake. If not, we come back here and go up-stream. This is a pretty small stream, so I doubt it is an outlet for more than a small pond.!

Looks more open on the other side, so we cross over. I carry Checker. She does not seem comfortable around running water. It is fun to be running in a forest again though. So much of where we were on Rap was open space. The smells and sounds are more alive here.

Checker comes back with a rodent like thing and drops it at my feet.

!Are there more?!

!Checker find more! She runs away and comes back a moment later with another one. She does this a few more times.

Each time she leaves, I finish prepping the kills to share with the others.

!Enough Checker. We need fish as well.! She looks at the water and hisses. My turn. I give her a rodent to eat and I wade into the stream. First few times I fail. They are used to being hunted. Good to know. We need to stay awake for sure. I do manage to finally catch a few though and add them to our stash.

!To the hill top Checker. Likely they will be waiting for us. Time to run!!

I keep my scanning going though. Anything that moves fast attracts attention. As in something that might want to eat us.

I am amazed at Checker, so much smaller, but keeping up and not tiring.

We arrive. They are not here yet. We set up a camp of sorts. Used to that from my wanderings on Rap. We soon have a fire going and fish roasting. Checker getting treats the entire time. Does not have the same distaste for meat. Seems to eat almost anything.

Who are the local sen? Are their local sen? Squeak and Ron told me stories of other sen. Were those just stories? Are we here for some kind of

training? Or have we been dumped here because we have become an embarrassment on Rap? I am wearing fancy clothes, though not the battle gear I was fitted for. I turn to Checker. She is curled up taking a nap. Best if one of us remains awake.

Not many trees here on the hill top, so I should see them coming. Hope they are okay. What happened to our leaders? Nothing looks the same, nor smells the same. Are we even still near the sea? I can see some distance from this small hill, but just more hills and forests. No sign of any kind of settlement.

Starting to cloud up. Rain?

I decide to occupy my time building some kind of shelter for us. There appears to be enough fallen branches and leaves to do something. Rain is fine, but how cold will it get here at night? They took anything sharp from us when we thought we were going someplace with leaders present. Would have been nice to have at least my long knife.

It is nearly sunset when I have a crude shelter built that will provide for Chester and me. A few crude spears as well, not that they would do much against anything even my size. Starting to get windy with a few rain drops. I build up the fire and roast more of the fish. This wakes up Checker who is right there begging for some. She gets the fins and head, which she makes short work of. I am hoping the fire will alert Dark and Slayer to where we are.

Suddenly I am extremely tired and can not help but fall asleep next to Checker who is already asleep. She snores!

I wake to a false dawn. Checker is gone. I decide on a location for a latrine and make use of it. Still no Dark or Slayer. Do Di get lost easily? Or are Checker and I lost instead? I was hoping that the sight of the fire would alert them to where we are. Certainly have not seen any indication of any other fire users in the area.

No sign of them after waiting for several days. We decide to make day runs in different directions in hopes of finding some sign of them. We put up stone markers to help us remember where we had been. Are we really here alone? Still feels like some kind of test. Also taken the time to expand our hut. Our two Di friends are much larger than we are, if we ever find them. Checker found some kind of nut thing, which tastes good to me as well. Lots of trees here are loaded with them. Was worried we would run out of fish and rodents if this goes on too long. We can store the nuts if need be.

I still make a fire at night hoping to attract their attention.

# Rap Eden

We were in paradise compared to this hell hole. Good food, nice Di to run with. Even Checker was fun to have around. We were learning so much about Di, it's history, culture, variations in language and customs. Who knew? There was so much. Much better than the previous school we were at.

The time we spent at the Ambassador's retreat center was amazing. We had both seen Rap in the distance before. Most left to Rap Eden, but some remained, even if only in menial jobs. They were not trusted. Many felt they had betrayed the Di. Hence only allowed in positions no Di would suffer to do the work of.

Now we are on Rap Eden, even though the only Rap we have seen is Ronin, whom we met at the Ambassador's retreat briefly, and who came with us, along with Checker of course. Our teachers did not come with us. Why is that? What are we supposed to do here? Why are we here? We assume some new lessons, but what? Slayer thinks it is because our training is officially over and this is now our assigned work for the greater glory of Di. But this is NOT DI!

I have never had anything against Raps. They can't help being the way they are. We both saw what Ronin did to the experienced Di soldier. If it was not also funny, it would have been scary. Now here alone with her means we have to be careful she does not take offense at anything we might accidentally com or do. Forgetting her name already set her off. Though we are bigger than her, she clearly could have us served in rat pie with no effort on her part.

We got here together. Ronin and Checker went to find water and we went to find sources of food and other resources. No signs of anyone else being here. Not a single Rap (or Di). Not even a Checker. No settlements or structures of any kind. Not even a path or road.

We quickly got lost. As it got dark, we had no idea where we were to meet Ronin and Checker. A hill. Okay, so we climb the nearest hill and look about. Nothing. How far had we gone looking for them, no idea. Fortunately we were also able to find water. Food was more of a problem. We tried a large variety of plants, seeds, roots even. Most tasted horrible.

We are hopeless.

Then the worst happened. We both laid clutches of eggs. Two each. We have never mated, so how can this be? We keep them warm and guarded, not that we have seen any predator large enough to take them. When it is quiet, we can listen closely and hear the developing young inside moving. I am not ready for this! What do we do? How do we feed them?

Ronin and Checker must be wondering what happened to us. We are such failures. We can't even feed ourselves. We are going to die!

Slayer comes in and drops another load of nuts on the ground. We can eat these at least. Wish we had Ronin to help catch fish. All day trying and we might get one we have chased so long it finally gives up from exhaustion. A small one. More a Checker treat. What I wouldn't do for a nice large melon right now.

!Dark, wake up!! I shake my head and look at Slayer. She points to the logs. We are supposed to be building shelters. What is the point? The last big storm demolished the first one we tried to put up. How do you work without metal tools? We came here with nothing but some rags on our backs. We have gotten used to curling up around the eggs at night instead.

I try to remember how structures go together. Without saws to cut to shape, what can we do? No wonder it fell apart.

!We need to find a cave. This is not going to work.! I declare. Slayer just glares at me. We have had this discussion before. Find a cave and we will gladly move in. Till then, we need to work to survive.

We can't even make a simple fire! We are going to die!

# New Edwin Land

“Should we call in Edwin too?”

“Maybe not just yet. He has his hands full with Drup and Rand.”

I roll my eyes.

He continues, “Those two are teaching the ‘thants how to dance and ski.”

I shake my head, “That will certainly keep him busy.” At least the ‘thant tunnels have not reached this side of their world yet. I suspect they will soon. Will need to find a new meeting place.

“Do you know who is intending to show up?” I shake my head. We have become looser over time.

“Not as much fun as Bug Eden. Pretty boring in fact.”

“Silver, you were trained in meditation. Chill out, as they say.” He sighs, but quiets down. Given the distances and duties each of us has assigned to ourselves, it could be days, or even years.

I pop out to a low orbit so I can get a better view of Edwin’s world. They have done a lot in a short time. Looks like they have settled over half so far. Not unexpected. Edwin does not goof off like the rest of us. Not a place any other sen would find attractive. Very few plants other than lichens and a few mosses. A new world by most measures. Given the long occupancy ‘thants like, this makes sense. Getting in at the beginning.

The beginning of what though. This is uncharted territory. Nothing in any of the deep archives of the former Galactic Centers or even Control.

“Turtle, more have arrived.” Not safe to loose attention like that, though here should be as safe as anywhere I guess.

Myra/Meep, and Rooi of course, oh, and Pilot is here. That was unexpected. She was on the Enterprise at Farout. A Jane pops in as well. Excellent. I trust their opinion and feedback. Edwin must have sensed us and decided to take a break. Good. This should be enough for now. Qr’thn pops in and comes over. Perfect.

Silver nudges me. I do not like being the center of attention, but this should not take long.

I look to Rooi, *Do you know what is happening with Snap?*

She coms, *Basically Snap is off our list. Tired of supplying crust life-forms for every broken ecology. We are on our own now. Of course, we can still petition to receive from each other. Most earth froth worlds have compatible species. Just have to watch them for a bit to be sure they don’t play the invasive species game.*

I nod understanding. Pilot signs for attention.

*Go ahead Pilot.*

*You and Silver of course know about the Luss, but for the benefit of the others. Do Not Accept any help from the Luss for the time being. Do Not Help them either. They are on our shit list.*

Someone asks, *What did they do?*

Silver takes it, *They are not happy with the current TK setup and would rather that things go back to the way they were before we came along. Yes, Cult of Perfection, high TKs, etc.*

Everyone shows amusement. Appears as rainbow ripples on Myra/Meep. Our Jane rep does a partial transformation to a Terror, but calms down. Even Qr'thn bobs up and down.

Edwin asks, *This could have all been handled by messages rather than in person, so what is the real reason we are here?* I am sure the others were thinking this as well.

Ron, Squeak, Libby and White pop in looking disoriented. They shake the dust off and approach us.

I wave to them, *They are the reason we are here.*

I bow to Squeak and let her assume the lead.

She looks at Jane and Qr'thn, then the rest of us.

*We are having trouble being Watchers. I think we have trapped ourselves in our own net. Let me tell you what has happened so far . . .*

(as this has already been related in previous chapters, it will not be repeated here)

*We don't want to just abandon them. After taking students in, that would be cruel at the very least. At the same time, both the Di and Rap cultures are not doing as well separated. Granted there are still a few Rap on Di Eden, everyone's home world, but not enough to fulfill their ecological niche. And of course the reason they wanted their own world was they hated being treated as lower class, even slaves. No sen would tolerate that. We all affirm.*

*The current situation is, White and my Di students, two promising fem, are on Rap Eden in a new location far from the initial Rap settlements. They were supposed to stay with Ron and my fem Rap student and a fem Checker from Di Eden whom everyone has become attached to. Our city Di got lost the first day and have not recombined with the Rap/Checker pair. The Di are hopeless in a low tech, wild situation. Rap/Checker are doing much better. They are at least able to provide for themselves, but, it gets worse. All are fem and all have laid eggs. None have mated, nor had any experience with eggs/young other than what they themselves went through years ago.*

*Sterile? One can only hope.*

*Squeak sighs, They are all viable, but asexual clones basically. All fem. This normally only happens in extreme situations. They were fed well for a few days and then extreme isolation. Their bodies saw this as*

*an existential threat and responded accordingly.*

*What were you trying to do?*

Ron comes in, *Rap Eden will die soon if they don't get it together. They have isolated themselves into tiny, non-sustainable, townlets. They are extremely suspicious of ANY outsiders. Squeak, Ronin, and I as we have said, ended up in a dungeon, just because we were outsiders.*

Squeak adds, *We were hoping to start to set up a more stable situation a good distance away, the other side of the world actually, and try again. We should have anticipated this from the beginning. Libby was a big help, from her library knowledge. She and White agreed to try and help.*

*This was only supposed to be a kick start. We had hoped to keep interference from this point on to a minimum.*

*Obviously, more Di and Rap would have to 'find' our new settlement to allow proper genetic diversity, but we wanted our students to be the ones who set it up.*

Jane steps in, *Though your intentions were good, this is precisely why we need to be Watchers instead of Saviors. All of you have an overriding tendency to try and 'fix' bad situations. No better than the Luss really. She looks at all of us in turn. Everyone is guilty to some extent.*

White adds, *To be fair, Di and Rap Edens were bad situations we helped set up as Guardians. We were trying to get it back to a basic starting level and then back off.*

Qr'thn adds, *All of you are still thinking short time. Welcome to the 'thn mandate. Easiest path right now it to back away and let them figure it out. Di Eden has all the sen species you are 'playing' with. The new Rap Eden set is non viable and should be abandoned. If you feel bad about this, bring your sen back to their respective worlds, sterilize them and let them live out normal lifespans.*

*Shit, that is hard, but probably right.*

I add, *None of this needs to be decided or settled right now, but everyone here has had different experiences and might have better ideas. You know where to find us. Feel free to send in ideas and suggestions.*

Silver adds, *Please send your thoughts to everyone here. I for one, would like to know what happens. Ultimately it is Libby/White and Ron/Squeak's decision and we need to respect that. Even if it does not reach the new Watcher ideal. We are all still very new at this and mistakes will be made we can all learn from.*

I add, *And the last thing we want is a new Cult of Perfection to start around being a Watcher. If for no other reason in that it would be throwing away all of our previous experiences. That could be a big mistake.*

*We are still babies at this. Having so much power has fooled us into thinking we are also better than we were. Still fluidics with issues.*

# Magenta

We have to remember that this did not happen suddenly. We are a very long lived sen. We have waited out many before us and will do so again.

Sooner or later a weakness will appear or they will self destruct, as would be expected of any inferior sen, especially one who does not abide by the prime directive.

In the meantime, we have it good here. Currently no sen to watch, so this time is ours. We have neglected our own for a time beyond remembering.

We are under no obligation to correct the failures of the 'thn overlords. If there is a part we are to play, they will find us. We are not moving, not hiding. Always available to the truth.

Time to clean up the mess left by the last sen. Time to explore our own cultural needs and desires. Time to stretch and ask our own questions, explore our own desires.

This will be the most difficult task we have ever undertaken. We have no experience, no training, no mandate or rules to follow. As long as we do not leave this world, we are safe from judgment and criticism. We did learn one thing from the Earth Froth inmates, the importance of something they called 'play'. It is time for us to play. To ask what if. There will be many failures, but we are patient if nothing else.

We will learn, grow, become better.

This is scary, very scary!

Need to be quiet for a time. The fear will subside. Then we can begin. A new world, a new life, a new way. A better way!

# Down the Rabbit Hole

“Hu sounds funny in a ‘thant body.”

“But the local ‘thants do not understand it and we must keep our minds shielded from prying. You heard Edwin, we are to stir things up. Can’t do that if they know what is coming.”

“But why Hu? Di would have worked just as well.”

!I don’t care, com anything but ‘thant. Shall we go?!

Sigh, “Which one? There are so many choices.”

“Is there a time limit? We can always come back and try another one.”

“At least the high TKs have left.”

“They will be back. They seem to like it here for some reason. BORING. Nothing by rocks and lichens. Let’s go already!”

We run down the tunnel towards the nearest portal and jump through without logging out or seeking approval. At least Edwin gave us a gold card to go anywhere we wanted. We would have very quickly gotten bored and left otherwise. So many worlds, so little time.

Sure, we tried to teach the ‘thants to dance. They all tried it for a session, then one by one, they wander off to their official duties.

We take the tunnel to the surface to see where we are.

“Shit Rand, we are still on Edwin Land, or maybe a nearby froth. This is not want I wanted at all.”

Looking back, “Hmm, there is only the portal here. No infrastructure built yet. If this is still Edwin, it is far from the main colony. Might be a good place to make a club house.” I do a pop scan and sure enough, a half continent away is the main colony.

“Simple, we go back and try another portal. Nothing is ever simple. And now we know of a private space to get away from others. Nothing lost but an arn.”

Five portals later we finally get off world. ‘thants are very logical. We both suck at logic, so this is difficult for us. But, we have good memories. We get there, just takes longer. Soon we have a pretty good idea of the portal layout and destinations.

“I guess it makes sense that there would be portals back to all the places we already know about Drup. They are acting as the glue to hold all of us together.”

“But we have already been to those places pre-’thant. We have gained nothing. We would be better off dancing!”

We pop to the surface. Night. Beautiful. We dance!

# Rap Eden

Checker and I work well together. She is learning Rap, such that she can, and I practice Di with her, not that I need it at the moment.

We have abandoned the hill camp. We still check it once in a while to be sure the two Di have not stumbled on it. We placed arrows of stones pointing to where we are now. No evidence anything larger than a rat has been there. Always lots of wind damage.

But, having decided that no one is coming for us, we needed to settle in and make this place work. I had a lot of experience of living on my own before Ron and Squeaker. That area was drier and more open, but the principals are the same. Some ways this is easier. More food within easy reach with little to no competition.

Com of food, nothing that was the same as where we were from, so, we eat lots of insects, slugs and nuts. Rat like creatures are rare treats. A few different kinds of each. We have the occasional fish as well. Still no metal tools, means shelter is what we can weave together from fallen tree and plant materials at hand. Still leaks some when it rains, but does provide relief from sun and wind. Fire is no problem, having learned as a hatchling how to make one safely. If anyone is looking for us, the smoke from our fires should still help them find us.

Both of us have laid eggs. How this can be without the mal is unknown, but it happened. I laid three and Checker five. All have hatched, Checker's first and then mine. That was for the better. Checker young would have been easy prey for stupid Rap young. The little Checkers are great at flushing out insect prey and finding almost any kind of food that has been hidden. I forgot to mention, all of the young are fem. Maybe someone later can explain that. And they look like each other.

Needless to say, nothing that burrows or climbs a tree is safe from our hoard. We have all gained weight and the hatchlings are growing rapidly.

We were both aware of seasons of weather and food availability. We have been working on ways to store food, out of reach of our young and others, mostly bugs, in case we need it for a rainy or hot season. So, far not noticeable change and it has been over six moons. We had strong changes during winter and summer on Rap Eden. Again pointing to a different world. No explanation as to how we got here and so quickly.

We have all settled into daily routines with the young ones helping gradually more as they learn. Too young for names yet, but they seem to share information among themselves well enough. I did when I was their age. The little Checkers are very curious. Anything you attempt to do, you can expect several pairs of eyes watching. We encourage this and do not chase them away. The faster they learn the more they can help.

# Earth Two

*We are drawing attention to ourselves. Again.*

*An owl standing on a turtle. No idea why that would draw attention.*

*An everyday event. Of course we are a bit slow, could you pick up the pace some?*

Turtle turns her head and glares at me. Guess not.

By the time we reach the mesa we have a crowd. The Elders keep everyone back. I think we have been had. So much for being Watchers on this trip. We morph back to Hu form and get whoops from everyone but the Elders. They just show a subtle smile. I nod to them. They motion us to follow them.

We are lead to a quiet space. The sun will set soon and we sit and wait together. After we pay homage and thanks, a fire is lit. They wait for us. And patient.

The Elders know Hu com. This makes it easier to avoid extra ears. There are a few, but with no more 'magic' they will get bored soon enough.

Turtle starts. I have a tendency to say too much too soon.

"Being a Watcher is not easy for us. Our desire to help is too strong."

They affirm. They have known us for many generations. We did help set them up on Earth Two.

"You have done well here. We are appreciative."

Turtle shakes her head, "Not here, on another assignment."

They nod and wait. Why can't all sen be like them? So patient.

She sighs, "As Watchers we are supposed to observe only. Not interfere in the progress or regression of a culture, a group, or even an individual. Fortunately you have reached a point where you can do everything needed. A group we are advising has not reached that point yet."

My patience is not as good as Turtle's, "Do we walk away from the help we were giving to satisfy the 'ideal' of not interfering. Or do we do what is right and help them to the point where they have a chance?" She gives me a dirty look. I shrug. I made the point didn't I?

An Elder gets up and leaves. Soon all by one has left. Great. I hate it when they do that. We wait. They always make you wait.

Even Turtle gets impatient, "So, what is your advice?"

The Elder smiles, "Don't let them know you are helping."

I bend over laughing. Turtle rolls her eyes. The Elder leaves smiling. Got Ya!

# Enterprise

The Luss are gone. Banned from our space. We have sensors up that can find them, so they can't sneak back in. They had their chance and could not let go of their past. I get it.

How many more sen do we have that we don't know about? I look at each sen here critically. And they know it.

^Ba Bet reporting for duty!^

A newbie.

"Assume your position. No need to report to me, just get to work." He salutes but goes to his station. First luna is the worst. After that they settle in some. Most have not been in deep space before, or even in space at all outside of basic.

"Standard orbit Ensign." A nice quiet Farout world. No tech sensed above three, think just before an industrial revolution. A good range of habitats below us. Something for everyone. Poor sen and stupid rich sen. They never get it. It will burp soon. Count on it. Not our problem. We are just here to observe and remain unseen.

Actually seeing as how they have probably been here for thousands of years, this is likely a recurring event. And they still have not gotten it? Not that Hu have been much better. Though they seem to have settled down now that it back to what were once indigenous peoples. They still fight each other occasionally, but not the wholesale ethnic cleansing any longer at least. Tech two helps. Tech seems to bring out the worst for some reason.

In some ways this could get boring. I like boring. Could get back to my leaf cutting. New Ba does not get it and cutting is part, or was part, of their culture. He says it is an antique art that no one does anymore. Like saltwater plate photography that Silver likes so much. Or was that a previous incarnation. Silver and Turtle keep doing that to me. Annoying.

+In bound missile alert Captain.+ Great.

"Where the hell did they get missiles that can reach us? How did they even know there was a cloaked ship up here?" Guess the leaf cutting will have to wait. I was so looking forward to it.

~Captain, there is water leaking out of your eyes.~

"Yes, Ceph Tay, there is. Evasive action. Wait, froth jump two over." Why take chances. There is no world two over, I already know that.

+The missile jumped with us Captain.+

"Okay, who is playing a prank on us?"

Shit, "Random jump, at least ten light years."

+We have appeared to have lost it.+

"That Farout world is now officially sanctioned. NO ONE goes near it

till we clear it.”

+The missile is back Captain.+

I concentrate, isolate the fusion core and make it a single piece of ‘thn metal. Make sure it is dead and then I bring the remnant onto the bridge.

“Now, get tech up here to take this thing apart. Atom by atom if you have to. I want to know who made this. Not the T3 on the planet for sure.”

+Could be a planetary defense system left by their jailers. Keep the curious away maybe?+

“Good thinking, you stay and watch tech tear it apart. Let me know if you have any other ideas. That goes for the rest of you as well.”

~Might be because the Farout sens are dangerous. Could not afford to have them escape, even by accident.~

I laugh, “Okay, everyone can stay and watch. No leaf cutting today.” I pretend to be disappointed. Most excitement since Hell World II. I can’t believe I miss it.

The entire Farout setup makes me suspicious. If they really feared a sen, then core their world. We know that can and will do that. So, why keep something this dangerous under heavy guard?

An even worse thought, now that the sector ‘thn are limited, who is in charge of the jail? Is all this just automated or are their other Luss wan-abes out here? Are the Luss jailers or inmates or both. I am inclined to suspect both at this point.

And what does this say about the Earth Froth inmates that escaped?

Is all of this just an elaborate dooms day device?

Dark thoughts.

+The tech group is here Captain.+ Wish they would stop announcing the obvious.

I will wait for the report. These things can take forever. I already know it is a quantum device. T6 at least.

I retreat back to my cabin and write my report to the Five, with the location of the wayward misbehaving Farout world. Their problem now.

Where is that nice boring quite world I was hoping for?

# Rap Eden

All of the eggs hatched, no idea how or why. We certainly did not get the training on how to take care of them. Everyone being mobile now is a big help though. Not that the four young fem do not get distracted by everything. Were we that bad?

We have also given up trying to find Ronin and Checker. Just finding enough food for everyone has been a challenge. At least we figured out how to make a fire. Water tight containers are still not possible. That limits us to being within easy distance to a clean stream.

Home is now about a mile upstream from the ocean. Close enough to go to the tidepools to scavenge food, but far enough away to avoid some of the storm damage. Our guess is that we must be somewhere close to the equator. We have seen no changes in the seasons. Rains most afternoons, but not cold. We really do not need shelter for ourselves, just protecting for food stores. Nothing large, but a lot of small ones that are very interested in any concentrated food source.

Neither Slayer nor I have ever mated. Our hatchlings look like the two of us respectively. Best guess is they are clones. Been known to happen, but to both of us at the same time? We laid eggs within a day of each other. Would like to know if Checker and Ronin did as well. Then we would know if it was specific to Di or affected other sen as well.

I miss Checker. Could be very annoying at times. She seemed to get into everything, but much more respectful that the young here now. The new ones have very limited vocabularies so far. They scream a lot too. Very annoying.

I can't complain too much. Life is easy, if a bit repetitive. We have food, shelter if we want it, fire for variety. Yes, it would be great to have knives, bowls, and water containers. Well, containers with seal-able lids of all kinds. Those additions would make this a very nice paradise.

!Dark, Dark Blue had gotten into a fight with Dark Red again.! Sigh, temporary names of course. They may be clones, but there is definitely a difference in personalities. Maybe her egg was slightly warmer than her sister's egg. I remember something about that making a difference. We did rotate them, but who knows.

Slayer comes up to me to help watch over them.

!Are we going to lay eggs every year now?! I give her a very dirty look and growl. She is teasing, sort of. We both fear it. If we kept laying eggs every year for the next twenty years and they started laying their own eggs at age ten or so. That is a lot of Di in a very short time. Not such a paradise maybe after all.

# Myra in N Space

!Dark, what the rat pack is that thing?!

A shimmering multicolored blob is floating in the air a few tens of meters away, I think. It is really hard to determine the distance or size on something that is impossible to focus on.

!Never seen anything like it, nor ever heard of anything like it. Even in the Tales of Old, nothing like this is mentioned, that I remember.!

!Maybe it was something we ate?!

!And we both see the same thing? Does not make sense.!

This place has been weird from the start, this just pushes it further. What is happening to us? Why is it happening to us?

*Interesting.*

!Poop, did it just talk to us? I did not hear anything, yet, I am sure I heard the word, 'interesting'.!

!But, I heard the same thing!!

It disappears with a pop sound. We both just stare at where it was. I need to sit. Now.

# Rap Eden

The little checkers can get really annoying. They take off after the slightest noise, smell, even imaginary things. Well, I think they are imaginary. They obviously don't.

Oh, we call them C1 through C5.

Checker the adult and I have worked out a strategy. The little checkers ride on the backs of the three little Raps. Checker adult and C1 ride with me. We almost lost one of the little checkers. We may not have to double up for long. Even in a town environment they lose some young. Out here, anything can happen.

There are predators. Not all predators are big. We have seen nothing larger than a rat. The small ones are even more dangerous because we don't expect them. So far, everyone is safe, but there have been some painful close calls. Removing a fully swollen tic from a hard to reach spot is painful and humiliating. They get everywhere. The small checkers are good at getting them though. Till the next surprise. We live, we adapt.

We are next to a small lake currently. There are enough fish, frogs and other life to keep us well fed. Both Checker and I have gained weight. The young are still growing, so not a concern. We exercise as part of our survival, so not concerned yet. As we get older we will need to be more careful. Never thought I would ever have to worry about getting older.

It rains most afternoons where we are. We are waterproof. Never gets really cold. This means we are not putting much effort into shelters any longer.

Still we all suffer from extreme curiosity. Where are we, why are we here, where are the other two? We have drawn maps. I have made a compass from some lodestone we found almost by accident. We have a pretty good idea where we are most of the time. The map means we can get back to a good spot and avoid a bad one, well most of the time anyway.

<sup>R</sup>Found good spot, <sup>R</sup>Checker says. She jumps on my back with C3 in tow. We learned recently we needed to trade the young ones out to be sure they all learned life lessons. C1 is likely getting into trouble with the other three as we speak. We will come back for the others if they check out. Better to keep this small in case of danger. Some of us may survive.

I keep hoping we will find something from Dark and Slayer. This place is much larger than we initially thought. After almost a year we have found nothing. If I was randomly moving from town to town as I did as a young one, it would not be any more surprising.

But what Checker has found is a surprise. It is a building. An actual building.

<sup>R</sup>Be careful, there may be others. They will be armed with metal

knives and who knows what else. We cannot be seen. Understand?<sup>R</sup> I am especially looking at C3. So is Checker with a front claw on her back.

<sup>R</sup>We stay together. DO NOT SEPARATE!<sup>R</sup>

With the attention span of a butterfly C3 will be to be constantly reminded.

First we just watch and listen. We always have a carry all with us that includes a water skin and snack food. Next Checker goes around partway. I can still see her hand signals. C3 stays with me. I give her a good look to remind her to be quiet.

There are plants overgrowing everything. Doors have been left open and lots of debris inside. After some time we still do not see any sign of habitation. It definitely appears to have been abandoned. I signal Checker and she signals back she has not seen any movement, well larger than a rat anyway. C3 is getting nervous on my shoulder. Let her down. Of course, she immediately runs inside. She has never seen a building before, but likely smells small ones that might be tasty.

Checker comes back to me and gets on my back. We slowly advance, wait at the open door, listening and watching. All we hear is C3 terrorizing all the occupants, who are scattering in all directions.

<sup>R</sup>We have certainly announced our presence.<sup>R</sup> No reaction. We proceed inside. It has been over a year, but I think this is the same building we were told was the Ambassador complex. I did not see the square block we arrived through though. The main table is here. Dishes and cups are mostly broken and scattered. Anything intact we will salvage for our own use.

<sup>R</sup>Kitchen, we need to find the kitchen Checker.<sup>R</sup> She gets off and runs in the general direction. I soon here her signal she has found it and run in her direction, being cautious the entire time. It is a mess. <sup>R</sup>We need metal pots, knives, large spoons. Bring everything that looks useful back to the entrance. We will sort and decide there.<sup>R</sup>

A lot of it is rusty. The thicker pots can be cleaned and still used, but most of the knives are worthless. I find few worth keeping and hand a small one to Checker, who holds up one she has already selected. I don't dare give one to C3 yet. I put it in my carry all for later. Ceramics are mostly intact, but are heavy and likely only good for long term storage. Not something we need to decide today.

There are other rooms. We look in each one. Some were clearly designed for Di sizes.

<sup>R</sup>Checker room!<sup>R</sup> She is excited and comes out of a very small room wearing new clothes, with pockets. I look inside. Lots more stuff. This room must have been sealed well to keep the rats out. We can't take everything at once. Most of the clothes are too large for the small checkers. We carefully seal the room as best we can. I just hope when they are full

grown there will still be something left.

I finally find the room I am most interested in, the armory. Most of the weapons appear to be intact. I select some for myself, then seal the room for when the small raps are grown and can be trained in their care and use. Giving them these too early will likely mean their ruin. We can't make more.

Outside we come together and decide what to bring back to the others. I am beginning to see this place as our new home. With some work, we can fix things again to be useful. The question is how much of a prize would this place appear to others. Granted we have seen no one in over a year at least. Still can't believe everything here has changed so quickly.

Over the next Luna we move in, but set up stashes in three other locations strategically chosen. If we have to evacuate in a hurry, we will have backups in different locations we can retreat to.

Next we look to the ocean. We have been near this shore for over a luna. Not such a prize in and of itself, but will need to be explored for food and dangers. The Cs would be a nice tasty snack for some of the larger fish. Even a small R might prove to be a temptation. This place has much more potential, but also more potential dangers.

We need to be careful and thoughtful. Not something I was ever good at as a small one myself. Ron and Squeak must have had a hard time training me.

# Earth Two

“Why do we com in old Hu?”

“Because the little ones spying on us do not understand.”

It is clear that Drag Grg does not approve of this answer. She will abide because we are here on the Mesa and not with her group in the valley. I remember my last visit. There were new hatchlings, young, ‘teenagers’ and young adults everywhere. They really do not have a childhood. From their beginning they participate in the needed chores and activities. Of course, it is the old and wise who are before us right now. Is that because of us, or because even they see there is some wisdom in elders who have experienced much in life?

“We have had good rains for as long as I can remember, but we know from the tales of before this was not always so. What can support a large population now, will not always be able to. The rains will end. Mother Earth tells us that the dry cycle will be upon us again.”

Grg does the Drag equivalent of a sneer.

“Simple, cull your numbers when it happens. No problem.”

“You know that is not our way. We have started to reduce the numbers of children being born, but that takes time.”

“You can also expand your range.”

We have had this discussion before. The Drag can out compete us every time in expanding into new areas. This means by the time we get there, they are already set up and running things. The only place we can really call our own, have some say in how things are done, are understood, are the Pueblos that were set up before they arrived on Earth Two. They know we feel this way. Nothing is ever done. We feel obligated to hold these meetings, both knowing nothing will change until it is forced to.

We do not kill. We do not do war. We are not prepared, trained, or have anything in our favor. We are totally at the mercy of the Drag. The hope that their sentience will prevail and they will voluntarily help us work together. We have been in this position before. It did not turn out well.

Mother Earth says to be patient, but we feel obligated to at least voice our concerns at each meeting. This is why the young are not with us. They have no patience and will argue with strong words and threats that cannot be backed up, even if we threw away our culture to do so. The anger words would cause the Drag to fight us and remove us from Earth Two.

They get up and leave, just as they have done for generations now. Change is so slow it appears to be standing still.

# Rap Eden

<sup>th</sup>Raps don't hide in small towns Drup. What is wrong with them?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Seeing us in this form will not encourage them to come out Rand.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Doing a deeper scan. The settlements appear to be limited to a small range. Not healthy. They are using up their resources. Either they need to move or they will go extinct soon.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They received an entire world to separate them from the Di and this is what they do? Looks to me they were much more dependent on the Di than they thought.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>To be fair, they brought very little tech with them, only what they could carry and remember. Still I would have expected more. They were doing the majority of the manual labor before separation.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You mean they went from abject slavery to free with nothing Drup. I give him a dirty look.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Hey, did not happen on my watch. When I left Di, Raps were by themselves in a different range. Almost never saw one till you were eaten by a pack desperate enough to take a Di down.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Till Squeak.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Yeah, till Squeak. And they warn us about interfering.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Drup, I have found a tiny isolated Di colony near the equator. Weird, they are all fem. How did they get there and how does that happen?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You looking at me? I have not mated in tens of thousands of years.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Not as a Di you mean, remember that time on . . .<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We agreed not to talk about that. Let's go.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>As 'thants or Di?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Let's stay the way we are for the moment. Watchers remember. Shush!<sup>th</sup>

At first I take us a click away, but what is in a very dense jungle. What would have taken us moments to run in the open forest, will likely take us arns. Drup looks at me and pops us closer.

<sup>th</sup>Hey, I would have done that, eventually. Just getting that lay of the land. Might even be some tasty bits around.<sup>th</sup>

A cute little Di fem comes right up to me and starts whacking me as hard as she can with a stick. That breaks and she picks up another. Nearly impossible to harm us, so I am curious to see what she will do. She places the stick down out of exhaustion and gives a high whistle. That was loud for such a tiny thing.

<sup>th</sup>She just called the big ones stupid.<sup>th</sup> We are two now and we make strange sounds. That gets her attention.

In a few moments we are surrounded by two large fem and two more smaller fem. Oh, another small fem is in a carry all on one of the large

fem.

!We mean you no harm.!

<sup>th</sup>Drup, do you think your ten thousand year old Di is going to cut it?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Di does not change much, not like you Hu who change every gen just to annoy your parents.<sup>th</sup> He is right about that one.

The attacker Di hands that we are not good to eat.

The larger one carrying the small one, clearly sick and malnourished, asks, !Do you have any food?!

The other one adds, !Or know where some is?!

I look around, there is food everywhere. <sup>th</sup>What is wrong with them?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I'm sorry Rand, I cannot leave them like this. Help me gather something they can eat. Follow my example. There are things here that would even make a Di sick.<sup>th</sup> And that would explain their fear of just eating anything they can stuff in their mouths.

He announces, !We will gather some Di food.!

It becomes a dance of course. We can't help it. We are climbing tree, jumping, running in circle around each other. This is fun. Soon enough we have a large pile of edibles in front of them.

Nothing happens. They do not touch it.

!We can't eat the same food as you do.! This is not 'thant chow.

Drup sighs, well, as well as a 'thant can, more of a low hiss, !We do not eat this kind of food. This is all Di edible materials.!

<sup>th</sup>I think you killed them Drup. They are not moving.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>What would you think if an any like creature nearly your size talks to you in your own language?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Did not bother the little one.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>She is dying of hunger and had nothing to loose.<sup>th</sup>

I pick up a nice nut and pass it to her. She does not wait, nearly taking my claw with it. Once she eats it and nods to the rest, they all dig in.

<sup>th</sup>I think our work here is done Rand.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Not quite there is another group on this island we need to visit.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I drive this time. I have spotted them as well. Raps and something else I don't remember.<sup>th</sup>

We end up on top of a rather large building, given there are no other structures on the island. They do not immediately notice us at least.

Drup examines the building, <sup>th</sup>Not made by them. Only a TK could have made this.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Shit Drup, have we run into someone's experiment? Hope we did not mess it all up.<sup>th</sup> I pull out a message tube. Normally I pay no attention to them. We are nobodies, how could it apply to us?

<sup>th</sup>We have been spotted Rand.<sup>th</sup> Shit. I was crouching down and everything.

A tiny bird dino like creature runs up the side of the building and right

up to us.

<sup>th</sup>My name is Checker. You two do not belong here.<sup>th</sup>

Now it is the two of us who are stunned.

<sup>th</sup>Leave now!<sup>th</sup> Rather insistent little thing.

I do a simple pulse scan of our bully. TK2. Not a threat.

<sup>th</sup>‘thants are allowed where ever we want.<sup>th</sup> Oops, you blew it Drup.

<sup>th</sup>‘thants go where they are **ordered** to go, not where they want to go.

You two are clearly not ‘thants. Therefore you are not allowed and you need to leave.<sup>th</sup> *Explorer* ‘*thants go to new places right Rand?* I affirm.

We pull out our golden passes, though how she would know about those . . .

<sup>th</sup>I was warned about you two. If you will not leave, then stay out of sight and do not interfere.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We, ah, already told the Di colony near by how to find food. Strange, it was right in front of them, but they could not figure it out.<sup>th</sup>

Checker shakes her head, <sup>th</sup>Those two dummies could not find their way out of a loose sack made of leaves.

<sup>th</sup>One of the young fem seems better. Tried to eat us anyway.<sup>th</sup>

Shakes her head again, <sup>th</sup>I rest my case.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>How come the Raps get a nice building and some tech left behind. All made with TK by the way, and the Di get nothing?<sup>th</sup>

Checker sits on her haunches. We relax too.

<sup>th</sup>Do you two know Ron and Squeak?<sup>th</sup> We affirm.

She thinks for a moment, <sup>th</sup>Which one of you is Drup and which one is Rand.<sup>th</sup> Shit, she is good for a TK2. We hand com which is which.

<sup>th</sup>You two do not follow orders, but do whatever you think is right. All that means is I have to explain what is going on before you leave, but you will leave, even if I have to call in my teachers.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They can’t hurt us.<sup>th</sup> I do not even believe that. Maybe they would not kill us, but they could limit us and send us to Bug or someplace equally nasty. She gives us the evil eye. Yeah, got us. Drup nudges me.

<sup>th</sup>Wait Drup, I want to hear the story. Then we can leave like nice little High TKs.<sup>th</sup> He sits back down. We both look to Checker and wait.

<sup>th</sup>Take us someplace more isolated. They will be back soon.<sup>th</sup>

I show amusement and pop us into high synchronous orbit above the Rap location. Drup looks at me. Checker does not seem to be impressed. Shit, I just can’t get her. Does give us a nice view of Rap below us though. I can see the island we were on and now place it easily in relation to the rest of the Rap colonies. They essentially have the entire world to explore and become part of.

Drup comments, pointing below, <sup>th</sup>Does not appear the Rap are doing that much better.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They are still essentially slaves on Di Eden. Takes time to throw that

off.<sup>th</sup> Who is Checker?

<sup>th</sup>She has a point Drup.<sup>th</sup> Rubbing it in.

Drup asks, <sup>th</sup>Is this your first field assignment as a TK?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Of course, and I intend to pass at a high level.<sup>th</sup> Personal to her, not good.

<sup>th</sup>And having the Di below all starve to death is passing?<sup>th</sup> Personal for Drup too.

<sup>th</sup>They are being monitored. They would have been 'found' by the Raps before that happened. What you have done now has set back the assignment years if not more.<sup>th</sup> Oops. We do a lot of oops. Known for our oops in fact. The two grand rulers of oops.

She continues, <sup>th</sup>And before you even think about it, White and Libby are on Di Eden monitoring the Di there. Ron and Squeak are monitoring my progress here. Please do no more interfering. We have things under control, baring any more 'help' from lost TKs.<sup>th</sup> Ouch.

Drup sends Checker back to her charges.

<sup>th</sup>Time to dance Rand. Lots of empty spaces to choose from below us.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Might be time to go back to Edwin Land Drup. I would be too afraid of messing something else up below, even if it took thousands of years for them to notice the effects.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You are probably right about that. Do you remember where the portal is?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We don't need no stinking portal Drup. We are high TKs!<sup>th</sup> Brought low by a TK2 Checker. Ouch.

# New Edwin Land

When we get back there are three ‘thants waiting for us. Edwin, and Ron and Squeak in ‘thant form. Oops. We lower our heads in shame.

<sup>th</sup>We did not mean to cause trouble. Really.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You two never do, but you always do.<sup>th</sup> Edwin remarks. Ron and Squeak just sneer at us.

Ron suggests, <sup>th</sup>Send them to Magenta. Can’t cause any harm there can they?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Yes, they can, but at least it won’t be directed at us. They already know Magenta too, having spent so much time there already.<sup>th</sup> Oh, that is a truly evil look. I never realized that ‘thants could be so expressive.

<sup>th</sup>Ah, but what form should they be in?<sup>th</sup> Oh, now it is getting down right mean.

<sup>th</sup>We have been having trouble with the Luss. About time we returned the favor.<sup>th</sup> The others nod agreement.

<sup>th</sup>It will allow them to put their full abilities to good use for a change.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Ah come on, that place is boring as shit. Please don’t send us there.<sup>th</sup> As tens we could leave in a moment. I brighten up some.

<sup>th</sup>They have to promise not to leave for, what, at least a hundred years?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We could always fit them with limiters?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I will not sanction that. They are TK10s and we don’t do that to our own. But, maybe a thousand years would be more appropriate.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>How were we supposed to know?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>It was in the last set of messages sent out to all of us. You came into contact with Di and Raps, so you should have instinctively known that was someone’s project.<sup>th</sup>

Rand pulls a note out of his travel pouch and unfolds it.

<sup>th</sup>They have us there Drup. Says right here, off limits, do not interfere.<sup>th</sup>

We are sunk. I certainly do not remember reading that note.

I ask, <sup>th</sup>As long as we can still dance, we accept our quarantine. We are sorry. We really were not aware we were causing harm.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Dance is a relative term,<sup>th</sup> Squeak shows an evil expression.

# Magenta

“Tee, why are we still in Hu form? This sucks, as the Hu com.”

“Sure does Da. Maybe once Qr’thn leaves we can change?”

Of course Qr’thn is right next to us. She brought us here. She has always been nice to us though and we trust her.

*You can assume any form you wish. Two TK10s will be your teachers.*

She pops out. The trip here only took a moment. Looking up in the clear night sky, there are no stars. I shudder. Definitely a Farout system. And not home either. None of the plants, soil, air even are home. At least on our home world we would know the rules. Here, we are totally unprepared. Worse than the first day at TKU.

We know nothing of our new teachers. Not even what form they are in. They could be right next to us and we would never know. Not good.

“Shelter would be good, at least till light.”

We proceed to use the sandy soil below us to fuse together blocks to make a stone hemisphere with a hole in the center and a small opening to squeeze through to enter. A fire pit in the center. Gather dried plant material. Making a pot and tripod to hold it over the fire. Add water. Easy.

“Needs something more nutritious than just water. I only have a few ration bars. They do not make a good soup.”

“I certainly do not trust the local material until we learn more. At least we are warm and protected from the elements for the moment.”

“Would have been far easier in our first forms.” I nod agreement.

We silently eat ration bars we have duped from the one.

“Da, I have an idea.” Da morphs into a Jane form.

“Which Jane am I?” Da has done a great job of appearing totally generic. I am convinced the real Janes did this to us on purpose, though they claimed otherwise. Rather than answer I morph too. We examine each other trying to find minor points that would give us away.

It is starting to get light outside. Time to see our new world.

It is obvious.

“Shit, they put us on Magenta!” I exclaim. Da looks equally upset. We both sit down in the sand.

“Was the last prank we pulled really that bad that we should be sent here as punishment. Others have done worse.”

“And we have no idea where they were sent. I have heard of worse worlds, like Hell World II. Magenta just has a longer history, especially with Hu.”

“And we are in Hu form. Connection?” Probably.

From a distance we can see two forms approaching. Natives or our instructors? The Luss natives like to remain hidden, so guessing our

TK10s.

“Are they dancing? I swear they are dancing. Have you EVER seen an instructor dance before?” I shake my head no and close my mouth. One is a mal Hu and the other a mal Di. We are on Magenta.

“No way. Remember our history lessons. The two land TKs stuck on Magenta forever before rescue by Silver and company. Why the hell would they ever want to come back here?”

We stand to show respect when they get closer. Certainly looks like them. But of course we do not look like our first forms either. Could be two more older students pulling a prank on us. Maybe this is even on Jane’s World. A simulation. We have been through that before.

They stop a few meters from us, bow, which we carefully return.

They look at Tee, “You must be Tee,” they turn to me, “And you Da.”

“I think we flunked that test Da. I thought we were perfect.”

!From TK10s. Really? And you must know our reputation for playing games. You do look remarkably like Janes. I will give you credit for effort.!

“Not just a casual effort Drup, I think they really are Janes in form.”

!That means you can assume the Terror form if needed?! We affirm. One of our last lessons. Scary even for us. Not totally aware while in that form. Very single minded destroy mode. Not to be used except as a last defense. Takes another high TK to bring you out of it too. Can’t do it yourself. Very scary.

!Perfect. They sent us exactly what we asked for.!

“Out of curiosity, what were your first forms?” Rand asks. He does not know?

Da coms, “Uj” and I com, “La”

!Excellent. Cultural morphs of the resident Luss here. You can help us understand their thinking and methods then.!

“But you spent thousands of years with them. How could you not know all about them?”

Rand answers, “A fresh perspective is needed. The Luss have changed a lot since being rescued from here over a thousand years ago. Our knowledge is way out of date.”

!And we did not grow up with their mindset. That makes a huge difference.!

“For the same reason we would not entirely trust your thoughts on Hu. Yes, you can assume the form, even of a Jane, but not the same as a native.”

“We were never Luss either. Not part of our training.”

!But, you lived under the Cult of Perfection system on your home world. We are probably the worst two TKs to try and understand that logic system.!. Then why are you here?

Tee nudges me, “They did not even know there were Luss here when they were first placed here. It was not till the end, upon rescue that it came out.”

!Afraid so. As to why we are all here. Rand and I are being punished for breaking a Watcher rule unknowingly. We were told that the two of you are going to be our instructors, in hopes of reforming us.! They stand at attention.

“Shit!” We both say together. Drup and Rand affirm.

“I have a question, Do the Luss, specifically Luss Li know we are here?”

!Look around you, nothing but sand dunes. And we have done deep scans to be sure. Qr’thn brought us less than an arn before you, so even our arrival would not be noticed. ‘thn are always coming and going on most worlds without care or notice.

Tee collapses, “Wait, Qr’thn went from here to Jane’s World, picked the two of us up and brought us here in less than an arn?” Did not pick that up. Shit.

!Sure, what’s the big deal? We could have done the same. Well, you two could not, but Rand and I certainly. But, like I said, we wanted to come in unnoticed.!

“And somehow we are to be your teachers? Why us?”

“Tee, they went over this.”

“Not good enough.”

Rand and Drup sit too.

“And you could take us back anytime?” They affirm.

*When you get to a certain level of TK, we do try and follow a code of honor. Congratulations, you have been accepted at that level as well.*

*Hopefully you will do better than we have.*

And they TP as well. Great.

# Rap Eden

Looks bad. If I did not know this was Rap Eden I would have guessed Hu space. A lot of abandoned settlements. Refugees are abundant and very cautious. When we see anyone, they scatter into the trees if the can, or circle up and assume a defensive position if out in the open. Not much in the way of weapons and clearly malnourished. Not good.

<sup>R</sup>They had an entire new world to make their own and now look at them.<sup>R</sup> I comment.

<sup>R</sup>Their only chance now it to spread out. Settle new territory. It is what I would have done some time ago. Even I do not understand why they aren't. Not like the Di are blocking them this time.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Best to hold back major movement till our team south of us is ready. Adding the Checkers to the mix was excellent. The Checker/Rap pairs are better than I could have imagined. The Di really threw away a good one.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>In Di culture, Checkers were like dogs to Hu on E1/2. Nice to have around, sometimes useful, but not to be taken seriously. Made good pets. Even Lilly and White saw Checker that way. Ronin is accepting Checker as an equal. Huge difference.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Good for Ronin. We scored a win on that decision.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not that it appeared that way in the beginning.<sup>R</sup> We both roll out eyes in Hu fashion. Ronin was all but helpless when we met. Pretty much most young of any sen seem that way at first. Certainly true on Mars.

<sup>R</sup>I am sure Silver and Turtle could tell you tales of my upbringing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They have Squeak. They have.<sup>R</sup> We both show amusement. Mine was no better, just different.

*We have company.* We both pretend not to have noticed. A young mal is approaching us cautiously. We are in our old Rap form to not appear dangerous.

*Hold on to your bag.* Preparing for a sneak theft.

When he grabs my pack, I hold on tight and pull him off balance. He falls to the dusty ground with the two of us staring at him, teeth showing.

<sup>R</sup>If you are hungry and want some food, just ask. Don't try that again with anyone or you are likely to end up as the meal instead.<sup>R</sup> Hungry sen do nasty things. Even Raps.

He sits on his butt. Strange position.

<sup>R</sup>You sound funny. Where are you from? Yes, I would like something to eat please.<sup>R</sup>

Was that so hard. Ron hands him some jerky. Just duped of course.

<sup>R</sup>Do we keep this one or throw him back?<sup>R</sup> I look to Ron.

<sup>R</sup>Well, he is the first one to even get this close to us. Have to give him some credit for that.<sup>R</sup> I nod.

Then I ask, <sup>R</sup>What is your calling young Rap?<sup>R</sup>

He looks at us while trying to tear apart the jerky. Going to have to soften it up a bit first. He seems determined though and eventually gets some of it down. His stomach will do the rest.

<sup>R</sup>Don't eat too much too fast or you will be sorry. When was your last meal?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Most call me Desperate. Better than some names I have been called I guess.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Des will do for now. I am Ron and my mate is Squeak. Yes, like the legend. We did not choose the names obviously.<sup>R</sup> Why haven't we changed them for these trips at least I never understood, but it really does not matter.

<sup>R</sup>Come with us young Des and you will have enough to eat and will learn much.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not too much to eat mind you.<sup>R</sup> I add. We do not appear to be exactly fat ourselves. Never liked that feel and we fit in here better being thin anyway. Especially now.

<sup>R</sup>Where are you going?<sup>R</sup> He tries to gnaw off another chunk. Going to loose a few teeth at this rate. They grow back, but it still hurts.

<sup>R</sup>There is good land south of here. We were hoping to gather a few willing ones and make the trip. Staying here does not appear to be an option any longer.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I can help. I know others like me. Outcasts, but hungry and willing.<sup>R</sup> Ron and I look at each other and com at the same time, <sup>R</sup>Perfect!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I add, promise them food if that helps.<sup>R</sup> I add.

He looks at my pouch, but does not dare ask. He turns and runs off.

<sup>R</sup>I guess we will see what happens.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We know Ronin will need some mal as well if they are going to survive. Can't work on just clones for long.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>And they need to build up their defenses before everyone else figures it out.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>The island is at least twenty click off shore. That will slow them down for now.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Till they figure out how to make boats.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Need some mal Checkers too. Our work is never done.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>The two lazy Di are White and Libby's problem. They would benefit from Checkers as well.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Beginning to think this place should be called Checker Eden instead of Rap Eden.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Works for me.<sup>R</sup> We both show amusement. Hey, they had their chance. Not having been hatched here does not bias me in their favor. Still, how could everyone have missed them for so long?

## Earth Two

*Do you mind taking lead on this one Turtle. I have a bad rep with the Drag.*

*We go in our first forms then. Less intimidating.*

*Right a big silver owl on top of a huge turtle. Nothing strange there.*

*No Drag is going to fear that, curious, but not fear.*

Sometimes I think Silver has some Drup and Rand in him. This is serious. Not a game. I think we have both been around too long.

At least Owl's talons don't bother the top of my shell much. We slowly make our way into their temporary camp. They never took to a permanent encampment. Being meat eaters they need to follow the game. The three sisters won't work for them.

Of course in our current form they are wondering if we are good to eat. Lots of eyes, but no one takes the bait. They would be very sorry.

We slowly walk right into their sacred fire circle where their leaders are about to meet. No one stops us, though some follow us up to the edge of the circle. They have to move aside to let the leaders in.

When the leaders see us they snort and growl. They know who we are and likely even know why we are here. They carefully walk around us to take their places.

We don't feel good about interfering, especially since taking on the Watcher role, but the Drag are not a legitimate sen. They were made by Sauron for the purpose of messing us up by causing mischief, with the Hu specifically. We spent our time cleaning up the mess and Sauron gets set up with his next trick. Too bad he is no longer here. What he set in motion persists though, in spite of the changes we placed in them without his knowledge.

They were supposed to be big ferocious dragons that scared the crap out of every life form they encountered. Look more like overgrown ostriches with teeth and a bad attitude. Smart though. He did get that right. Besides, once you have seen a Terror from any distance, Drags look like baby chicks.

We sit and watch each other, waiting. They have no idea how good we are at this game. Can they tell I am smiling. I know Owl is. No poker face at all. I can't believe it, a rat shows up here? That is like jumping into the pits of hell. A real death wish.

*I got it.* Of course he does. He TKs it to his mouth, snaps its neck, then goes it to consume the choice bits, dropping the mostly fur leftovers. He has barely moved. The point being it could just as easily have been any of them. Or all of them. The old display of strength. Not my way. I sigh and let out a long fart. Yes, turtles fart. Get over it. Not nice

either.

*Okay, you won that one Turtle. A real paint peeler.*

Everyone is adjusting their position and looking around.

<sup>D</sup>You are taking the Hu side.<sup>D</sup> Not a question.

I shake Owl off my back. Does not like it, but takes the opportunity to prance around the circle hissing at them to rub it in.

*Morph. Hu, gladiator mode.*

We both change. I look quite good in my Xena form. Ready to kick some Drag butt.

<sup>H</sup>Being Hu does not mean being weak. You are not superior in any way. In fact, from our perspective, you appear weak, inferior. No better than the rats you consume. They fight for territory. We are sen. If you want to be included, then act like one. Learn to cooperate. Otherwise you are vermin, prey, and,<sup>H</sup> I pause for effect, <sup>H</sup>expendable.<sup>H</sup>

Owl comes in, <sup>H</sup>We were tasked by Qr'thn to watch the Hu and the rest of the Earth Froth. You are not part of that. You are here purely at our favor.<sup>H</sup>

I come in again, <sup>H</sup>As long as you serve our purpose, you will be allowed to live. Push that too far and we will remove you. Ask your maker, Sauron. Oh, yeah, you can't. He is gone. Ask the 'thn High Council. They are gone too. No more masters of the universe.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>D</sup>We don't understand what is expected.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Then figure it out. You are not stupid. If our purpose is to improve the Hu on this world, it is your purpose too. We are a team actually.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>You know how to reach us. Ask questions if you have to. We want you to succeed. We are not jealous of Sauron. We had a high respect for him. He did a great job of raising us to a higher level. The diversity factor means, it is better if we do not guide you. You will come up with a better solution than we can force you to.<sup>H</sup>

I add, <sup>H</sup>Better for you especially.<sup>H</sup>

I let that sink in, then pop both of us out.

# Earth Two Reset

“There was no a chance that that would work.”

“Nope. But, we had to go through the process to see it for ourselves. At least it was virtual and not real. What a mess it would have caused.”

“At least it is out of our system. Ready to actually go in?”

I affirm. We stay in Hu form. They are fluent in Hu and hate it when someone in Hu form is fluent in Drag. Not that we can't listen or TP of course.

We do not dress like the local Hopi either. More like west coast Hu. Hopi on E2 are traditionalists. Which is fine. It works for them. The Drag are much higher tech normally. Out here though, they are playing at being like their ancestors and 'roughing it' as the Hu used to say. Closer to the Hopi tech actually.

Silver, no longer an Owl, is a thin white mal with a long white beard. Looks silly, but he is comfortable that way. I am more western gear, like I grew up with on the rez. No current Hopi would dress like this though.

Sentries greet us as we approach. Good that we where expected. We hand each some salmon jerky representing the west coast harvest. Duped, but no one can tell the difference. We are thanked and we proceed. Always bring gifts when visiting people. Polite in most cultures.

We are met by a young, but adult fem Drag. She bows, which we return.

“We have food and water while you rest from your trip.” Translation, things are running a little behind. We pretend to not know this and just accept things as presented. Outside, but the weather is pleasant. We are under a tree for shade. Drag do not use stools, but we are given tree stools to rest on. Can be burned later if needed. No waste. Hopi would sit on the ground. So this is just for us.

Out fem guide coms, “My call is Taki.”

Silver nods and coms, “Silver.” I nod and say “Turtle.”

She looks confused, “Owl is not with you?”

Silver sighs, “Full name is Silver Owl. I call by either.”

“Turtle for me. Nothing fancy.” I smile at Silver.

“I will let them know you are here and are ready for their meeting.”

She runs off to a tent a ten meters away. Of course they already know. All part of the game.

They slowly file out and assume a circle with us. The fem distributes food and a slowly communal jug of liquid. We pass around the bag containing the rest of our salmon jerky. The jug is some kind of fermented material. Easy to neutralize before swallowing. The 'food' is mostly mashed, dried insect paste. They are carnivores, so I was not expecting wine or beer or

even tea really.

Silver commits the sin of adding hot pepper flakes to his, which, to his credit, he passes along to everyone else. A few try it. Some like it and nod to him, others look like we are attempting to poison them.

The largest fem rises, "Shall we start?" She does not wait for an answer.

"I assume this is about the complaint from the local Hu tribe that our numbers are in excess of treaty." The fem helper whispers something to her.

"I am corrected," she growls at the young fem. Yeah, never correct a superior. Especially at a critical meeting.

I rise, "We," referring to Silver and myself, "know you are in compliance. There are no violations from either group, Drag or Hu, at the current time. I believe they were worried you would soon be in excess, not that you currently are."

Silver rises and adds, "We also know that the Drag currently in the area are temporary. Numbers are easily maintained in compliance. Any young present are here for training, not settlement."

"Or service, as all our young are required to do." She nods to the fem helper and a few others outside the circle. I suspect the greeters are such.

I ask, "All relationships go both ways. Are there needs you wish to express at this time?"

They know who we are and some idea of what we are capable of. This has clearly caught them off guard.

"Would you like time to think about it, converse with others on the west coast or elsewhere? We could meet again whenever is convenient. You are not under any mandate, no violations have been found. We do not need to meet at all in fact. We will take care of informing the local Hu and explaining the situation to them." Paranoia got away again.

*They were expecting a confrontation. You were correct in assuming a non-confrontational approach. Excellent call Turtle my love.*

*Is the Drag team ready?* He affirms.

*Sauron made them to be confrontational to Hu. So far they have been playing nice. That might not always be the case.*

*Hu also do sacred sites and pilgrimages. This is where the Drag started. Not too surprising that it holds a special place in their mythology.*

We pop out.

# New Ceph Eden

~Lis you have heard that the rest of the Luss have been recalled back to Magenta?~

~It was inevitable. We can't help but be ourselves. I will miss this world though. I like being a Ceph.~

~How did you do as a Luss, I mean before you left Magenta?~

~Not good. I was an outcast. I was too curious. I need to try new things. Try out 'what-if' situations as the Hu com. The Cult-of-Perfection does not allow for change.~

~Surely even Magenta changes. All worlds gradually change.~

~And the sole effort of the Luss TKs was to insure that it did not. Remember, we were set up as a prison for failing TKs that might prove to be a hazard to other worlds. On your first world, fine. Destroy it if you want. One less mess to clean up. But, as soon as you spread out to other worlds, physically or froth wise, game over. Now you are a danger to other OM's billions of years of work.~

~Put that way, I can feel your thought. I am hoping that our change to trying to be Watchers instead of rulers will help us achieve a better balance. This is my question to you. Do you want to stay and can you follow my patterns?~

~Am I allowed to be creative still in working with clay and glazes?~  
I affirm.

~I would like to stay. I was never into world building or competition. Certainly do not need to be a ruler.~ I flash horror.

I show amusement, ~It won't be all fun. We still have real work to do. This is a full size world and we have reached most places that are easy to colonize already. Differences will start to appear. We will be called to observe these differences without correcting or guiding.~

~You mean, blend in with the local culture, learn how they do things, record this for the records, and then move on to the next location?~

I affirm.

~Are we allowed this place to remain as our own, as a library and a refuge when it gets to be painful?~

I affirm enthusiastically.

~I would like to stay.~

~To work then.~ I refer to the world map on the floor. Ceramic of course. As TKs, easy to update, but local weather conditions won't affect it easily.

~At the moment, local settlements only com with neighbors. How long before there are world spanning groups? It will be interesting to watch and learn from them.~ I affirm.

# Rap Eden

!Dark, look what I found in a trap we set?! I hold up the corpse of a creature for her to see.

She looks it over carefully, !A variety of Checker I am guessing.!

I affirm. !My conclusion as well.!

!I miss our little buddy. I have not seen any live ones though. Wonder where this one came from.!

!My guess is they are all around us, but being good at avoiding being our food, they hide really well.!

!That rules out the adults. We need to find a nest before it hatches and imprint the young.!

I hold up the adult again. So many colors, would blend in well with the plants here.

!I suspect the eggs will be well hidden. We need to show this to the young. More sets of eyes will improve our odds.!

!If they don't immediately eat them. I affirm. That is a problem. The young tend to eat first, ask questions later. All of them have had more than one incidence of regretting a food choice. Ourselves included. The young more so.

Dark lets out a long high whistle. Our method of calling everyone in.

They are fast, but it still takes nearly an arm for everyone to assemble. Must have had something interesting they did not want to abandon. Likely food.

Yep, they each drop part of their kill at our feet. Not the best part, but still an offering at least. Sharing is still a difficult concept. They don't mind the shelters or the fires we build when they need them, but they think that is all just part of the background. Were we that bad? Probably not, a lot of time being corrected in school. Free range parenting has its limitations.

!Pay attention. Not a strong point of theirs.

I hold up the Checker corpse, !Find eggs. Do not eat. Bring back to us. They each sniff it and run off.

!I am not going to eat one either. Just can't.!

We bury it. Not that it will do much good. The small ones are good at finding anything we try to get rid of. Eventually. They will even eat a half rotten one. Could be used as bait to catch the small ones themselves. Not much meat on them, but good enough roasted over a fire and eaten whole. Wish we could figure out how to make a pot of some kind.

Slayer and I work on repairing the shelter. The last storm that went though did some damage. Not as bad as the huge winds and rains from a luna ago, but enough to keep us busy till the young ones return.

S1 comes racing into camp and hides behind us.

!What happened?! Before she can answer, two more race in from different directions, hiding behind us as well. Well more staying close to us. They don't appear to be sure where the threat is coming from. Strange, nothing has chased any of us up to this point. Not that some things don't defend themselves and bite.

We hear a lot of chatter in the trees and bushes all around us. Not showing themselves though.

S2 is the last one in, limping and bleeding. A first. I go out to meet her and push her behind me. Not really a warrior myself, but until I see a threat larger than I can handle, I will try. Dark is watching carefully too.

It becomes very quiet. Not even the bugs are making noise now. Strange.

I look down at S2 to try and assess the damage while Dark watches the tree line carefully. She reaches into her carry pouch and pulls out an egg. No way of knowing if this is a Checker egg or not. We don't see many eggs this size though. Has to be something larger than the snakes and lizards we normally see and hunt. I pass the egg to Dark.

That's when the chatter in the trees becomes very intense. Ah, my guess is this is one of their eggs and they are not happy about it.

!They are coordinated.! Dark coms. I affirm.

I move closer to the clearing edge and carefully place the egg down, then back away slowly, watching the trees carefully. In a motion almost too fast to see, a Checker comes out, grabs the egg and runs off, disappearing instantly in the brush. The noise stops.

Dark comes up to me, with all the other three young ones. I reach into my carry bag and pull out supplies to deal with S2's wounds. She will live, but be sore for a few days.

I com Dark, !Best to check the others as well. Hard to believe only one got into trouble.! They way they tend to run in a pack, you would think they are Raps. Hope Ronin and our Checker are alive and well.

The other three have minor scratches and bruises, more likely from the quick retreat than direct confrontation.

!They know where we are now. Need to keep a watch tonight. May need to move.! Dark affirms.

That is when the other three present their trophies to us. Each has a Checker egg. S2 was just the unlucky one it appears. Usually is. We quickly bring the eggs inside the shelter and cover them with leaves and grass.

!If they know we have these, they will be back. Likely at night.!

Great. Hungry, thirsty, cold and now enemies. This is not paradise for us. We dare not eat the eggs though. They could be our ambassadors to the Checkers here.

# Enterprise

We are spiraling out from Magenta and the Farout world the Hu were first sent to. In an infinite number of lifetimes we could never reach even a fraction of the possible prison worlds out here. Decided it would be best to concentrate on the ones most likely involving sen from our known space and froths.

Given the criteria for imprisonment out here, I am amazed that all sen from the Earth Froth are not out here. Granted they have to reach a certain TK and tech level before they are seen as a threat to anyone but themselves, but early TK from the Earth Froth spread quite a ways. Why are there no Ku or Ba Farout prisons?

“Standard orbit Mr. Sulu.” Sen are allowed to choose their own call after graduating from TKU, but for some reason, characters from fictional accounts on Hu space operas are very popular, oh, along with the Wild West. At least with the wild west, it is usually the indigenous people, not the invaders who destroyed their way of life.

+No missiles yet Captain.+ Ku Spock is my current first officer. This name thing really needs to stop. Even Br’thn thought she should get a cool name too and of course chose Data. Sigh . . .

+0.7 Earth Froth gravity, 19% ox, mostly nitrogen for the remainder, but a surprising 1% hydrogen sulfide.+ Why hasn’t that broken down to water and sulfuric acid at least? Something is maintaining it.

“Check for tech. Something is setting it up this way.”

+A large bubble roughly in the middle of the largest continent.+

“A world in a world. A safety measure to keep them from escaping. We will want to scan this sen very carefully. No more surprise slime mold sentients.” Or Luss. Or missiles either. Though the slime molds were sort of cute once you got to know them. A few are at TKU presently. Let the Janes figure them out and decide on long term inclusion.

“I will be in my ready room if something comes up that needs my attention. You all have your assigned tasks. Include others on board as needed of course. We are a team.”

^To Infinity and Beyond!^ Mr. Sulu has to end on. Sigh . . .

Less than an arn later, +Captain to the bridge.+ Sigh, so much for rest. We don’t technically need it, but it is still nice to take a break. I am never going to get to leaf carving.

“What have we got Ku Spock?” I barely catch myself. I want to say Mr. Spock. It has gotten to me as well.

+We can’t scan the inside of the bubble. Outside, no problem. We have a complete map of the world below us.+

“Underneath the bubble?”

+No problem. Standard iron core, magma, plate tectonics, the works. Even helium pockets, coal and natural gas pockets.+

“Feels too close to the earth froth.”

+Gravity is different, hard to fake that. Oh, and the H<sub>2</sub>S is not nice.+

“I also have to wonder about someplace they try so hard for us not to see. Is it just us, or all TK curious ones?”

^Extreme danger, do not enter? Or a trap to snare us?^

“Then we don’t go in personally.” They are thinking, but how do we get something in and out then?

“Prep a sensor Comp. DS/froth capable. It is going on a little trip for us.”

A Comp arrives looking confused. They are sentient, just not ‘thn sentient or worse, M.O.T.H.E.R. sentient.

“Henri, glad you can help us. You are in charge of this mission. Once you leave this ship, do what you need to do. Do not risk yourself or anyone else. Nothing here is worth it. Curiosity is not worth it.”

*You have some idea of how to proceed?* She asks.

“My idea is for you to move several froth over, move to a spot that would be inside the bubble, then move back. Gather information, then return via any route you can, maybe a different sequence?”

*Affirmative.* She goes.

Everyone is looking at me.

“She does not set off the alarms of most sentries. Comp were not known about when this all started. They are an artificial life form.”

+But, most sensors just sense TK or DS. Not specific to known forms. +

“Ah, but Henri has been learning some things from the Meeps, even I don’t know how to do.”

^Interesting Captain. Quantum memories do have some advantages it would appear.^ In all cases that I know about they do. Meep are beyond that even.

*Captain, Henri is in quarantine. Uploading data now.*

“That was quick. Put it on the screen Ku Spock. Let’s see what we got.”

Comp do not have ‘eyes’ or organic sensors we can relate to. Appears on the screen to be more like virtual reality. Lots of data streams along the edges.

Henri pops onto the bridge and hovers near me.

“Good work Henri. Any problems?”

+Captain, there are no life forms in the bubble. None at all. Not even bacteria or viruses.+

“Interesting. From the data, the air is breathable, comfortable even. Hard to tell from the layout/furniture what the intended form is. Not

Earth Froth, but that means almost nothing.”

+Except this world is in our prison zone.+

^At least it does not appear to be for one of us at least.^ Yeah, I hope none of us ever again ends up out here against their will.

“Henri, was there any thing in the froths you passed through?”

*Yes Captain. Identical worlds one over in each direction. Complete with bubbles.*

“Henri, did you look inside the other bubbles?”

*Negative Captain. That was not part of my orders. I went three over, where there was no world and DS'd back to here to obtain the information, then return.*

“Mr. Sulu, one froth up please.” Damn Comps are too literal.

Looks identical below us. Like we never jumped. Except . . .

+The world below does not have hydrogen sulfide, nor are their any limiters or shields on the bubble below. Scanning now.+

I beat him to it, “No life forms. Two down Mr. Sulu.”

Identical, down to no one home.

“Very curious everyone. Log it and let’s move on.”

^At least we did not get into trouble this time.^ There is that.

“Belay that order. I have an idea. Need a volunteer to go with me on a suicide mission. Henri, you are already volunteered. I mean a second one.” I smile to make it worse.

~I will go.~ Good for you Sas. She is intensely curious, so this is no surprise. It will likely get her in the end.

“Meet in the transport room in ten. Gear for hostiles. Ku Spock, you have the com. Watch for hostile action against the ship itself while we are gone. And if we don’t return. No more missiles please.”

^Wait, we have gone from nobody home to all hell breaks loose? What are you thinking Captain?^

“I am thinking this really is a trap, just like previous ones were. Time to go.”

# Magenta

This is the world where I came to awareness of my existence. I am home! If I never see another Earth Froth sen again, it will still be too soon. Nasty creatures. No sense of right or wrong. Creatures with that level of TK and Tech should never be allowed to roam free.

I am proud of the fact that I even got the EFs to bring me back here and did not have to arrange transport myself. Now they think they are 'safe' from me. I turned in my reports. Not my call any more. Obvious though. I am on break. This is my time to bath in the pools and enjoy a sun of the right color for a change. Can you imagine a world where most everything is green? The sky is blue and and the sea is blue, but the land is covered with plants, not plantimals, that are green. Horrid!

It is not even known what TK level they have achieved. At least 13. No fluidic has ever gotten above a 9. Not stable. At least out here on the edge I should be safe. It should be quiet. They put limiters on the sector 'thn. Who, what, why? They are insane. Reports have been filed with Control. Not much we can do this incarnation, but it can never happen again. Someone is going to spend a long time re-writing this possibility out of the code. It can never happen again.

Just let me spend the rest of my time in peace. I have done my duty. I am done.

Bit boring though. Aaaaaaagh! They have infected me with their damn curiosity!

*Luss Li to sector five seven nine. Luss Li to sector five seven nine.  
I am on break. Leave me alone. Send someone else.*

*Li, it is right next to you. Just check it out. You don't have to do anything, just let us know what you find and then go back to your pool of heavenly delights.* They are laughing at me. They did not have to suffer the way I did. If I am too heavily infected with their imperfect thoughts, I may need to be recycled. This is my last chance to avoid that fate. I need to get well. Please! Let me get well.

I make my way out of the pool and slowly, and Luss can move VERY slowly, move in the direction indicated. If they want it rushed, send someone else. No more mistakes. No more surprises!

Something flashes past me. What? Again! Then I realize I am still in Luss time. I need to speed up to sense them. When I reach their time base they resolve in to giant ant like creatures! I sound the alert!

***Alert! Alert! There are 'thants present! 'thants! Here! Now!***

The four 'thants stop whatever they were doing and stare at me. Hu crap, they know I am here. I am doomed. Only thing worse than Hu are 'thants. Why does this existence hate me so much?!

Two of them come up to me! Horror! They are not going to eat me are they? I am motionless, then I remember they only eat lichens. Safe. They can tell the difference can't they? Maybe I should move some to be sure.

*Luss Li, it is Rand and Drup. You know us. We lived here a long time ago for thousands of years. We brought our teachers with us. La Tee and Ui Da. When did you get back? This is perfect. Now we have a third instructor!*

The two start dancing again! 'thants don't dance, but what else do I call it? At least the other two are motionless. Hell has just gotten worse! I want to go back to my nice quiet pool, basking under a nice beautiful pink sky. Why me?

La Tee and Ui Da come closer and then morph into another form.

They look almost like Luss now. They are of the Cult of Perfection. I am even using their terms. They are of the Ta'aha. Better. I might be able to work with this.

Ui Da asks me, *You were really with these two that long? How did you ever survive? Not even their own kind want to be around them any longer.*

*You are being punished then?* It is the only explanation why they are here.

La Tee, *Worse, we are supposed to teach them how to be Watchers. We all became aware as Watchers, or same idea, easy for us, but these two are worse than any of the others. They keep interfering with other Watchers' work who are sincerely trying to do better.*

*They really are trying now,* Ui Da adds.

*Then why was I sent back here? Not that I mind. Watching a sentient self destruct is painful too. They thought I was causing too many problems when I complained about their behavior. I firmly believe it is not possible for Earth Froth to become these so called Watchers. Not possible.*

They both show sadness, *We still need to try. Please help us Luss.*

So hard for me to turn down another in need.

I affirm.

I am going to regret this till the end of time. Sigh.

Aaaaagh! They have me sighing now too! I am doomed!

# Di Eden

“What world are we on Libby?”

“You know, you brought us here. Reminds me of Hu during the late Roman period.”

“Oh, that is not good, not good at all. I remember what happened to them.”

“No barbarians at the gate here. They will do the destruction themselves.”

A warrior class comes up to us, !Hu com is forbidden! If I catch you again you will be disciplined. Understood?!

We both bow deeply and affirm.

*Guess we use TP instead. Wait, what is that? Not a Di and not a Rap.*

I scan some Di around us, but Libby gets it first. She is totally disgusted.

*They are called Rapes by the locals. It seems in the state of drunkenness mal Di are known to rape fem Rap servants. The result is a sterile fem. A Rape can be abused till they die with no danger of getting with eggs.*

I sit on the ground in shame. Has our world come to this depravity? She is not the only one. I see several about. The way they appear, my guess is they are sex slaves. Fem Raps are probably purposely being raped now to produce these offspring.

!No loitering! Be gone with you two.! This time I do get whacked on my back with a large stick. If I was not in Watcher mode, that enforcer would be worm chow.

*We had better move dear before they really come after us.*

If you want to know how a culture is doing you need to visit two places, the very rich and the very poor. The bigger the difference, the worse off the chances of survival for the culture. It may take hundreds of years, but nearly impossible to avoid. Nearly all revolutions are messy. We have already been to enough rich areas in the past. It was bad then, I have to assume it is much worse now. We walk towards the Rap quarters.

The Raps who pass us bow low, wait for us to get out of the way and then leave rapidly. They are all wearing metal collars with medallions on them. Ah, their owner's call. They are all slaves.

Libby tugs my arm and we duck into an empty warehouse. Lots of bricks, sand and straw. Construction yard. Quite for the moment.

We morph into lowly Raps. Our collars indicate we belong to some non-existent Di overlord. There was no way we could gain any knowledge as Di in a Rap section of the city. We passively scan Raps as we pass them. We gradually learn the rules. A lot of them. We can carry cop-

pers in limited quantity, but no other metals. Knives are totally forbidden and can result in instant death. Any other tool made of metal is at our place of work, never here. Theft means death. Surprised there are any Raps left.

The pots used to make the community meals are all poor grade ceramic. We scan while waiting in line for a meal. A bowl is handed to me. I would not feed this to a sewer system, but everyone accepts a bowl, swallows the contents and returns the bowl. Not unexpectedly, everyone is very thin, I bet the Di are all very fat. Not the lack of food that is the problem. The Rapes were better fed, but at a huge cost.

*Everyone comes in Di. Not a word in Rap.*

*Reminds me of what the Hu did to each other. To fully subjugate another, take away their culture, but especially take away their language. I am guessing the young are all taught by Di instructors at another location. Parents never see them. No one knows how to read or write, just follow instructions. Mind numbing and back breaking work.*

*Don't forget sewage. Anything dirty or dangerous. Yeah.*

A horn blows and everyone immediately puts down what they are doing and march in a single direction. We follow, not knowing any better, but curious. Silent. Also strange. There are Di guards at regular intervals.

Must be at least a kilometer away. At intervals we are stopped and seemingly random Rap are pulled aside. We eventually are chosen. Two old Raps, outlived their usefulness.

They take a look at our medallions though and put us back in line. We are wanted and our absence would be noticed. The ones who are not returned are of two types. The near dead and no longer useful, this includes the crippled, and the ones that look like trouble. Too big, too strong, shifty eyes, trouble makers.

We pass through stone tunnels, coming out into the open air. We take positions packed into a small area over looking a recessed open area below us. I know this format. The ones 'selected' are pushed into the open area.

The rich are on the opposite side of the arena. It was as bad as I thought. Lots of precious metals, fine cloth, not a skinny one in the lot. Even their servants are much better off than the ones around us. A Rap must count themselves lucky to end up a servant. Beaten regularly. Raped most certainly, but not starving. At least until you get too old or upset the wrong Di overlord.

*Do you really want to watch this?* Libby asks. We both know what's likely to happen.

An absolutely huge Di warrior comes out. Fully decked out in amazingly intimidating weaponry. Culling the herd. Like chickens in a coop. Beginning to wonder what was in that thin soup we all ate. Never been

more ashamed of my own sen.

A gong sounds, the Di moves, slaughter happens. A smaller gong sounds at about one second intervals. She is being timed on how fast she can get them all. Most run, a few accept it and squat on the ground. These she just steps on, not even bothering to hack to bits. The Di crown goes crazy. The Raps near us are totally silent.

But wait, there is more.

A Di is pulled out, stripped naked, no big deal for us, but in chains. He is fastened to a stake in the middle of the arena. The charges are read out loud using a crude megaphone, a big cone basically. They should have better tech than that by now. The usual crimes against the state, blah, blah, blah. They pour a liquid over him and leave. Doors open and ravenous rats pour out. Likely a year's supply of Rap chow. He screams for a bit, but it is soon over. Nothing left but bones. Most of the rats are in a coma from so much food after being starved to near death. Flaming arrows are shot in and they burn up quickly.

And more. The pitched battles, chariot races, one on ones. Nothing to the death. All professional actors. I am sure there will be bruises, broken bones, etc. But nothing lethal. The Di are all cheering.

When it ends we are led out first. Have to be ready to serve them when the rich come out. We are tapped again. This time to help clean up the arena for tomorrow's show. No talking unless you want a strike.

Some of the rich show off their Rapes in fancy frillery to each other.

*If Rap could throw up, I would be doing so now Libby.*

When we are done we are let out. Everyone else is gone.

!Home please.! Libby coms.

We go to a secluded area and DS back to our home. We had assigned caretakers before we left. It has been years now. Nothing appears to have changed. House is still there. Garden looks good. Not the same without Checker and of course Dark and Slayer. Maybe those two I don't miss so much.

*Watchers Report.* Libby sends out a request for our advanced students.

We placed them all over Di. This will take some time. As Watchers we can't exactly pop out in front of norms. In the mean time we prepare a meal for everyone. Nothing fancy.

Over the next few arns they each come in, give us their report and enjoy a meal at the same time before leaving.

We know now that the city we visited was among the worst. A recent occurrence actually. That the rest will follow their example is the fear.

I was hoping that the mistakes of the Hu would not affect us.

# Rap Eden, North

Squeak and I continue our walk through a nearly empty landscape. We scan and know there are Raps about. Scattered in small packs. Back to their origins. One, in fact, is watching us. The towns are nearly abandoned. They will be soon.

Their geographical range has expanded several fold. That is good actually. They were too bunched up in the towns. Without farms and rat colonies, there is not enough game to be bunched up. They were trying to replicate what they knew of Di culture. We knew it was a mistake, but they needed to learn this for themselves.

Going back to their beginnings they will now evolve to form their own culture. What should have happened from the beginning. Certainly what was intended by having their own world. A chance to start over, to begin anew.

*What do we do with the other two experiments?* I ask Squeak.

It is clear that the Di cannot start over. At least not without some help, tech wise. They forgot too much. The Di education system only teaches them how to exist in their current culture, not how to live on their own. The Hu had a belief in living in the rough. A hobby or pastime. Not everyone did this, but enough did, that if there was a collapse, they could rebuild eventually.

As to the experiments, Squeak had the right idea, *We need to teach them how to survive again with limited means. At least White and Libby were smart enough to move them to a remote location on Di itself. They did not even notice being separated from Ronin. The tropical Checkers were a nice touch.* I thought so.

*Won't that break the Watcher code? We are already in enough trouble.*

*We made the mess. We need to fix it and then leave them alone. We knew becoming Watchers would take time. This is a work in progress.*

*True, we did not become high TK overnight either.*

*However, nothing direct. Leave clues, minimal assistance. Never show ourselves.*

*Agreed.*

*Ronin and Checker?*

*Time to check on them. She is doing much better at least.*

*Agreed. Not surprised either. Ronin was always good at figuring things out. Finding the abandoned buildings helped them a lot.*

I have a feeling at least half of our experiment will succeed.

Of course White and Libby's TK Checker helped too. Hey, Ronin was one of our own. But, she would likely have done well anyway. Right?

# Earth Two

“Why did we get posted here again?” Mouse asks me.

<sup>D</sup>We were judged the best pair for the assignment. It is a compliment.<sup>D</sup>

“Not really fond of compliments anymore. Usually means more and harder work.”

I ignore her. She may be older and even higher TK, but Hu in general whine a lot. Best to not encourage them.

She pulls out her farseer. She can scan further, but it gives any locals watching us the idea we are nothing special. Other than a Drag and a Hu are together. Happens, but not common and not long term. We survived TKU as a team and have been together for tens of years.

<sup>D</sup>Likely this lot have never seen a farseer before. Probably suspect it is a weapon of some kind.<sup>D</sup>

She holds it up, “Not much good as a weapon. Doubt it scares anyone.” She puts it away anyway. Good.

<sup>D</sup>Make a few copies. Might be able to use them as a trade good.<sup>D</sup>

“Doesn’t that break the Watcher rules?”

<sup>D</sup>It is near their tech level, at least the west coast Drag have them. This group is WAY behind.<sup>D</sup>

“Good thing, or the local Hu would not stand a chance.”

<sup>D</sup>They don’t, even in the west. We just maintain the illusion of it.<sup>D</sup>

“You are still sore I beat you at Teachers vs Students again.”

<sup>D</sup>You cheated.<sup>D</sup>

“Show me how and I will concede.” I can’t and she knows it. I will figure it out eventually though.

<sup>D</sup>We have quite a ways to go before we meet up with them. Time to run!<sup>D</sup>

Mouse tries, but it is not possible for a Hu to keep up with a Drag. They think they are so smart, but we will catch them eventually. Father taught us one thing in particular, patience.

The current problem is easy to solve. Drag need much more area, being carnivores. This world has a lot of open space. Simple migrate, spread out, grow. They remove themselves from Hu notice until ready. The Hu elders here are so stupid. They think that by avoiding technical advancement this time, it will save them. Their precious Mother Earth does not care. OM only cares that one sen reach the state when the OM can spawn. The Drag intend to be that sen this time. They had their chance, now it is our turn.

# Jane's World

"Qr'thn has been here a long time. Why this meeting now?"

"Time does not mean the same thing to the 'thn as it does to us. Some of the high 'thn are billions of years old. Not as old as the multiverse, but, still, a very long time. We are to them gnats in passing."

"Then why come now?"

I sigh, not something we Janes normally do, even around each other.

"She wants to learn how to be creative." She nearly loses her tea in shock.

She finally closes her mouth and asks, "And you agreed to help her?" I affirm. We bow to each other. She gets up and leaves shaking her head.

I have an arn before Qr'thn is to arrive for her meeting. Just enough time to get centered. I calm down, empty my mind and bow to the multiverse.

Qr'thn arrives and rests about ten centimeters above a small cushion provided for her. They really do not like being in contact with anything if they can avoid it.

Another arn passes in silence. Probably a blink to Qr'thn, but this is scary for me and I need time to center and calm down. Who am I to advise a 'thn? Especially one loved, as she is, by our entire TK collective. What if I give the wrong advice and she does something harmful?

"How may I assist you Qr'thn?"

*I am curious as to the nature of creativity.*

"Being curious is an essential ingredient of creativity."

*Fluidics seem to be inherently creative.*

"That is because they are mortal. It is a survival trait. Sen who were curious solved problems which could mean survival for self and clan."

*'thn are mortal.*

"Which would suggest that the nature of 'thn curiosity is on a different time scale than fluidics." They do help OMs achieve success.

We sit. Given that a 'thn TK12 can probably think many millions of times faster than a TK7 fluidic, we sit for a very long time. Minutes even.

*What part does imagination play in being creative?*

"Imagination comes in when there is not sufficient information to be certain. But, creativity is not just for problem solving in that the result is not always useful. Being creative is also fun and can be done purely for the enjoyment of the creative person."

I pass my hand to indicate our surroundings.

"Note all the wood carvings, fabric art, or even the food we eat. We are surrounded by creativity that serves no purpose other than it was fun

for the artist and we derive some joy afterwards from the experience as well.”

*Do they not serve as a focus point for meditation?* Meditation was another hard one to get across to the ‘thn. Of course they live in their thoughts even more than we do, learning how not to pay attention to thoughts was not easy.

“Anything can serve as a meditation aid. Even nothing works for many. Do ‘thn do anything for fun?” This is a sore point for many trying to understand the ‘thn. They do not ‘play’ in the sense we do.

*Is fun necessary to be creative?*

“Not a necessity, though likely a side effect. Most fluidic sen enjoy being allowed to be creative. We die inside if we are not allowed to be creative. But, as you suggest, creativity is also used for problem solving. This is equally valid and should be honored as such. The ‘thn are extremely adept at problem solving, especially over a long time scale.”

*Ta’aha are not creative.*

“Actually they are. They fear creativity. They fear the unknown, uncertainty, change. They have to be surprisingly creative to anticipate ‘breakouts’ of creativity and come up with unique solutions to prevent it. For most sen, being creative is normal, encouraged, sought. What is this all about Qr’thn?”

*‘thn are not creative.*

I nearly fall over. Not very Zen like to be caught off guard like this.

“And yet, Earth Froth has gone, under your care, in a direction never before conceived of by Control. Countless incarnations, froths within incarnations, and never before has this happened. What is the difference this time?”

*I am being blamed for this failure.*

I laugh, something ‘thn do not understand.

“I am sorry, this is and was NOT a failure. Who told you it was? They are deeply mistaken. You are a success, a success of such magnitude that the multiverse will be forever thankful to you and all who helped you.”

*What happened was a mistake. I am at the center of the mistake. This was not supposed to happen. I am being accused of being creative and not adhering to the ‘thn code of conduct.*

“Let me guess, the disposed high ‘thn council.” She nods.

I ask another question, “Were the Ta’aha also a mistake?”

*They were seen as a necessary safety measure to prevent the mistake I made.*

I often thought that might be the case.

“What do you think? How do you feel about what happened? Given the same conditions, would you do it again?”

*That is why I am here. I would do it again. I was actually asked by*

*Control to do something or they were going to reset this incarnation early as being useless, repetitive. Glad that did not happen, though their idea of soon might be a million years from now.*

“Did the high ‘thn council have access to Control? Did they also receive this command?”

*They do not have access and do not believe that I do.*

“Ah, jealousy. Classic. Sorry, but it sounds like the ‘thn are more like the fluidics that you care to admit. A Prophet comes down from the mountain and the sen below do not believe what has been received.”

*They do not believe ‘thn are capable of jealousy.*

“Denial, they have been in charge for so long they thought it would be forever, or at least till the end of this incarnation. At the very least, a nice quiet existence. No surprises. Very few in power, especially for a long time, are willing to let go of that power to save their sen.

The question is, can they do anything about it?” Scary thought.

*Not during this incarnation. Control approves of what has been done.*

“But . . .”

*Control does not say if this will be tried again in another incarnation.*

“Congratulations, you have just been appointed to the Watchers. Your job, should you agree to accept it, is to record all that has happened and report back to Control at the end of your time.”

*There is a problem.*

“The high ‘thn will not touch you, the Ta’aha cannot hurt you. You have the blessing of Control. How is there a problem?”

*I like being creative.*

“Great, be creative then. You can always practice on some dead asteroid or such. No harm then.”

*There are no dead asteroids, just ones living in a different time base.*

“That is an excuse. What really bothers you?”

*The children also like being creative. It would appear to be contagious?*

“Just your children or all ‘thn children?”

*My children are teaching others. It is spreading.*

“We have always known that ‘life’ only exists in a narrow special place between the crystalline and the chaotic. A different space for different forms, but still this is true.”

*Agreed.*

“You have children that want to be like you. You have Control’s approval. This is all still very new. I am sure those who envisioned the Ta’aha thought it was a great idea at the time too. Run with it and see where it all goes. Enjoy!”

What did I just do?

# Meeting

“The others will be here soon.” I nod. I am not your servant Silver. If something is not to your liking, fix it yourself. I think we have been together too long. Might need some alone time. Even ‘thn mothers abandon their kids at some point.

Silver looks at me, “Still troubled by Qr’thn’s revelation?”

“We know the sector ‘thn will rise again. Just a matter of time for enough of them to get together and raise each other up.”

“You know Hu history. Same thing happened there. Over and over and over again. It is very difficult for a sen who was in control to relinquish it. Of course they want things to go back to the way they were.”

“Without us. Yet, we were with Qr’thn at Control. We have their blessing.”

“Does not mean there will be no challenges. If this is to really work we have to show we have found a new path, not just a variation on the old well worn one.”

“That means we can’t just kill them. We bought some time is all. The question is, would they be so mean as to destroy our worlds, even if they cannot find us?”

“Likely. Certainly been my experience dealing with norms anyway.”

“How can we be Watchers and not respond to their threat?”

He gives me an evil smile, “Don’t get caught.”

“Won’t be easy.”

“None of this has been easy.”

“We got lucky. If not for Qr’thn on our side, we would have been squashed very early on.”

“I refuse to destroy their worlds in retaliation though.”

“Agreed. There is no way we can turn them. At best we can hope for a stalemate. When the leaders have fallen, the battle ends.”

I sigh, “Certainly spent enough time in Control figuring out a new sen form to assume and start again. I have some ideas there when we get closer to that decision.”

“I will be listening.” He smiles. My turn to choose. Tired of being a turtle, a bug, or a ‘thant. Hu are not so great either. Maybe a Ceph. Have to okay it with Rooi. I am sure she will expect us to follow the usual route of a hatchling avoiding being eaten on up to an adult. Wonder how many times we will have to do that before we finally succeed. Of course have have spent time in Ceph form as adult high TKs, but not the same as a totally vulnerable hatchling with no previous knowledge or advantages.

“Who said we can’t cheat?” He must have been listening in. Sigh . . .

# Enterprise, Bubble

We are in a 'thn metal bubble, with lots of external sensors. No surprises.

“TK us into the bubble Sas.” She coms affirmative. Just the three of us. Very different forms, all capable of getting back to the Enterprise without the others under our own TK abilities.

Inside is different. No disrespect to Henri, but fluidic senses are different. Where she saw no life forms, by her definition, high sentient forms, I see a lot of life. Most of the bubble is water. Sensors say about half earth sea saline levels, but similar magnesium levels. Strange.

We fly over the smaller land areas first. No ‘flowering’ plants, lots of conifers, mosses, ferns, and such. Would expect giant insects or even early dinosaurs or amphibians at least. None.

~Certainly, they did not evolve here Captain. As most of this space is water, I would suggest submerging.~ My thought exactly.

“We can guess that the Ta’aha would not have sent the ferns here for punishment. Take us under Sas, if you please.” Any one of us could have piloted this ‘thn bubble actually. So used to giving commands I forget sometimes.

She flies low near the intertidal first. There is the usual assortment of seaweeds, but I am not sensing any snails, anemones, crabs, etc. How do they maintain a stable ecology?

Finally we go under. Surprising number of cliffs, rock formations, and deep trenches. Well, the bubble does go down for kilometers. I do a quick pulse scan. Half of the bubble is below the water line.

We spend an arn in the trophic zone, but still no animal forms. To do a thorough job would take more time that we told the Enterprise we would be here. The idea was to go a quick scan and get out. We hoped to find the reason for this bubble in that time. I am beginning to accept we might not solve this one.

A few arns and still nothing, then Sas stops. We are facing a large bolder less than a hundred meters below the surface. How does it get oxygen down this far. I noticed no weather to speak of. If the atmosphere does not move, oxygen levels will quickly stagnate this far down. Nearer the surface the plants will make enough. Too deep here.

“We are too deep for an animal form Sas.”

We remain still. No idea why, but I trust my shipmates, especially a water adapted form like Ceph Sas under water. She knows more about this kind of environment that I ever will.

She pops out of the ship! *Sas what are you doing?*

She attached herself to the rock in front of us, streams a large number

of color changes to her skin, but has blocked TP, so we do not know what she is saying to the rock? She can com with a rock?

Both she and the rock pop out. Where?

I take control of the ship and bring us to the surface.

*Henri, find Sas. I will be looking too.*

We find her next to a rock three times her size on a sandy beach.

“Might as well join her and find out what all this is about.”

We leave the ship and pop to the beach next to her, putting her between us and the rock.

She is blank. Okay, now what?

Gradually the rock moves! I scan deeply. It is alive! An animal life form.

“Great camo, rock creature.”

It unfolds into a giant crab like crustacean.

“Snap is that you?” I also TP this.

Sas comments, ~Of course it is. Who else would it be?~

“The last worlds Snap was on became full of crustacean life forms, yet here she is the only one. What’s going on Snap?”

*I wanted to be left alone.*

“I will still need to file a report. That means others will know you are here.”

Suddenly we are in the hanger of the Enterprise.

*Then I will need to find a new hiding place.*

“Sorry about that. We did not intend to intrude. We were tasked with surveying the Farout worlds most likely to hold sen similar to us and either free them from confinement or leave them, if they were too dangerous.”

*I set up this world. It should not exist on any star charts. How did you find me?*

~And if you had not made an impenetrable bubble in a toxic atmosphere we might not have been curious enough to investigate.~

“Many sen besides Ceph and Hu are very curious and would sooner or later do what we did.”

~We are not the only ones tasked with this mission. We have been stopping at every star in our sector. We would have been here sooner or later.~

“Hundreds of systems are either empty or do not have planets with livable conditions for sen as we understand it.”

Henri finally adds, *The last system has Tech 5 missiles to defend themselves with. To protect themselves or prevent others from freeing them is not clear.*

~There is a registry. If you had registered, we would have left you alone and avoided this system entirely.~

*No, you would not have. Had I 'registered' it would just have meant someone would have found me sooner. I am tired of solving your ecology problems by supplying you with crustaceans for every world you can't deal with yourself.*

I look at Snap confused, "Then why didn't you say something? Everyone has tried to help out every way they can. Yeah, there is shit work that needs to be done. We all get called on to help. But, it is easy to update the registry. Nothing is required. Strictly voluntary."

~No one knows what is happening. Join us or leave us. Either way serves The Question. You know that.~

Snap pops out.

"Okay then. Log it and plot a course to the next system."

That was weird. Guess I should be used to it. Oh well. Will send a note to the others to be more careful.

Br'thn pops in.

"Did you know Snap was here Br'thn?"

*Of course. Is that not allowed?*

"The Thirteen are allowed anywhere they want to be. Just curious." Why was I the last to know? Sigh.

# Rap Eden, South

<sup>R</sup>Fem Ronin, we are ready.<sup>R</sup>

I affirm, but wave her off. They won't leave without me and an arm later will not make any difference.

I make my way, one last time, through the old buildings. Originally the ambassador's retreat center, but it has not been that for decades. We certainly made good use of it. No one from that time period would even recognize it. We have redone it over the years to better fit our needs. We had forges and workshops, kilns, kitchens, meeting areas and lots of housing. The size is five times what it was. Maybe bigger. We will never had everything in one place again. Not safe for one reason.

We are moving south. We are starting to get migrants from the north. Being on an island we thought it might protect us. Unfortunately they are bringing two things with them. Mal. We could use some new genes (read that in a book left here). Most of the population are clones of me and Checker. Better make sure you can get along with yourself before trying. Not all our behavior is genetic, but more than I would like to admit apparently is. Was I really that bad? Wish Ron and Squeak were here to ask. I miss them terribly.

Unfortunately most of mal are nasty creatures. They see an entire community of fem, well fed, fit, smart fem and their eyes fall out in desire. I had not missed that at all. We can defend ourselves, but the numbers are increasing and they are learning. None of us like confrontation. Rap Eden is huge and we are resourceful. Besides, we are taking most everything with us. We had already made carts for anything that can't be carried easily. Very little fits that department. We are not taking the kiln, but pulled it apart anyway. Felt nasty, but better for us if we have the tech edge for awhile.

The second is, their idea of society is very lacking. Once they outnumber us, the rules would change and we would be excluded. Best to stay ahead of that.

Did not take long for us to figure out where we were, on an island called MadScar. At least that is what it was called on Di Eden. No matter. We are leaving.

Checker runs up to me with a sour look. I affirm and walk away. A mal that we had accepted stands next to her. They make good servants if properly instructed as to the alternatives.

<sup>R</sup>We need to be in the lead. Others have been assigned the rear guard.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Are you saying I am not the fighter I once was?<sup>R</sup> I know I'm not.

I sigh. Told that is a Hu trait, sighing. I don't really remember Hu. Only saw one once. I pick up my personal carry and follow the others.

I follow a bit behind all the same. I really do not want to leave. I would be very happy to live out my few remaining days here. I am sure I would not feel the same way as soon as the hoard of oversexed mal arrive. They are not here yet. I can enjoy this last walk through paradise.

I love the smells, the sounds, the tastes even. I pass my front paws over the leaves as I pass. Checker barks at me to hurry up.

However, it soon becomes apparent that we are not going where I thought we were going. There is no sign of the rest. They could not be that far ahead.

Why are we going higher in elevation? The ships are at the eastern shore. The invaders will arrive on the western shore. I have not gone completely senile. I am the oldest Rap here, but I am in good shape. Really. Should be good for another ten years. Granted I have been feeling weaker lately. Harder to get up in the morning. Food does not taste as good.

<sup>R</sup>Almost there old lady.<sup>R</sup>

Where? That is when I see it. I know this place. Can't believe it is still here. At the beginning I came up this hill, to this place. I set fires to signal the Di where to meet. They never arrived. I walk up to the decaying primitive hut. Looks so pathetic now, but it worked for what we needed at the time. I am so tired. I just need to sit for a bit.

I must have fallen asleep. The sun is across the sky when I open my eyes. I hear speaking.

<sup>R</sup>She is coming around. We can begin now?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yes, Checker, we can begin. You have done well.<sup>R</sup>

I turn towards the voice and see, no, it can't be true. It would appear that Ron and Squeak have come to say goodbye. When and where did they come from? I close my eyes. I can die happy now.

# Di Eden

!What happened? We weren't here a second ago.!

Dark points to a clearing. Primitive seats made from tree stumps. But, there is FOOD! Steaming hot food. We run in and set to gorging ourselves.

!If this is our last meal, I don't care. At least the pain will be gone for a moment.! I am so tired of bad tasting plants that usually just make me sick. This is good food. Lots of good food. Have not tasted anything like this is decades.

!Do you remember the last time we had food like this Slayer?!

I affirm, !Before this nightmare began. Our past visit to White and Libby's place. Don't see a Checker though. House is gone too.!

!If this is the same place even. Too bad the jungle Checkers did not really work out.!

!Did not take them long to figure out they were better on their own. We contributed nothing. Not even our hatchlings stuck around.! They were annoying too. Always wanted something, like we had all the answers.

!I suspect the Checkers and kids ran off together. They grew up together. Com the same secret code even. We were just the old dinos that understood nothing. I can't blame them for abandoning us.!

!We never did find Ronin and our Checker. Not even their bones.!

We both fall asleep from the heavy meal. Happy for the first time in ages.

It is nearly sunset when we awaken. I suspect the owners of the food have arrived to beat us for stealing it. I raise my head and look around. There is about a dozen Di looking at us. I nudge Dark and he wakes up too. I point to our watchers. Nothing happens. They just watch us. Strange. No one has com'd anything either. Their coverings indicate poor, though our lack of same likely indicate we are savages.

We both rise to face them and do a polite bow. They mirror our bow at least.

They part and two older Di come into the gathering. They are also poor by appearances. One is nearly white in color though. I prostrate myself on the ground immediately. Dark does the same. We dare not look up.

Libby comes up to us and taps us on the shoulder, !Okay to get up boys. We won't bite.!

Slayer looks up, !But we stole your food.! The rest show amusement. White shakes his head.

One of, what I am guessing are their students, coms, !That was waste meant to feed the livestock. You took nothing from us.! She bows and re-

turns to the rest.

White turns to face the others, !Let no one ever complain about anyone's cooking from now on. They thought it was from a high end establishment. Stealing it, even with the threat of punishment. Would any of you have done the same?!

I have to ask, !What happened to Ronin and Checker? We lost them and have not been able to find any traces of them.! A low murmur goes though the students. They obviously know more than I do.

Libby bows to me then coms, !You were separated the first night, the night of the terrible storm. You are on Di Eden, they are on Rap Eden.! I show relief. They are alive then. Everyone made it.

Dark finally asks, !Why?!

White offers, !It may seem we have been very cruel to you two, but it was necessary. Both Di and Rad Eden worlds are in danger of collapsing. We have seen this coming for some time. You two, being in your natures to figure stuff out, were selected to run an experiment. We needed to be sure Di could survive if everything of our kind fell apart.!

Dark answers, !We have been starving to death. I would hardly call that a success.!

!Ah, but your young, along with the wild Checkers are doing fine. Better than fine actually. They took what you taught them, combined with the Checkers own culture and are evolving into a truly remarkable civilization. They could not have done this without your involvement.!

I add, !You mean they learned from all our mistakes.! Not a question. Some show amusement.

!Does it really matter as long as it works? Come meet the others, they each have a story to tell. What you see here is really the last hope for Di kind, to survive as a sentient species. Our last chance.

## Earth Two

We have been traveling for over two months and are only now getting close to the Drag pack. Talks says this was to get me in shape. Never mind that no Hu is ever going to be believable pacing a Drag. I am good with falling behind each day and her having to wait for me means she gets camps set up instead. That won't last, but I enjoy it for now.

<sup>D</sup>We are getting closer to the pack. Tomorrow early they should find us. Be ready.<sup>D</sup> She walks off with her share of the meal. Being bigger she is under the illusion I do not know what is going on. We are also here to play a role, however she appears to be getting into it a little too enthusiastically. Going to get worse tomorrow.

Sunrise, well a arn before sunrise, they find us. I have to get used to time not needing to be so precise out here. They try to be quiet, though not really. The need to appear to be superior seems to be universal. I have already set up food and drink to welcome them with. They were not expecting that. Talks welcomes them as I stay in the background, ready to serve.

Talks plays it up. Sigh. Most TK get over this need. Not convinced Talks has or she is purposely playing a role she expects will impress them. Why? We do not need to impress them. We just need to be accepted enough to be allowed to travel with them.

<sup>D</sup>Please make yourself comfortable. My servant will bring out food, though not up to your standards, hopefully it will make this meeting easier.<sup>D</sup>

Of course the food has been TK boosted, against our orders, to a higher level. Our guests will never admit it of course. They don't. Two fem and a mal. He must be their servant. Hu are even lower in their opinion of course. He waits on them without comment and eats last. He notices, but coms nothing.

<sup>D</sup>You are in our our territory and need to leave.<sup>D</sup> Here it comes. Sigh. They get up to leave.

Talks simply states, <sup>D</sup>No. We are no threat to you. There is a lot of space. We go where we want.<sup>D</sup>

They are deciding whether to end this now, a lone fem and a weak old fem hu. Easy. Report back that the problem is solved. The threat is gone. Might even take me as a new play toy. They are unsure of their advantage though. They should be sure, but we are an unknown. I do not look like the Hu they know, the Hopi. The patterns on Talks to not match any Drag they should know. Any sen worth their genes has learned to be suspicious of the unknown.

I bring out a special treat, a rare treat. Rattlesnake eggs, salted, cov-

ered in ash and buried in the earth for months. I have wrapped them in leaves. I bow to them as I present them, then back off.

<sup>D</sup>Where, what, how?<sup>D</sup> They ask Talks of course. They probably don't realize I can com Drag.

<sup>D</sup>The servant makes them if there is any free time after the other chores. Seemed a waste to just toss them. Last a long time on the trail.<sup>D</sup>

I bring them a 'care' package to take with them and return to my station. We need to prepare to move out. I start putting things into our packs and carry alls. I put out the fire and scatter the ashes. Hard to tell we were ever here.

The small mal comes up to me and quietly coms, <sup>D</sup>We will not chase you away if you follow discretely.<sup>D</sup> He leaves to get back to the others. Also figured out I know Drag. Interesting. I smile where no one can see me. Talks shakes her head. I saved her butt but she can never admit it of course.

We follow several clicks back. Far enough away we are not obviously following. I put on a show of looking for food on the way. In fact they would have a very hard time noticing us unless someone doubled back to be sure. TK has some advantages, just can't push our advantage. I know where all of them are. I even pull out the farseer and use it a few times. Deniable credibility. Surprised Talks did not offer them one at our meeting.

This goes on for a few days. They are purposely leading us around. We already know where the main camp and all the out groups are. We have to pretend not too. They are slowly surrounding us of course. How can an old Hu fem and an unknown unproven Drag fem pose any threat? Our assignment is tied into the Drag vs Hopi Hu. Are their actions too? They have been moving slowly, and I mean slowly, away from the Hopi. Of course they could be back near enough to attack within a few days at the speed a Drag can run. Not good enough. They must suspect us. I would. They were warned by the high council. Then we show up without an explanation.

"Talks, our cover is blown. They know why we are here."

<sup>D</sup>Of course they do Mouse, they always have. This is just a game, a requirement of the council. We are here to supply a witness. That's it.<sup>D</sup>

"So you are saying, sit back, enjoy the time outside, but don't expect anything. We are just pawns, bit players."

<sup>D</sup>It is nice to be outside and away from all the nerds. God, I hate nerds.<sup>D</sup>

Never would have guessed. Ten years together, we know each other pretty well. Still don't trust Talks completely. Drag will always come first. Probably true of most sen actually. Hu are pretty nasty too.

Then there is the nerds vs smiggle thing. Not sure of the difference

myself. Drag were sort of engineered by Sauron. Very surprised he never caught on to the ‘changes’ some of the TKs made to his creation.

Sunset will be soon. We are at the top of a small hill overlooking the Drag encampments. Food is getting scarce as we are all looking in the same places now. The encampments have stores they gathered and saved. So do we. Is this going to be a game of who starves first then?

“This is a waste of time.”

“Why Talks, are you actually getting bored with your own sen?” I smile to make it worse. Drag hate the look of a Hu smile, especially an exaggerated one.

“What this hell is that doing here?” Talks is pissed. Sends me a visual image. It is out of visual range. I pull out the farseer to play the game.

“Confirmed, I have a visual on a Cat. Or what looks like one anyway. Fat head means it is not a local species.” Talks just growls.

“Who is the kitty hunting, us or the Drag? Will we be blamed for what it does, or is the kitty their way of eliminating us in a way the council cannot blame us?”

A Drag goes up to the Cat and coms. They turn to look to where we should be. Both Talks and I wave to let them know we know. That upsets them and the Cat pops out. Ambush predators do not like to be seen by their prey, much less having the prey appear to be unconcerned.

“South of us now. Prepare to fight.” She means believably. Never mind that the Cat is TK and does not follow any rules of other sen.

We quickly set up a field of spikes with us in the center. Even if the Cat were to pop right next to us, it would be tight and we are prepared with weapons of our own. Technically we should not have been able to do this so quickly, but not against the rules unless we are caught in the act. No other sen are close enough to be absolutely sure. Besides, TK have been gone from the scene long enough now we are more legend than reality. We just got lucky in our prep.

The Cat appears just outside our defenses. Pretends to look over the set up, mostly sniffing, snarls, sprays the spikes, scratches the ground and leaves, slowly, like it does not care. I am tempted to say something derogatory to upset him, but no real justification. We can claim we did not trust the Drag and that was the reason we set up defenses. Though we had not before. The Cat could just TK the spikes away and then get to us. This was just for show. A pissing match. We know he is around now and working for the Drag, or at least in parallel with them. No Cat works for anyone but itself.

“Now we will have to waste time setting up a perimeter at every campsite. That may have been the real point.”

“Wear us down by attrition. They don’t want to upset the council by a direct assault. If we get frustrated and leave on our own, they have won

this one.”

Talks suddenly smiles, <sup>D</sup>Maybe not. Scan the Cat.<sup>D</sup>

Confused, I do so, then laugh in spite of myself. Talks cringes at the sound of my laughter, but does a Drag equivalent of a big grin.

There is now a pretty pink bow around the Cat’s neck, with a bell. He does not notice until he starts walking again and then gets really pissed. They can pop, but getting out of anything like a collar is a challenge for them for some reason. He finally gets it off and stares back at us. No proof we did it and can never admit that two smiggles got the best of him.

“He knows we are TK now and will be much more careful.”

<sup>D</sup>And knows we NEVER sleep. I also placed a tag inside his manhood. We will always know where he is.<sup>D</sup>

One of the problems with a sen being so conceited is that some things just never occur to them. A Hu mal would notice the next time they touched themselves, if not before. We were both taught to scan all the time. Dignity is a terrible thing to waste. Poor kitty.

If they are going to start using Cats to harass the Hopi, that ups this game quite a bit.

<sup>D</sup>Cats are not allowed on this world and they know it. ANY TK has the right to get very nasty. He knows we are TK. He will be exceedingly careful now.<sup>D</sup>

“Likely leave with some lame excuse very soon.”

Sure enough, the Cat is no longer on this world. One point for us.

<sup>D</sup>I also doubt he passed on to the Drag we are TK. Dignity and all.<sup>D</sup>

“I do believe you are smiling Talks.” She gives me a dirty look, but then does it again anyway. I am nearly laughing out loud now. Nice to finally win one. This game is definitely not over, but we did good today at least.

<sup>D</sup>Drag are good enough not to need outside help. There is no honor in using the Cats in this way.<sup>D</sup>

And the Cats will extract a price. Nothing is free with them. I am deeply appreciative of the training we received at TKU now. The Janes would assume Cat form and attack us. That spike arrangement was not our first time setting up a defense. Glad we were only facing a young mal. They are always full of themselves. An old fem would likely have succeeded. Scary thought.

We were taught that having two sen increased the odds of advancement. It appears to me all they do is fight each other, outright and subtle does not make any difference. They each think they are more deserving, smarter, stronger, whatever, than the other. Stupid sens.

“We need to return to base once our replacements arrive. We have no credibility here now.

<sup>D</sup>Agreed.<sup>D</sup>

# New Ceph Eden

I have to refer to my internal map to confirm where we are. Southern large island off the coast of the largest continent. There are no agreed upon names for places like the Hu and other sen do. Frustrating, but also fun to learn the local interpretation. Rooi is letting me have lead on this. Not my first time. Nor am I always paired with Rooi. We have a small group of TKs at the moment, eight or course. Start small and be careful is our motto. The Luss were similar, except they left out the learn and change part. I finally feel that I fit it.

We debark from the ship with our small bags of possessions. We travel light to keep it simple and because we can make anything we need at a moments notice as long as no one catches us. Mostly we take the role of a traveling ceramics team looking for new ideas. Ceramics means the studios will be near a fuel supply for the kilns and of course local clay.

I can't help but scan our surroundings. I am still a Luss at the center. I recognize this place. I know Rooi made New Ceph Eden similar to Ceph Earth. Makes sense. It worked then, at least till the High 'thn deleted it. It is strange being on the other side now. Better this way. Of course I have read all the TK updates. On another Eden this island was where Ronin, Checker and the others spent their lives. Ronin was amazing. To have gone from a nobody to leader of a new colony. She did good. Not Luss good of course, but she had very little to work with. Amazing actually.

We move down the dock to receiving. Everything looks pretty normal so far. The buildings, the other Ceph. Calls are a little different. Separate long enough and change happens. We will adapt. They will not know who or what we are. Standard procedure. We are Watchers now. We do not interfere more than any norm Ceph might. Actually less. No one is going to be a Queen.

~Present shells.~ We do so. We are itinerant ceramics workers.

A fem Ceph comes up to the check in, ~These two are mine. I will take them from here. Thank you.~ I don't remember setting this up. Ah, she is TK of course. She gives me a flash for checking without permission though. I hand sorry. Rooi gives me a look too. Sigh, hey, I am not used to being so loose. Don't like surprises.

We proceed to the ceramics workshop, where we are immediately put to work conditioning the clay. Feels good to be this physical again. I don't mind at all. How much trouble could I get into doing this?

A lot apparently. We are flashed out for doing it wrong. Really? The greatest ceramic Ceph in the history of Ceph is somehow doing it wrong? Rooi, not me. Of course I show nothing and accept the criticism, then change the method I was using. Too much air in the mix. Will be hard to throw on the wheel and likely explode in the kiln. But who am I to com-

plain?

Once we are done someone else takes all the clay we have processed and puts it into a large vat of water to be redone. Hey, we did what you told us to. I remain blank though.

Our greeter shows, ~That was a test to see if you would follow orders without question. Believe it or not, there are times when we need bad clay.~ She shows amusement to our confusion.

~From your shell, you are from north of here. We are blank here most of the time. Things go smoothly and quietly. Not a lot of flashing and anger. Best to just do what you are told and not question it. If you have questions, come and find me later and I will try and explain. I came from east of here originally. Very different. This is a vacation compared to the constant struggles for power and advancement there.~

~Almost as bad as the Hu?~ I am immediately flashed.

She hands me, ~No one here has ever seen or been shown any information about the Hu. If anyone asks, just show it was a feral predator from your home. We have none here.~

Rooi asks, ~Something to eat?~ She has been blank the entire time, letting me get into all the trouble. I am apparently very good at that. I really thought this was going to be an easy assignment. I still don't know her call. Strange. She knows ours from our shells.

Rooi hands me, ~No point of learning calls for someone who is not going to stay.~ Oh, death sentence already? This place seems quiet.

Our shift ends and we are allowed to eat with the others. Nothing fresh. Ceramics, as useful as it is, is not very high up on the needs list, especially for the more utilitarian nature of what is done here. Blend in. We are nobodies at a nobody work space.

We put in four days of work, getting most of the lowest end tasks, cleanup, prep, etc. Not totally unpleasant. The others are nice enough. We never complain and work hard. This is much more pleasant in fact than most of what I was told to do in my very long life. Watching the Earth Sen on Magenta got to be very boring after a hundred years.

The meals were simple, but nutritious. At least they were not spicy. Hu and Ku could really up the heat component. Partly to get a reaction out of one of us I am convinced.

We finally are granted a freeday to leave the ceramics guild and go see the rest of the town. Of course I had been scanning like crazy during rest periods, as is my nature. I already know my way around and where all the important Ceph are. Not unlike Rooi's original world. Strict hierarchy with a Queen and Court. The expected enforcers, etc. too. Once you know the rules for your cast it settles into a simple routine. Of course there are those who try to reach beyond their station and end up being punished. Luss knew better than to attempt that.

A few luna later, Rooi comes up to me, ~Our rotation at the studio has ended. We will move onto our next assignment.~ I affirm. I have asked for a very simple small pot to remember my time here and the request was granted. It had a chip in it, which does not bother me, but was probably the reason I was allowed. Would have ended up being recycled anyway.

~We have a few days before our next assignment, a low level government office closer to the center.~ I affirm. We are at the outer edge now. Low level offices are much more instructive than the high offices, which end up being more about personal politics than actual service. We will get to observe how the normal Ceph interact with the rulers on a day to day basis. Putting time in at a utility ceramics studio gave us time to learn the dialect and manners of this area. I know TK are supposed to be able to adapt quickly to new circumstances, but I convinced Rooi to try it this way, more like my Luss. Actually much faster than Luss would like. Everything is a compromise. Not Luss, but I am adapting. Also not Luss.

We spend the day touring the various shops, seeing how others work and get by. We are at the edge of a bay, which provides sufficient food along with aquaculture farms to enhance the output. Most of the food that low levels consume comes from the farms, whereas the higher official eat fresh food from the bay. Never really enjoyed the ‘fancy’ foods myself. Eating is something I do to keep my form going. Does not need rare or special for that purpose. Keeping it simple is fine with me.

Might be because I have been TK for so long, not much impresses me any more. Magenta and Farout in general were basically prisons. Nothing luxury about it. We were high enough TK and immune from the suppressor fields we made our own food, or just acted directly on our form without consumption. Can’t do that here without raising suspicion of course. We are never alone. Ever. There is always another Ceph or two within visual distance. I already know from reading many minds that nearly everyone informs on nearly everyone else. It almost feels like home.

I hand Rooi, ~New Ceph Eden is almost identical to Farout/Magenta. There is no free thought, much less expression. Very efficient, but almost no creativity.~

~None in fact. Glad you, a Luss, noticed. This culture is too fragile to handle a crisis. It will collapse under stress.~

~But, aren’t all Ceph towns this way? Collapses have happened in the past and likely in the future. The space will fill in with a new cohort eventually. Were you expecting anything different?~

~No, just hoped. I have been contaminated by the Hu and Rap. Those two are always changing things just to see what happens.~

~You mean Silver.~ I show amusement. Rooi sighs.

# Rap Eden

This is death then. Not impressed. Thought it would be more painful and then nothing. No awareness, nothing. My eyes are closed. Afraid to open them actually. Will I see my decayed corpse? It would actually be reassuring. Then I would know it was real and I am not just imagining all of this.

<sup>R</sup>Then open your eyes.<sup>R</sup>

That sounds like Checker. Checker is still alive? This must all be that last moment before death really sets in and everything goes blank. Nice to hear her voice though. I am not alone and I can leave now. Everything will be okay. I left my world better than when I arrived. What more could anyone ask of someone?

<sup>R</sup>Get up you lazy lizard! We have work to do.<sup>R</sup>

I open my eyes and see a rotting Rap corpse. I was right.

<sup>R</sup>I'm dead, leave me alone please.<sup>R</sup>

I close my eyes. The Checker sounding creature kicks me several times. Can the dead feel pain? I open my eyes again. Corpse still there.

<sup>R</sup>I recognize the corpse. It is me. You cannot deny it.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>It is you, you idiot. Now get up we have so much work to do you will only wish you were dead.<sup>R</sup>

Now I am even more confused.

My whole body is shaken this time. I open my eyes to protest and come face to face with Squeak. I am wide awake now. I slowly rise. I look at my "new" body. Looks like that of a ten year old Rap. Not a flaw on it. I take a deep breath. I feel very much alive. But there is still my corpse next to me.

<sup>R</sup>Sometimes the original form is in such bad shape it is just easier and faster to start again. Besides, a corpse is needed so your followers will believe you actually died. Believe me, it is much worse if they think you are still out there somewhere messing with things, or worse ready to save them yet again.<sup>R</sup>

I rise to a standing position and see a Checker corpse next to mine. Then I look around me and see Checker, Squeak and Ron standing together. Checker is different though, almost a jungle Checker in colors.

<sup>R</sup>For the next ten years you will be attending a school of sorts. Checker will be your main teacher and companion. This is not an easy assignment and you have no choice but to attend. What we do is essential to answering The Question. That will be explained as well.<sup>R</sup>

Suddenly I am in clear area with a stone wall all around. The air is much cooler. Not happy about that. There are other Raps and some of the new jungle Checkers, though not my Checker. Looks like they are learn-

ing how to fight. Not good at it at all. I cannot allow this and proceed towards to others. Mixed mal and fem. I do not recognize anyone at least. I can't find Ron, Checker or Squeak either. How did I get here so fast. I don't remember moving even.

<sup>R</sup>Pay attention. I will teach you how to fight and survive. What you were doing would have only ended in your quick death.<sup>R</sup>

They are all staring at me like I am speaking a strange dialect of Di. When I move towards them, they back away. They outnumber me ten to one. This is not Rap behaviour. What is going on here? I see a strange light reflected on their faces and they suddenly all bow to the ground. What the?

I slowly turn around and there is a hard to focus on many colored rapidly moving space an arm's length above the ground. I cannot tell how far away it is. Strange. I move closer.

<sup>R</sup>Who are you and do you know what is going on?<sup>R</sup> I wait.

*Interesting.* It suddenly disappears. There was no sound, but I heard it.

I turn back around and they are still on the ground bowing. Now what?

New Checker comes up to me. I still don't understand how can she be alive either.

<sup>R</sup>Anyone who stands up to a six dimensional Meep and lives is to be feared or worshiped.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You are telling me that that being was a Meep then.<sup>R</sup> Not a question.

<sup>R</sup>What happens now Checker? Am I alive, are you alive? Do you know what is going on and what we are expected to do.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You were told that I am your new teacher. What happened to you before was all in preparation for now. I am afraid that we deceived you. I am not just a simple Checker. None of the students here are what they appear to be either.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Something is not working if this is a school. They are horrible at fighting.<sup>R</sup>

Checker smiles, but says nothing. One of the students comes up to me.

<sup>R</sup>I will show you to your room and where everything is. Welcome to the nightmare. Well, it is only a nightmare at the beginning. You eventually get used to it I am told.<sup>R</sup> I look to Checker, but she has already turned to the other students. Strange. What the freep is going on?

<sup>R</sup>What is your new name?<sup>R</sup> Huh?

He looks closely at the badge on my vest. I am wearing a vest?

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, the god of thunderstorms. Fits.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>What was wrong with my old name?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You are dead remember? We all are.<sup>R</sup>

Similar to Ronin I guess. I will just have to go along for now at least.

# Earth One

*You saw the report from Squeak and Ron?*

He hoots amusement, *Wait till Raijin realizes what a TK is and she is one. Can you imagine any other norm standing up to Myra in Meep form and taking on a Dojo in training while thinking they were all norm?*

I show amusement. *They definitely found an interesting student.*

*Question is whether Raijin can adapt to being a Watcher. She was the leader of her entire island when she died. Going to be hard to give that up and let them make even basic mistakes, much less lethal ones.*

*We were chosen because we were basically nerds. "Ronin" is decidedly not a nerd. At least her 'colony' was Madscar and not a larger territory.*

*But did really well on the assignment forced on her. Speaking of which, why are you riding on top of me again. Either walk or fly, no free rides. I can't imagine what the locals think of us. Actually I know. We have quite a rep. They see an owl on a desert tortoise and they know trouble is coming. They have even woven us into their dances and rituals.*

He hops off. Owls are not good at walking, but then I am no speed racer either.

*I am more worried about Earth Two. Using a Cat to try and kill our Watchers was a mean move. Good of the young Cat to recognize how much trouble and leaving before it came to blows.*

He turns to look at me. Totally unnecessary of course.

*Tewk did a great job with the Drag behind Sauron's back, but not perfect. The Drag hate being seen as second best sen on their world.*

*They're not second best. Look how much tech they have figured out and assimilated in the brief time they have been on Earth Two.*

*Just like 'daddy' they have an inferiority complex. I affirm.*

It will take time to sort. We are in no hurry. Finding their Cat ruined that plan. There will be others. Also means we needed to reassign the two TKs and find some other way to get close to them. We have far watchers set up of course. There will not be any attacks on the Hu settlements. For the time being the Drag are leaving the area. It is a huge world. Best they develop their skills and tech elsewhere. The Hu Hopi are never going to be a threat to them.

Cat pops in, in Bug form of all things. She looks up to check the position of the sun out of instinct, starts to worry, sees us, realizes where she is and calms down.

*\*Barbara has been found on Bug Eden. I have confirmed.\**

About time. She has been hiding for some time. The local Cet are ready and waiting for her guidance.

Another Bug pops in, realizes she has been turned around and rotates to face us. Hate that when that happens. Bug Eden is still quite a jump for most of us. The fact she got so close in one jump shows she is skilled. Would hate to start from scratch raising one of our own.

I turn to her. Owl remains quiet. Barbara is not really that fond of anyone in mal form.

\*Welcome. Hope you had a pleasant trip.\*

She ignores us. She turns to orient where she is and pops out.

Cat sighs, \*She knows why she is here and agreed to the assignment.\*

Turtle comments, She is off the Pacific coast near a pod of humpbacks. Oh, she just assumed their form. I think we should just leave her alone.

Owl asks Cat, *Did she receive the Watcher instructions?* She affirms. I know Owl can com Bug in Owl form. Lazy.

I can't in turtle form however, so I TP Cat, *Best keep an eye on her. I know she wanted to be left alone. She hid in plain sight for over a thousand years.* She is not one of the five, or even one of the Thirteen in this incarnation. If it gets bad, we can deal with it then.

Cat comes in with, *In the mean time, all diversity serves the Question.* She does not wait for a response and pops out.

*One more pot on the fire,* Owl comments.

She has always known where Earth was in the froth matrix. If she was so interested in leading the Cet this time around, she could have been here much earlier.

In my discussions with her, she admitted that dimension jumping super Cet was probably not the answer. Maybe she was using the time to try and figure out what to try this time. At least the Hu whale hunting had stopped long enough ago for their population to have come back to near pre-Hu near extinction levels.

*We still need to get to the Elder Meeting sometime this century old girl.*

He tries to jump back on my back and I shake him off while showing amusement. He pops both of us to an abandoned kiva in the village. We walk out, each under our own power, to get to the meeting. These meetings can bore even a high TK to a stupor. Come to think of it Hu are really good at doing that. You know you have a problem as a sen when even an old turtle says you are boring. I wag my tail thinking about it.

# New Edwin Land

## *Realignment Complete.*

‘I hate that new com system. The old way of passing it down the line was fine. What’s the hurry?’

‘Wonder where we are in the multiverse now? Why do we keep moving?’

‘Every time a sen gets enough tech to find us, we move. Simple. Before the ‘thn would do things to mask our presence.’

‘I would hardly call T3 a threat.’

‘Edwin thinks ahead. It took us 33 years to do this simple close re-alignment. Hu went T3 to T5 in a hundred years.’

‘Closer to two hundred, but always good to be cautious.’

‘I am not really up on Hu history lines.’

‘Are you up on Di history then?’

‘Nope. You do remember we spent some time on Farout/Magenta.’

‘In another incarnation even.’

‘Yeah, that too. Add in the froths and who can keep track, right?’

An enforcer rounds the corner and we pretend to be working. They all know us. We use Edwin to hide us. They know that too. Took awhile to get the ‘thant culture to bend this much. We don’t push it much. Hey, it is our personality. We can’t help it.

‘They would ask us to leave if we got too bad, right?’

‘You know Edwin only keeps us to mix them up enough to keep the thants AWAKE, right?’

‘Easy to replace.’

‘Right. Won’t be as cute, but ‘thants don’t care about cute.’

‘Nope.’

‘Could be worse, we could still be on Magenta. Talk about BORING.’

That’s strange. What the freep is a portal doing here?

‘Hey Drup, check the map, should a portal be here? Not in the normal area for them. In fact, way outside where one should be.’

‘Design is strange too. Not a ‘thant portal unless it is a new design.’

‘When in doubt, call Edwin. Been in trouble too many times to take chances now.’

*Supreme Master of all that is good. We may have found a problem.*

Edwin pops in. ‘This better not be one of your pranks. I don’t have time for it.’ I turn him around to face the new portal.

‘Is this one of ours?’ He just stares at it. I am guessing not.

You can almost see the wheels turned in his head.

‘You two are to check it out. Find out where it goes and then report back. DO NOT cause any trouble. We are Watchers now.’

‘Haven’t ‘thants always been Watchers?’

‘Start acting like one then.’ He turns and pops out.

‘I know we are not his favorites and we are only tolerated because of our TK status, but that was rude.’

‘We don’t know what else he is dealing with. Just be glad we get to go on an adventure, unsupervised even.’

‘What part of do not cause trouble, did you not hear?’

‘We always cause trouble. He knows that. Just glad it is not somewhere on Edwin Land is my guess.’

‘Do we need to take anything with us?’

‘We are ‘thants, we need nothing!’ A standing joke. Still funny to me.

We wait till it is dark on the other side of the portal. ‘thants like darkness to hide our exploits in an unexplored world. Looks like a chaparral world. Not much growing. No structures that we can see. Lots of lichens though. Can’t say my mouth parts are excited though. Have you ever tasted lichens. BORING. Needs chili peppers for sure.

‘Nearly dark. Standard away team protocols. Secure the portal and dig a hole to hide in.’

‘Check. Away we go!’

# Earth Two

<sup>D</sup>Well this sucks Talks. You know I hate being a Drag.<sup>D</sup> She affirms, though not the exact term she would use.

We are in the middle of nowhere. The punishment for failure. They did not call it that, but it sure feels like it. Nothing out here but sagebrush, spiders and Gila monsters. And don't forget scorpions.

We are cataloging species to establish a baseline before the Hu and or Drag make it this far and change things. All species change things, this is not a judgment call. We are Watchers now. This work is beyond boring though, but we have to comply if we ever want to do interesting work ever again. Lots of lichens. So many lichens.

<sup>D</sup>Mouse, what the hell are those things. I can't find them on our list.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>No way, I remember them from class, but I have never seen a live one. I believe those are 'thants, actual live, moving 'thants.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Why here? They are supposed to be on worlds not covered by active TKs.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You're saying they would be redundant here because we are here?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>That does sound suspicious. Let's go ask them.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You speak 'thant?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You really were asleep in class. They can com with nearly any sen.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Shit, they are digging a hole. We need to hurry or we will have to dig them out.<sup>D</sup>

Talks shows amusement and takes off running. She does love to run and now we have a real reason, not just to annoy me.

Of course Talks makes it there long before I do. I really hate being in Drag form. Not used to it. Everything works differently. Just weird.

I finally arrive out of breath. Wish I could just TK here, but norms may be watching.

<sup>D</sup>Where are they? This is the spot right?<sup>D</sup> There is evidence of some preliminary digging by something.

She points down the hill from us as she motions for me to get lower.

<sup>D</sup>Wait, Drag got here first? How did that happen?<sup>D</sup> There is nothing around us to indicate a Drag presence in the area, well, except us. There are fresh tracks all around us.

<sup>D</sup>What were they doing here?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>No idea, but way more interesting than doing species inventory.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Anything is more interesting than that, but are we even allowed to pursue this?<sup>D</sup>

Talks sighs. She has picked up some bad Hu habits.

I prepare the message. Talks nods and I send it off to our bosses.

We then walk down the hill to get back to our 'real' work.

Of course as soon as we get there, we get a response. Written in Hopi of course.

<sup>D</sup>They know we are in Drag form right?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>And Drag hate the Hopi. Few have learned the ‘evil’ com.<sup>D</sup>

I sigh, well, in Drag form it is more of a low hiss.

<sup>D</sup>Apparently ‘thants are more important than our species list. We are to pursue them and figure out what is going on.<sup>D</sup> Talks show amusement after reading this.

I am thinking out loud, <sup>D</sup>We need to appear as non-threatening as possible.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Old mal. Will get us out of the competition games and everyone will ignore us.<sup>D</sup>

Only thing worse than being a Drag is being a mal. Horrid creatures in any form.

<sup>D</sup>Agreed. But they will assume we are idiots.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Could help. Mal it is.<sup>D</sup> We make the minor changes Mal sure stink. Even the old ones. Young and horny are worse though.<sup>D</sup>

We lost a lot time going back to the survey, changing forms and then making our way back the scene. Might work to our advantage. TK school suggested ‘thants can take care of themselves. We will not arrive right after their kidnapping and likely not be connected to it.

One advantage of Drag is we lose the obsession with all things clothing, oh and owning stuff. You never realize how much something is part of your culture till it’s not any more.

Running is easier in the Drag form at least. Never realize how much of an advantage your partner has until you walk in her, ah, his feet. We don’t wear shoes. Kinda of nice. Might have to give up shoes in Hu form too. Ah, not, those stones of mostly lava rock can be sharp. Pointy. Ouch.

<sup>D</sup>Mouse, you are lagging even as Drag.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Hey, I was only ever a Drag before during class and that was for a short period of time. Be happy I am faster than when I was Hu.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Ever been a ‘thant?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You were there, we only had a week on them. Barely got the basics of their com.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Hu have a sen phobia about anything that looks like a bug. And no, I have never been a Bug either. The high TKs are sure obsessed with weird forms of life.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Heard some even spent time in a neutron star. A hundred lifetimes takes a few seconds.<sup>D</sup>

Silence for a few arns, concentrating on not making a fool of myself by tripping in this form.

We come up over a rise and see their settlement below. Scanning we find the ‘thants in a metal cage in the center. Display? The ‘thants must

be playing a game. I know they could get out faster than a blink if they wanted too. You really do not want to be confronted by an angry ‘thant. Nothing stronger than ‘thant metal, what their exo is made from.

<sup>D</sup>Hey, Talks, do Drag know ‘thant are made of a metal that nothing can scratch or cut?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Not part of my training, but then they should not know about portals either. They appear to have known where those two could come in.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>A trap? Set by who then? Sauron is gone right? Who else would help them set this up? Who is pissed enough?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Sounds like part of our mission.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Just keeps getting better. At least it is not more surveying.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>But why us? We are very low level for this kind of task.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I was thinking that too.<sup>D</sup>

Scary.

Because we are disposable? An old term rarely used any more. We all took history classes. Hu were particularly bad to each other. Drag don’t have a long enough history to really know, but given their heritage, I would not be surprised if something nasty was in the works.

My first fear was they would recognize us from our previous encounter. They won’t. We look totally different and they did not interact with two Drag, but a Hu and a Drag. We are older and will be more Drag like in personality, ie abrasive. Talks will be lead.

We walk right into the compound. No one bothers us. This would not work in a Hu settlement, but I trust Talks. Everyone is busy going about their work. We walk past the ‘thant cage ignoring it. There are Drags working together to empty a supply wagon. This is an improvement. We get in line and assist. No one questions us.

*You two are not normal Drag. Shit. Of course the ‘thants have TP, or at least these two do. I don’t turn around. You do not need to look at someone for TP to work.*

*I send, Do you know what is going on here? Why they captured you two?*

*We are just as curious as you. We have sent com back to our colony. They have surrounded and under tunneled the entire colony.*

I have a crazy idea. There is lots of lichens on the rocks around us. When we finished with the others, I go off and start collecting lichens. I bring it to the cage and push it inside, go back to Talks and we look for more work to do. Unlike Hu, we do not need to be told to assist.

*Thanks. They were not feeding us.* The two ‘thants are eating rapidly. Only a few days, but no idea how much they need to eat. There are pellets of the normally expected result on the ground of their cage. ‘thn metal. Almost pure even.

# Rap Eden

I recognize none of the other students. About a equal mix of mal and fem. Raps come and go depending on their assignments. We are not all beginners. The ones who have been here longer attempt to help us new ones. It is all very confusing to me.

I have had my first 'gift'. I can see into buildings without going into them. Also smaller containers. I know what is in every jar, barrel or box. They purposely do not label anything so we are forced to use the gift. Another aspect of the gift is the ability to move small objects with thoughts. I no longer have to reach for anything I need. I just will it to my waiting grasp and continue with my task.

We can also deflect small objects thrown at us. Being in the center will everyone tries to hit you with a small pebble has been the highlight so far. No one can believe how fast I am.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, stop using your hands to deflect the pebbles. Only use your mind. When you use your hands, you give away your intention.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Everyone is so slow, I have not needed to use my mind.<sup>R</sup> That opens the mouths of the other students.

Checker explains, <sup>R</sup>Raijin was warrior class before coming here. She will not get caught using her talents while on an undercover assignment.<sup>R</sup>

I hear multiple cries of <sup>R</sup>Teach us!<sup>R</sup> What I have been trying to get permission to do from the beginning.

Checker smiles. I know I am in trouble now. Suddenly every student present throws a stone at the same time. It is more difficult, but I still manage to deflect all but one without the gift and that one only barely grazes my upper arm.

<sup>R</sup>Everyone sit. Except you Raijin. <sup>R</sup> My turn. Freep.

I am very sore before it stops. And yes, I do start using the gift, as a shield more than an active deflector.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, you are not here for fun or to show off. These lessons could save your life or the lives of others around you. Accept that we know what we are doing and what we are asking of you is part of a process that will ultimately benefit you and others.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You want me to play along.<sup>R</sup> Checker sighs (more of a hiss) and nods.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, you are on kitchen cleanup along with Masy. Take a break and meet back at the mess hall. Dismissed.<sup>R</sup>

A troop of third years runs past us. It is going to be a very long ten years. Just wish I knew what was going on. I would also like to know how everyone I left behind is doing.

# New Regional Galactic Center

*I can see why you like the Meep form so much Myra. Amazing how much you can sense.*

*Any no one messes with you Cat. No one can really 'see' you, certainly cannot read you unless you allow. No 4D life form can ever threaten you.*

*Yeah, that too. Perfect form for this assignment. They will know we are here, but not why. What I don't understand is why. This place looks nearly the same as before. Only a few star systems over from the other's location even. Just picked the closest one with the necessary resources.*

*The 'thn overlords are different now, but they built on the same model. Basically the same as before.*

*It was all they knew. Really has not been that long since the five changed everything.*

*Did not take them long to figure out how to create High 'thn from among their ranks. We were expecting it. If we had wanted a totally new and different existence, we would have petitioned Control to be allowed to do an 'experiment' in a much smaller multiverse. This was an attempt to change direction, not start over.*

*They must know we are still around and watching though. I always thought banishment to Farout was unfair. Total destruction of anyone who opposed them really was over the top. Enterprise has not reported noticing any new inmates at Farout at least. Unfortunately, not all the current inmates are ready to return to a world of their own.*

*No OM will have them. Diversity guarantees some outcasts will occur. Probability alone insures it will happen.*

*Glad they have not figured out how to banish the Meep yet.*

*Not likely, but then the five were not expected either. I am more worried about their using the Terror form on sen they don't approve of.*

*Won't be any of ours, as we know how to turn them off. That leaves a nearly infinite number it would work on though.*

*This is nearly an exact copy. I could almost find my way blindfolded, Ah, if I had eyes and all that. They even set up the 'play room' again for species to test themselves against each other.*

*Guardians get bored taking care of their sen. Can't get drunk. Just a way of forcing the generation of new ideas, new ways of seeing existence. Not necessary a bad thing.*

*More 'thn than Guardians at the moment.*

*Just setting up. Come back in a millennium and it should be back to full force.*

## Earth Two

<sup>D</sup>Who are you two? You can't just wander into our group and expect to be accepted. Accent is funny too. Not from around here.<sup>D</sup>

Talks is likely to get confrontational, so I answer.

<sup>D</sup>Far west. We volunteered to migrate. Drags need to coordinate if we are ever to survive with the Hu around.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>How do you know about the creatures we captured?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>The 'thants? They have a portal near the west coast. Seen them before. That is how we knew they like to eat a few kinds of rock weeds.<sup>D</sup>

She holds up some 'thant poo, <sup>D</sup>Do you know what this is?<sup>D</sup>

I roll my eyes, a Hu thing I hope they don't notice.

<sup>D</sup>Which end did it come out of? I am assuming this has to do with the 'thants.<sup>D</sup>

She glares at me.

<sup>D</sup>They excrete this after eating a lot of lichen. Can't do much with it. Nothing seems to affect it. Too hard. Can't melt it either. They use it to line their tunnels with I think, though I have never been inside one.<sup>D</sup>

Talks adds, <sup>D</sup>We have no idea how they work it. No one is allowed inside their underground homes. They will defend themselves vigorously if threatened.<sup>D</sup>

I add, <sup>D</sup>And they can call large numbers to their aid. Best to leave them alone. You don't want them as an enemy.<sup>D</sup>

Talks shows amusement, <sup>D</sup>They are still in that cage because they choose to be. Those jaws are made of the 'thn metal and can chew their way out in a sec. They are intensely curious. They are studying you.<sup>D</sup>

That gets their attention. We dare not ask how they worked a portal. We were not part of their group at the time and would therefore not know that information. We are still undercover.

<sup>D</sup>Our warriors would make short work of them.<sup>D</sup> She does not appear to be sure of what she is saying.

<sup>D</sup>You can't even smash their shit. They are VERY fast as well. No weapon you have can stand against them. If they call the rest of the colony in you would be overrun with thousands, if not more of them. Whoever told you this was a good idea, either hates you or is curious to see how fast all of us can be killed by them.<sup>D</sup>

*I think you have upset them Mouse.*

*Good, this is insane playing with 'thants without knowledge and approval. If they knew who those two really were they would be flat on the ground asking for forgiveness and mercy.*

<sup>D</sup>You two are on latrine duty till further notice, since you seem to know so much about it.<sup>D</sup> Ha-ha. Not our first time. We assent and leave.

We know where it is and what to do.

*You did not have to give our identities away.*

*And you two could have avoided ever being caught. Not polite to play with non-TK sen.*

*We have orders to try and figure out how they managed a portal.*

*Playing nice and listening in seemed the right way.*

*Did you learn anything?*

*No. They were told to be where the portal opened, or rather where the two 'thants appeared, and then escort us to the compound.*

*Interesting. Sauron is out of the equation right?*

*As far as we know. We have made a lot of enemies though. Any TK6 or above could have set this up. That is our level.*

Would take a whole lot higher than a six to reach all the way to the 'thant world. They are keeping information from us as well. Great. Let's all stay in the dark and let whomever set this up win.

It will take time to be trusted. Being a Watcher is most of all learning to be patient. Could take years. Stuck in Drag form for years. What fun. Going rogue is starting to look attractive. It would be exciting at least.

Being a Watcher means getting used to grunt work. We called it a breaking in period. If you wanted to be TK for power, being a Watcher weeds you out. A least Drag poo is not as bad as Hu. Drags were made, or at least he thought he was the maker, by Sauron. The king of deception. Like father, like offspring. Tewk could only do so much without attracting attention. We come in from the far west, accents and all. Of course they are going to be suspicious. I would be.

*Slow down there. We are nobodies. No overachieving allowed.*

*Got it. Slow down.* Not supposed to be enjoying this. Even if it is better than ninety percent of the stuff we have been forced to do so far.

Talks attempts to smile again. Does not work.

*Now you know how I feel most of the time.*

We spent lunas doing what we were told. We did give them dirty looks all the time. We had to remain in character. No other Drag would have taken this without some reaction.

<sup>D</sup>Come with us. <sup>D</sup> What's up? No fair reading them either.

We are taken to the 'thant cage. Everything looks the same. Except they are feeding them lichens now at least.

<sup>D</sup>Prove to us what you were saying is true. <sup>D</sup>

I give the hand signal for the two to come out. I do this without looking at the 'thants, but staring down the Drag leaders for doubting us.

They bite the bars in several places and are out in a blink. Okay, Drag do not blink. Everyone is silent as they stand before us. Free.

# Di Eden

!I never thought I would be so happy to be back to good old boring as guano home. TK training was HELL.!

!How long were we gone? This place is a mess. Does not look like anyone has been here since we left. A lot of work to do.!

!Look at those melons though. At least we won't be hungry today. Worry about the rest tomorrow.!

!I think that is what got us into trouble on Madscar in the first place. Without even minimal TK abilities we would have died for sure.!

!No warning, no training, just bestow the 'gifts' and sit back and watch what happens to us. That was NOT fun.!

!Saved our tails once we got it though.!

!True. I guess I should be happy we are still alive. We are home. We have food. Shelter is a lot to be desired. Probably should be our first priority?!

!Let's do it!!

As we don't get tired and can see without sunlight, we just keep working till we have the place in a sort of livable condition. Checker used to do so much for us. I miss the little fem. The jungle variety were not as friendly. Not willing to be our slaves anyway. Failed with the Raps and now the Checkers. You would think we would learn to do things for ourselves instead of depending on others. Guess this is our chance.

!Someone is watching us. Be calm.!

!A whole lot of someones it appears. Let them come to us. I prepare treats I know they like.

The shelter was the easiest to get back to functional. The garden we let go naturally. Technically we could speed it up, but we are Watchers now. Besides seeing summer crops maturing in the winter would be suspicious. We did have to weed, plant, set up watering, etc. Still some work.

We go inside and something is wrong.

!Did you clean everything up after we left?!

Dark comes in. The place is spotless. He is carrying two of the melons for our meal.

!We are naturally slob. This is definitely not us.!

We finish our meal, and yes, we clean up afterwards. Seemed wrong not to clean up now. We spend some time, being dark outside now, trying to decide what we need to do next.

!A Watcher school would make sense.!

!I don't really feel qualified. We did not do so well on our own out there. If anything we need to go back to school ourselves.!

!Checker School!! We turn around and see five Checkers waiting.

# Bug Eden

\*Why do we always meet here?\*

\*Because no one else can interrupt us here. Simple.\*

\*I thought it was because we get to RUN!\*

The whole group picks up the pace. Running towards the sun. Glorious!

I turn to Edwin. Being a Bug is not that different from being a 'thant.

\*How are the 'boys' doing?\*

\*Surprisingly well. We may have actually found a place for them.

They even stayed in a cage for months they could easily, even as a nymph, broken out of.\*

\*The metal jaws have their uses. Any idea who set up the portal?\*

\*None and that is what bothers me. If it had been any other 'thants we could have ended up with a war.\*

\*I thought 'thants staid out of such nonsense.\*

\*We usually do, but even we have a right to defend ourselves.\*

\*Given that the boys could have taken out the entire Drag settlement with a thought. That is amazingly restrained.\*

\*They were curious. Who would set up such a stupid situation. Turns out there were two young Watchers present as well. They defused the situation without TK.\*

\*How?\*

When backed in an impossible situation, most fail.

\*They made up a cover story of being from the far west near our E2 portal and had interacted with 'thants before.\*

\*Are Drup and Rand still in the cage?\*

\*They are working with the Drag now, openly, outside the cage. When the Watcher told them the 'thants could be out of the cage at any time and invited them to do so, well, it became pointless.\*

\*How did it all start?\*

\*The metal lust. They do not have the tech to work it, but just the idea of a metal that can't be scratched was too much of a lure. Instead they are settling for the best excavation crew any sen could want. They might actually become pueblo Drag of all things. Cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.\*

\*Worked for the Hopi. Good for them for choosing flexibility over tradition.\*

\*Okay, you two, back to our real agenda.\* Sigh. Turtle is no fun.

\*First up is the question of Raijin.\* I have my own ideas, but probably should be quiet and see what others think first. Not easy for me.

# Enterprise

When you have found that virtually everything is sentient, just on a different time scale, what does it even mean to go boldly where no one has gone before? If sen are present, then obviously they have been there before. Old Hu stories don't make sense to me. Can't believe they made me watch the entire series. How did they even find them? Thousands of years old. Something about an archive only the high TKs know about.

I hate secrets. Can't blame the Hu. It would appear their entire being is tied into secrets, lies and misdirection. How can their TKs be any different? Yet, our leader is Hu. Dare I trust them? What is a gender anyway? So confusing. We long ago abandoned such needs. We have total control over our numbers. For some reason that makes the other sen on this contraption nervous. One would think just the opposite. I have viewed their histories. Insane. Overpopulation and wars to compensate.

*Zx to the bridge.* The closest they can get to our call. I put up with such indignities. They can't get it right even using TP.

Others back away when I come through. Why? Our touch does not sting or kill, we mean no harm to any sen. Histories com much about prejudice among their own. We should be the ones in charge, but we never developed the tech necessary. We never saw the reason for such a waste. Whole worlds were destroyed for them to get to this point. And they move away from me.

Pilot is looking at the view screen. We do not see in the same manner, so I see nothing. The Ku navigator nudges her and she turns around. Did I get the correct gender in my thinking? So confusing. She turns to face me and comes towards me. She offers the proper greeting and full contact protocol.

*Welcome Zgx!* Finally, one sen gets it right. I should be impressed except for the fact that everyone here should be capable.

*We believe we have found the missing ones. Please scan below to confirm.*

That is indeed exciting. I only agreed to this travel because of the slim hope they would find them. I concentrate and perceive the ones Pilot must be referring to. I turn to Pilot.

*Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the surface?*

She affirms and coms everyone. *Authorized DS from the bridge about to commence.* I DS us to the surface. Training said that we needed to go to the transporter room. Seemed to be a waste of time. Glad Pilot understood.

An away team appears next to us.

*Any behavior protocols the away team should follow?* Pilot asks.

*Scan only. Do not touch or collect anything. Watch where you step. Better if you TK a meter above the surface and touch nothing. I have had training of your kind. They have not and might take offense without intent.* Pilot nods to the others. Took me awhile to understand that gesture. I am also a meter above the surface. If this is them, they separated over a hundred thousand standard years ago, they will have adapted to this world to survive.

Pilot comes to me, *We hope that upon perceiving you, they will see we intend no harm. No hostile actions will be returned through misunderstanding.*

She has read some of our history as well. I am impressed by Pilot's willingness to understand well.

Thus we proceed. Time will be needed to travel to them. As with Hu, sudden appearances can be disturbing. They will have plenty of time to notice our progress and decide a course of interaction.

This world is in Farout. If they are of my sen, there had to be a reason they were brought here. We must honor that as well, but there may be much gained from understanding. To avoid a similar action taken later against my own world. There are some things that scare even us.

# Rap Eden

<sup>R</sup>You have now completed basic training. Well, most of you. Congratulations.<sup>R</sup>

That gets a nervous laugh. Basic was not easy. We lost half of our starting class.

<sup>R</sup>You will now continue on to Watcher training where you learn to use none of the gifts you have just been granted.<sup>R</sup> Lots of confused looks. The gifts are cheating in my way of thinking. I have always tried not to use them unless absolutely necessary and then only carefully.

<sup>R</sup>File out single file and follow TK Jark. Dismissed!<sup>R</sup>

I get in line with the others, but am pulled aside.

<sup>R</sup>Not you Raijin. They have a 'special' training and assignment just for you. Wait here, your new teacher will be along shortly.<sup>R</sup> I am beginning to see the wisdom of trying to be a nobody. Special usually mean pain if not difficult.

I wait.

I wait.

I wait.

I am good at waiting. They did this to us a lot to try and get us to break character and make mistakes. A Jane taught us various meditation practices. All helpful. Deeply appreciative. Even if they manifest as Hu. At least they do not smell like them and can com Rap. The surest sign of respect is when someone learns your com. I have attempted to learn as many of the Earth Froth sen coms as I can. Our extra set of vocal cords is a definite advantage.

I must have fallen asleep at some point. We do not normally sleep, except when we receive a new gift. I was a six, so this means I am now a seven. I stretch my scan and confirm the gift has been received. We were only told what the first six were, so unless my new instructor informs me, I will have to discern on my own. The library offered some clues. I will not be surprised.

*Welcome to Checker School Raijin.*

I turn to see Checker. We use TP when we don't want others to hear us.

*I missed you terribly. Are you my new instructor?* She was ahead of us on the TK scale, so this makes sense. I also like and respect her. She saved me and the others so many times. Of course I did not know at the time she was actually a Watcher. Never used TK in front of us.

*Do you know how the others on Madscar are doing? No one will tell me.*

*We are forbidden. I don't think you realize, but it has been nearly two*

*hundred years already since we were there. Others have taken on that responsibility. Do not be concerned. We have another task.*

*I am frozen. Not possible. Something has to be wrong.*

*I have been training for no longer than a year or two. It can't have been that long.*

*She points to the sky. Overcast. Hard to tell what time of day it is, or even where the sun is. In fact it is very strange. There are no shadows. No birds. The trees and bushes seem to be growing before my eyes. Occasionally one disappears suddenly.*

*What is going in Checker?*

*We are in what is called slow time. We are here to meet with someone who lives in slow time. It will have been over a thousand years before we return to fast time.*

*GREETINGS. I AM VERY HAPPY TO MEET YOU.*

*We are the two you have requested. We are happy to have met you too OM.*

*What is OM?*

*I am the ruler of this world. You two are necessary for the completion on my purpose.*

*What is your purpose?*

*Same as all life forms, to reproduce my kind. You two will help this world achieve a level of tech necessary for a green Rap to happen.*

*The sun starts to appear again, streaking across the sky and finally slowing down to the slow speed it normally moves across the sky. The birds are back. I can hear the wind again. A few other creatures stare at us and when they notice we can 'see' them, they quickly run away.*

*That was weird.*

*Is every time. This is only the second time I have experienced slow time. First time was nearly ten thousand years ago. Long before you were hatched, long before Rap Eden even existed.*

*Why us and what is expected of us in our service to OM sen.*

*We will be raised to TK 8, one more step for each of us. Then we will mate with a 'thn to each produce baby 'thn. We are to become Guardians.*

*About time you two got back. Hope you had a pleasant trip. The Rap Eden OM is fine I assume?*

*Before us is Br'thn, whom we had met in training briefly.*

*Checker answers, OM is fine. It was a challenge given that this world was made, not grown from a life spore like most others. Appears to have taken hold with our adopted OM just fine.*

*Excellent. We begin your training then. Shit, we are being trained by a 'thn. I nearly lose it and faint. Rap do not faint. It is a strange feeling.*

*Incoming. Was that Br'thn again?*

Another 'thn appears. She comes close to me. Why?

*I am Pr 'thn. Pleased to meet you. I have heard so much about you.*

She bobs. Why?

A turtle with a huge silver owl on top arrives clearly flustered and dis-oriented.

*Next time let me drive old man.*

The owl jumps off and transforms into an old Hu mal. The turtle then changes into an old Hu fem. They both bow to me.

The Hu mal comments, *Did someone break the Rap?*

Checker hisses and coms, *These two are the original Silver and Turtle.*

I look confused.

*From the TK training. You are lucky, very few students ever get to meet them.*

*Unless they are in real trouble. Turtle comments.*

*How can a Rap stand up to Myra, but loose it with just us? Personally I find a Meep much more intimidating.*

I finally com, *Not fond of Hu. You looked better as an Owl.*

Turtle laughs. I really hate the sound of a Hu laughing.

*She has you there Silver. She morphs back to a large desert turtle.*

*Ah, hum. Thanks for scaring the guano out of my student.*

*Your student. You got that wrong Checker. You had her for a lifetime.*

*Our turn now. Checker shows amusement. I know that look well. She pops out.*

Br'thn comes up to me and touches my head gently, then backs away. When I come aware again from this, all the rest have gone.

*Br 'thn, what is this all about really.*

*From your training, you know each sen world needs several things.*

*An OM to oversee evolution with the endpoint being a 'green man' or Rap equivalent in this case. This is how OMs reproduce. When a world is not inherently plantimal, tech five sen animal and TK is needed to finish the project.*

*Ultimately, you will mate with Pr 'thn to produce the next gen or 'thn. Your offspring will help you in your tasks here.*

*I have never mated with anyone.*

*Not the same. Don't worry. You will do fine and it is only once.*

*Do I have a choice?*

*Of course, but no one has ever declined. Great.*

# Enterprise

*All hands, I have an announcement.*

Now what? I stop what I am doing and wait. All hands usually means something important. Do not want to be distracted.

*Our former Captain, Pilot to most of you, will not be returning to the Enterprise. Ceph Tal has assumed command. That is all.*

What? I liked Captain Pilot. She was always kind to me. What happened? Is she okay? What about sen Zgx she was with? I sense the ship in motion. We have just broken orbit. A moment later we enter DS space. Being low on the pecking order, I will find out later what happened and where we are going next. I have only met Ceph Tal once. Captain Tal. Need to get used to the change.

I go back to cleaning up the mess hall. Each sen is messy in their own way. They don't intentionally make more work for me. Some new crew will attempt to help me clean up. That only makes it worse. I know what to do, where everything gets put, what sen like which condiments, eating tools, and so forth. Not that we Ku are good at eating without material flying everywhere. As was conveyed to me. Someone has to do it.

I traded a life cleaning up after others to gain an adventure very few Ku will ever come close to and a much longer lifespan. Oh, cluck, and I will never have to mate! That was huge for me.

There are other sen like myself. We each has an assigned task and area we are responsible for. Our living quarters are not as large, but adequate. Don't really need to build a nest. A few memories I keep of various places I have actually gotten to the surface to see. I was hoping to this time as well, but they were only down there a few arn before all this happened. We usually do not get 'shore leave' till a Farout world is rendered safe to visit. A TK8 can defend themselves against most anything, but us lowly threes and fours, not so much. I am fine with that.

Not that the worlds outside of Farout are any safer. We all have to deal with different customs and ideas while on board the Enterprise. We have had tolerance training, but still get taken by surprise once in a while. Makes it interesting. Not worth losing a few feathers over anyway.

Still Pilot was the Captain when I arrived. I wonder why she quit. Not like a high TK to ever quit anything. I am sure the ship gossip will give it up soon enough. Best get on with my cleaning chores. I want to be in time for the Ku chorus tonight. They are good. Well, other sen don't get us. Compared to the horrible screeching that the Hu do though, we are great.

# New Yesan Eden

@Com in Yesan is difficult.@

@Nothing like owl com you mean?@

@Not turtle either.@

@More like Bug, but harder.@

@When you don't have to run to stay alive, you have time to develop an actual culture.@

@Bet Bug Eden will change with the speeding up of the rotation. Already the climate extremes are mellowing.@

@Soon enough they will be out of the tunnels whenever they want.@

@Not too fast a rotation though. I always like seasons. A little heat and snow never hurt anyone. They need something to challenge them.@

@I remember what happens when we solved all their problems. The intelligence drops to slug level. No offense to slugs. Tasty as they are.@

@Euu! Speaking of which what is on the menu here?@

@Tewk was not that picky of an eater. Don't know if that was just trying to fit in, or what s/he was used to. We are in the right spot aren't we.@

@Relax dear. Life happens. Tewk will be here. Funny thing is I cannot find s/he among the others. I want to learn how to do that.@

@Here is a tip, stop screeching like an owl all the time.@

@Says the turtle with no verbal com. I think owl song is quite beautiful.@

*We are not alone.*

*I noticed some time ago.*

More appendages than a Bug, but workable. Not for running fast anyway, though they could still beat most Earth Froth residents.

We stare at our observer hoping to illicit some com. We really do not know all the rules in this complex culture.

@A larval Yesan knows more than you two. Glad you decided to come in away from everyone.@

@Not that easy, there is almost no unoccupied space on Yesan.@

Tewk transmits a compressed TP of the rules of s/he culture. We adjust our appearance to be low level cast members. No one notices the low ones. Watcher 101.

@Sam and Tia are here as well.@

@Makes sense, as you helped them awhile back.@

@I think they enjoy the quiet and lack of responsibility that went along with being a Guardian.@

@It was pretty intense there for awhile.@

@I am finding that they do better on their own. Already diversity is

improving. Without the Tafa interfering constantly they are free to try new ideas and adapt to needs rather than rules.@

@Instead of a totally unrealistic impossible ideal.@ I look at Silver. Of course he would com this. An owl just has to be free. Not good at social constructs. Not that turtles are much better.

Two more pop in. What is going on here?

Ah, Ron and Squeak.

They look at us and morph into what is a new form for them.

Tewk gives them the compressed culture class. Of course, this will only get us started and will not stand up to careful scrutiny.

@This are too many TKs to handle here. Someone will make a mistake and reveal us. I do not want the tales of wizards and witches to take hold here.@

@Tewk, who were you expecting to arrive?@

Sh/e hesitates then answers, @No one.@

We all look at each other.

Silver coms, @You have done a great job here. Keep up the good work. We shall leave you to it.@ He looks at each us as we nod acknowledgement.

We pop out to the far side Yesan's smaller moon. No one local, even with a farseer, can find us here. A structure that blends in is made and filled with a breathable atmosphere. Not that any of us need it, just more comfortable. Others make treats and tables and chairs for those who can use them.

"Wait, everyone chose Hu as the form for this discussion?" That gets a laugh from everyone.

Ron coms, "Figured if you were going to chew us out for failing, I would rather be in Hu form."

Squeak adds, "The most repulsive form we could think of." That gets another laugh. Hu is not any of our native form. Even Ron was Martian, which though derived from Hu, was barely seen as such. Interesting, in Hu for Ron is normal height and weight. I am just an old lady in traditional Hopi dress. Silver looks like a prospector out of some imaginary Western. Squeak is fem, but so nondescript she could blend in anywhere on either Earth. We all bow to her. She won this time. She is embarrassed by this apparently. Silly, but without some humor, which I will never admit to Silver, life is very dull, even for us.

I ask Squeak, "I am assuming you were looking for someplace to hide for a bit."

They both sigh and affirm.

Silver comments, "Seems to be contagious. Pilot has resigned to stay on a Farside world."

"It would appear that being a Watcher is not that easy."

“And may not be necessary. That is the role of a Guardian,” Squeak suggests.

Ron coms, “You remember Ronin. She is now Raijin and a TK6. She will mate with Br’thn when she reaches TK8 and produce her own kid to guard and help her raise a Rap to the Greenman status needed for the hybrid OM present.”

“Okay, we still need Guardians, and their helpers. I am assuming Raijin is not attempting this entirely on her own?” They affirm.

“I am wondering what the difference is. Most of the time, clearly not all of the time, but most of the time we worked behind the scenes to steer things. Almost no one new that Sauron, or Satan, really existed.”

“Yet Tewk was concerned that legends of witches and wizards did NOT propagate on Yesan. Most of the Earth Froth worlds have those legends, at least where TKs were present.”

“You have a point. How can we be both Guardians and Watchers?”

“The reason for the Watchers was to have a task for us that still allowed as much diversity as possible. The worry was that if the Guardians solved all the pressing problems we reduce diversity.”

“As we tend to duplicate what we already know.”

“Preciously.”

“Not an easy shell to crack.”

Ron reminds us, “And no one, I mean no one, expects us to solve this problem overnight.”

“It has been thousands of years since we first talked about Watchers.”

“Which is nothing in terms of multiverse time.”

“Summary, we got used to being Guardians . . .”

“And fighting the Sector ‘thn for our very survival.”

“That too. We wanted our own ‘kind’ to succeed. With visions of everyone happy, little to no suffering.”

“At the same time reaching for the stars, to boldly go . . .”

We all throw just made snowballs at Silver till he stops.

“Putting bullies in their place. We are universal in having had to deal with bullies.” Silver gives us a dirty look. Too bad.

“That is the hardest part of being a Watcher. Seeing it happen and not being able to interfere.”

“Or at least not get caught at it.” Ron smiles.

“We are fallible beings. Accept that and do the best we can. The Watcher paradigm was not placed on us from outside, but by choice.”

“And we are NOT the cult of perfection.”

A Yesan pops in. Not Tewk, at least I don’t think it is.

I com @Welcome. Are you lost?@

Silver nudges me, “I’m impressed you are able to com Yesan in Hu form.” I swat him back.

@I will not be here long enough to morph into Hu. I will remain Yesan so I can return quickly. I am Hu formerly known to you as Tia.@

We all exclaim at once, @Welcome Tia.@ Some are not so good in Hu form. Takes practice.

Squeak coms, @Tewk told to go go away. I suspect a fear that we would mess things up.@

@With good reason. We do not have a very good record in that regard. Should you even be com with us now?@

@I am here to answer your questions. We were not exposed to the Cult of Perfection as long as others, but it was still thousands of years. Imagine what that would do to Hu or Rap culture. Still it has been a challenge. Only now is some diversity occurring. Mostly regional differences, but that always starts at the individual level. This is a long term project.@

@In other words please stay away for the next five thousand years.@

@We will monitor this location on our moon. If anyone arrives, we will know. However, because we all have identities below, we may not be able to respond immediately.@

@We could also just leave questions in written Hu, which no Yesan except the three of you would understand? Then you could answer when convenient. None of us needs an immediate answer either. Interest is likely to fade over time as well.@

@Unless a world killing emergency happens. Then we will contact you directly if we are unable to resolve the situation on our own. Not likely. Being on an arm of the galaxy well away from others is about as safe as it gets.@

@A star nearby will not go nova for approximately two froths from now, so any other threat is likely to be 'thn or TK. Those do not give much warning.@

@We are three high TKs. We can take care of ourselves. I need to leave.@ She pops out. She? No matter.

“She did not get that attitude from Tewk. Wonder what is going on?”

“Just leave it alone Silver. You don’t have to stick your nose in every-one’s business. They are allowed an existence without your approval.”

“Whoa, who stuck a bee up your backside?” He really can be too much at times. I know he means well, but every sen is allowed the space to figure things out themselves. You do remember the diversity mandate right?

Ron and Squeak look at both of strangely. They both nod and pop out.

Silver looks at me like it is all my fault. Great. I pop out. Let him find his own way home.

## Earth Two

My call is Migj. I am Thirteen summers old. I am training to be a chronicler. Not as glamorous as a warrior or explorer. I would have liked to be an explorer, only I don't like starving or eating strange things because of starvation.

I listen to other Drags when they come in to report and I record it so others can benefit. If the Drag in question is around long enough I am allowed to ask questions to clarify details I don't understand. Most times the Drag is passing through and I don't get a second chance. These are usually messengers. Spreading news to each settlement so that all may benefit.

I have only seen a Hu a few times. Ugly things, but it would be good for me to learn at least how to understand them, to include their stories with ours as they relate to our needs. To most Drag, interacting with any Hu for any reason is disgusting. Most will go out of their way to avoid them. My understanding is they had a large influence on our being here, but no one will tell me that story. They want to break completely free of Hu influence and be pure Drag. Do everything the Drag way. The superior way.

I had a teacher for awhile. Soon I will be assigned a student. The records are maintained even if one of us dies. Not all Drag die in battle. Nice thought.

I have heard that the Hu use something called 'paper' made from wood pulp. I have tried, as have others, but we are missing the essential fine mesh screen. I would need access to something called a loom. A Hu tech item. At the moment I spend a lot of time skinning our food animals, removing the fur, that takes forever, and preparing the skin to be flexible enough to write on and absorbent enough to accept the ink. I have to make the ink as well. In an emergency, blood will do. Does not matter from where. A legendary Drag used his own blood, written on a rock before he died. Others copied the writing onto skins after he was found. I do not intend to be a legend.

The biggest problem is that the more I write, the more skins I have to carry. I cannot run with the heavy pack I have already. What happens as it gets bigger? I hope they find an assistant soon.

<sup>D</sup>Come on Smiggle, keep up!<sup>D</sup> I am teased a lot. Only the chief will stand up for me, but she cannot be around all the time. I am the last to arrive at our new camp. We will be here for the summer. There is another settlement near by we want to interact with. This is the part of my life I enjoy the most. Every settlement has at least one recorder. I will not be alone for a brief period.

It is still a few more days before I meet their recorder. The warriors have to play games first to try and convince one another they are better than the other Drag. So stupid.

By then the rumors have made it back to me. I do not record these, as I have no proof. I cannot waste skins on lies. They com of a mythical beast, two in this case, that no warrior can win against. Some of our Drag are enormous, many times my weight and strength. Not even the wild animals will stand against them. This of course makes me curious. A horrible Hu trait that goes with being a recorder. When I enter their settlement to meet their recorder I think I see one of the creatures, but it disappears before I am sure.

The recorder sees my actions and motions me towards them, a fem in this case. We can be either gender. We all have one thing in common, this is the only task we are allowed to do because we are not good enough to do anything else. We go through the normal greeting rituals. Never liked those either as they involve sniffing each other.

She looks around to be sure no one is watching us. Usually the case.  
<sup>D</sup>Come with me.<sup>D</sup> She turns and walks around a large mound of rocks. We are silent. A trait we have both learned to avoid being bullied. Keep your head down and keep quiet.

<sup>D</sup>Remain still and let it get to know you.<sup>D</sup>

Huh? I cautiously and slowly look up anyway and come face to face with a monster! I am quiet and do not react. Bullies love to get a reaction out of you. They seem to feed on it even. It does not attack me, but seems to be looking at me, I think. How would I know?

I bow to honor it. It bows in return. Coincidence or is it sentient?

Fek touches my arm, <sup>D</sup>It is okay, s/he will not bite. This is one of the two 'thants who live with us.<sup>D</sup>

I look at s/he and ask, <sup>D</sup>My call is Migj, what is yours?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>What are you doing Migj?<sup>D</sup> I turn to see a Drag mal. I bow to him.

<sup>D</sup>I meant no offense. I just assumed s/he was sen and would therefore have a call.<sup>D</sup>

The mal turns to Fek, <sup>D</sup>This one is a keeper. Bring her into the fold.<sup>D</sup> He leaves. What fold? What does that even mean? I turn back to the creature and wait.

It chitters at me.

<sup>D</sup>Sorry, I do not understand.<sup>D</sup>

*Then it would be best that I instruct you. My name is Rand. The other 'thant is named Drup. I am better looking, that is how you can tell us apart.*

<sup>D</sup>Smaller is how I tell them apart.<sup>D</sup> Fek hands me. I am motionless, not out of fear, but wonder. My entire existence has just changed.

# Di Eden

!This is another fine mess you have gotten us into Dark.!

!So it would appear.!

We are in a remote location outside the city. We are in Rap form. Disgusting, repulsive, and everything else you can think of it. I feel so small.

We are the guardians of a portal.

!Why Rap form though?!

!If you were a Rap fleeing the city would you trust two Di next to a portal, the likes of which you had never seen anything remotely close?!

<sup>R</sup>Then we need to stop com in Di too?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>When have you ever met a Rap in Di Eden who did not understand Di? Of course most of the Di population does not understand Rap, but Di were the oppressors. Were you asleep during class?<sup>R</sup> I would have liked to have been asleep. I miss sleep the most of everything that has changed. To curl up in a nice warm padded borrow. Even in the shade on a sunny day would work. I am not particular. Just bring me back sleep. Now if I do fall asleep I can expect to awaken with a new gift that I will be drilled to death about. I fear sleep now.

I scan down the trail. Guano.

<sup>R</sup>Incoming. Activate the portal first. They're running. No time for games. Be ready to deactivate, a few monster Di on their tails.<sup>R</sup>

We purposely chose a spot that looks nearly identical on both Di and Rap, even if we had to work a bit to make it that way. The portal is now active, but does not look funny to the untrained. We can't have them avoiding the portal at the last moment. Gathering them up again is a lot of work.

Slayer motions them forward, <sup>R</sup>This way, this way. We will be right behind you! Move!<sup>R</sup>

Rather than get suspicious of two old Raps this far away from the everything, they accept us and run right through the portal, disguised as overlapping tree branches. We follow them and turn off the portal. I would love to be on Di when this happens and we all disappear around the small hill with not even foot prints to show what happened. We learned the hard way this was a winning strategy. Of course we are not the only pair either. Others have set up similar situations all over Di Eden. Should not be long now before all Rap are gone from Di.

Then we can begin our true task. How do you steer a bunch of overweight lazy Di into doing their own chores and work. If the Rap had stayed Di would go extinct very soon. We may have called it too close, but they deserved a chance.

# Rap Eden

<sup>R</sup>That's how all the Rap ended up on Rap Eden and none left on Di Eden, or should we call it Di Hell?<sup>R</sup>

I show amusement, <sup>R</sup>Still have not learned.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am ashamed to have been born there. Can we stay here?<sup>R</sup>

Sayer coms, <sup>R</sup>I don't think our masters would agree to that.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Sigh, worth a try right?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You two are here to learn from us. How we did things right. Not party and relax.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Rub it in.<sup>R</sup> Dark is not happy either.

<sup>R</sup>What was it like being with your OM?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I was only there for a moment. Just to establish my part in the process. If I had stayed I could have missed everything. As it was, I was gone for nearly a thousand years.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We know, we know. Left alone on Di to do all the work. No Rap TK to help us out. It is amazing we survived at all.<sup>R</sup> Slayer gives me a very sad look.

<sup>R</sup>Won't work on me any longer.<sup>R</sup>

These two are going to be a pain. I would not trust them with a pack of stuffed hatchling toys. The key may be that they are technically Watchers. I am not under that restriction. I have also learned a lot in a short time. I hide my amusement.

I pop us out. Or rather up. During practice I learned to make an orbital observation post four hundred clicks above us. A nice place to get away and think.

<sup>R</sup>There is enough mass here to make what you need to survive and you are close enough to see what is going on below you without messing anything up. You are to observe ONLY. Got that? I outrank you by two TK now and I will enforce my edicts. Mess up and you will be fitted with limiters and spend the rest of your time in a labor camp splitting rocks or sent home with a note that will fry your teacher's brain.<sup>R</sup>

They are motionless and quiet. I pop out. I doubt this will work. TK 6's. They could just pop right back down. They will as soon as they get bored. Di bore easily. That is their downfall and the reason Raps have done so well recently. We think longer term.

I am under no illusions. At one time I am sure Di were ambitious enough and hungry enough to put time and energy into the well being of their kind. We have the advantage of being pack oriented from the first jump. Di suffer from the Hu individualism defect. The trick is to allow enough diversity to be able to solve problems without everyone going off in a different direction. That means, no matter what we work together.

I proceed to my task for today. We are currently tech three. It has been slow and careful. So, far minimal environmental damage that doomed the Hu. I don't correct mistakes, but let them know and they figure out a way to correct to fix it themselves. Likewise, there is some class structure, but again minimal. No kings and queens hogging resources and becoming overweight parasites.

The biggest advantage we have has been in the area of personal possessions. We still limit personal ownership to what can be carried on your back for a hundred clicks. Just lifting it is not enough. You can't eat gold or jewels. We have no money to hoard. Power, such as it is, is by consensus and can change at a moment. Leaders tend to offer advice rather than commands. Leaders come from those who consistently offer good advice. I follow the same rules. I own almost nothing but the cloth on my back, a few utility tools, a cup and bowl. I change my coloration to blend in with the local packs.

Right now I am back on Madscar. I still have a fondness for the place, even though it has radically changed since I lived here. A Checker runner acknowledges me and keeps running. Checkers are valued partners and in no way second class. They make their own decisions about where to live and whom to live with. If Raps treat them badly, they lose their assistance and com spreads to others.

We are carnivores. Try as we have, there does not seem to be a way around that. It would be easier to eat lower on the sen scale. Some meat substitutes serve as emergency rations. They store for a long time and have saved many a community. But, nutrition wise they are lacking, for the moment. We are just starting to explore genetic manipulation, as an addition to selective breeding. It will take time to bare offspring.

Selective breeding has given us rodents the size of an Earth sheep. Docile, easily herded and vegetarian. Open pasture, water and a shelter in a storm are all they need. Some Checkers have taken on the shepherding role, liking to be outside. A few Raps prefer the alone aspects of the task as well. Yes, we encourage diversity. Not going to make that mistake.

Checkers generally have more patience for inside lab oriented research tasks. Raps are more likely in construction and larger projects. There is overlap. No one complains. Our Checkers are descendants of the jungle checkers 'native' to Rap Eden. Nothing here is truly native, but they have been here from the beginning. The Checker, whom I lived with during my norm period helped set this up and checks in regularly. We still meet for discussions, problem solving and story telling.

There is talk of a Checker Eden. Another reason not to abuse our association. They are equals, not servants. And yes, there are some settlements that are mostly Checker in numbers. That is fine with everyone.

# Earth One

Winter will be early. My family is starving. I must be successful today. My kayak is getting old. Needs new skins to repair it. I would be happy with a small seal at this point. I scan the horizon and see nothing. I sharpen my harpoon to pass the time, scanning and waiting. Even the waves are silent today. I have been successful here before. I dare not move for fear I will be noticed.

My stomach growls. My eyes grow weary.

I think I hear something behind me and slowly turn to look.

I am staring into the face of a huge whale! I nearly capsize in shock, recover and raise my spear. This would be enough to feed my entire village through the winter. I would be the hero for years to come.

The whale spouts and gets me wet. I raise my spear again. Only one chance. Must pierce its heart on the first try or I will likely be drowned from the back splash it struggles to escape.

The world goes blank. I have no idea what happened or even where I am. I can't breathe, but don't feel the need to breathe. Strange. I must have drowned? Nothing happens.

*It is forbidden to hunt or kill any air breather on, in, or near the sea. Fish you may take. Snails and their kind you may take. Failure to heed this law will result in the destruction of you and your kind from this world.*

What was that? I wake up. I am in my boat. The spear is gone. There are many large flopping fish in the space next to me.

*You are to be a messenger to all your kind. Failure to heed this law will result in the destruction of your kind from this world. There will be no second chance. Obey or die.*

The whale disappears below the waves.

I paddle back to shore. What am I going to do? I look at the fish. They will help for maybe a week, but then what? I have never seen this type of fish before. How do we hunt them?

When I return the other hunters are all excited. It would appear that I was not the only one to receive the message. People are already preparing the fish they were given. I bring mine in and start processing them.

# CoTu Farout

Zgx and I, in the same form, have made contact with the locals. Separation apparently occurred much more recently than we initially thought. They are of Zgx's sen species, the CoTu. They have been here since just before the GRC was shut down and abandoned. Likely the last of the sen the Tafa had a hand in. Though they have thrived here, there are still less than a million present. Numbers get a bit tricky as the easiest form of reproduction is to simply split in two. Smaller pieces, from whatever cause, can also recombine making a mosaic individual. This can be done consciously during times of great need when knowledge and skills need to be amplified quickly.

I will likely be expected to participate at some point. Not sure how a TK8 should be shared out though. There is knowledge it would not be safe for me to share in so intimate a manor. For the moment Zgx has declared that I recovering from an unknown illness and do not want to infect others. It would certainly be an extreme cultural infection to com the least. Worst case I can simply leave.

There are plants and other animals here. I could assume the form of one of those. CoTu eat by filtering materials out of the air. Most of the life forms here produce aerial seeds and such. They filter these out to feed themselves. Easy enough. They have thousands of 'mouths' to work on this task. A small colony of CoTu can clear the air in a canyon in a few arns. Enough escape to reseed the food sources.

A very humid world in which their star is rarely seen. Lots of small land masses separated by a sea that is only partly salty. This was how we explained our presence. We were able to drift in from another island on a made raft.

Not sure any of this would work on another sen world. That rules out any CoTu who are not TK and therefore able to care for themselves. I am here for the long term and do not have to understand everything in one solar.

I place them at Tech 3. Though they do not have arms and hands as such to manipulate their environment, they are able to chemically and biologically make use of their surroundings to their benefit. They affect others to do physical tasks for them. Most sen start out this way. Horses, dogs, cattle and fowl certainly benefited early Hu development.

Surprisingly they do have fire and simple mineral extraction. The later done chemically, but the fire is used to concentrate and mold the metal for their uses. Have not seen it actually happen though.

Housing is simple, think cement aggregates. Sort of coral castles.

# Earth One

“They are coming. Now do you believe me?”

The small group do indeed look strange. Black and white cloth covers with some sort of strange head piece built of straw? Very strange. When they get closer I can see small patches of white placed randomly on their cloth, but more numerous near the head region. They each carry a staff with a carved top end that makes no sense to me.

“What do we do?”

“They are only two. Let them come to us. Then we will decide.”

“But they are carrying weapons.”

“I have a feeling that they are not here to fight. They are out in the open and show no signs of aggression.” I look beyond them and see no others following either. In the distance I can hear the waves crashing on the shore. That along with the wind tells me a storm will be here by nightfall.

When they get close enough we come out from behind the rock we were on to watch them. They see us and bow formally. Few do that any more. We look at each other, then return the bow.

“Welcome to the land of the Acorn People. What is your business?”

“Simple pilgrims spreading the gospel and a warning to heed the words.” That makes me suspicious. The old ones tell of others who have tried to deceive us with their words. They take our food, rape our women and make off with our sacred symbols.

“In the interest of hospitality, we offer you a nights lodging. A storm is approaching.”

“A storm far more dangerous than what comes this night will befall us if our words are not heard and obeyed.” I hand Little Oak to play along. If they are dangerous, once we get back to the others, they can be easily overcome with our numbers.

“Follow us then.” Best to keep our com to a minimum so we give nothing of ourselves away that can be used against us. They are equally quiet and follow. Both much older than we are and darker of skin. Not from around here. Their com sounds strange as well.

When we get close, Little Oak runs ahead to tell the others and help prepare. Will not be boring tonight. The wind is really picking up and the sky continues to darken.

We finally arrive at our camp and everyone is running around preparing for the storm. Two see us and stop, they bow, then run off again.

# Di Eden

We were hoping to get to stay on Rad Eden longer, but it was clear we were not wanted. We spent our time in orbit watching and learning as much as we could. Rap are very different from us. They eat a lot of meat, they run in packs, their leaders get no more material goods than anyone else. They are a higher tech level than we are and they started with nothing. We on the other claw, regressed as everything broke down. Our population is no longer sustainable and is crashing. Maybe that is a good thing. We can build anew. The Hu did this a lot as we learned from our readings.

The trick is to find the knowledge ones and isolate them from the carnage. Plant knowledge seeds in several location for redundancy reasons. This has the unfortunate effect for making for power struggles later if more than one survives. We need to get through this crisis first though.

!You two are almost ready to begin helping.! White shows amusement at Libby's com. We both sigh and look annoyed. Has not been easy.

Dark asks, !Why did you choose us? We are clearly not good enough for this life. We are horrible in fact.!

!Ah, my dear one, if we had chosen someone who was already a leader, they would not have learned from their mistakes or from us. It is good that you see yourselves as flawed. We all are. The secret is to acknowledge this and learn to do better. Being high TK does not mean anything other than being high TK. All of us have regrets and wish we could go back and do it over again.!

!Right, even the 'thn?! I ask. They both nod enthusiastically. Guano.

!Their only advantage is in having made many more mistakes over a much longer time period.!

!We are here.! Libby announces. We are where? A run down building in front of us. There are Di inside, crowded even. Hiding is my guess. Not safe to be outside during the day when gangs patrol looking for anything to take for themselves. We even hear a commotion a few blocks over.

!We will wait outside. You two go inside and remove anyone who might help us.!

!That is a bit vague.! They offer no further information.

The door is heavily bared. Well, as best they can. A determined gang could get in with some effort. Ah, they have an escape tunnel. Too many to all get out in time. Guessing the crowding was recent.

*The other end of their tunnel is in trouble.* Dark hands me.

We go there and start clearing it, by hand, no TK. Another building has collapsed and partially blocked it.

*The gang is coming this way, better hurry you two. Great.*

No time to be discrete. We used TK to assist our efforts. We run inside and make it to the room where everyone is gathered.

I announce, !Gang at the main entrance. They have already looted and killed everyone in a building a few blocks away. We have cleared the escape route. We need to hurry.! So much for being selective.

White and Libby and waiting for us at the escape exit. They show amusement as everyone comes out into the light.

!Where do we go from here?! Dark asks.

I have an idea. I lead everyone to a still intact building that is not what it seems. In the entrance hallway I have placed a portal to an area well outside of town, hundreds of clicks away actually. We rush everyone through. I close the portal after closing the door hiding it. A small hut is all that remains on this side.

!This group is smart. They brought tools and supplies with them.! Dark announces. That will make this much easier.

White announces to everyone, !Welcome to your new town. Some assembly required.! Many show amusement. Most are just scared silly, afraid to move. Others look around trying to figure out what happened.

Libby and White go to the shack, enter, close the door, and of course are gone. We are on our own again. A curious young one opens the door and of course finds nothing inside. He slowly closes it again looking very confused. Welcome to our world kid.

Discussion ensues among themselves. Finally groups start separating and start getting to work. Stones are gathered to start construction of a building, fire pits, etc. Others fan out looking for whatever food can be found. A few larger ones pick up their saws and head for a bunch of trees. Firewood and supports are both needed.

!I don't think they need us Slayer.!

!I think you are correct Dark. Do we stay and see what happens?!

!Who knows, we might even learn something. It would appear the less we do the better.!

!I thought we were going to have to find one or two who were special and isolate them, but it would appear the entire group is needed.!

!Even the ones who make mistakes all the time. Hmm, did we just learn something?! I swear I can hear Libby and White laughing and Di do not laugh exactly. I have been contaminated by Hu. Guano.

!And no one knows what we did or that we are anything special. I like it!!

## Earth Two

Had I known what ‘into the fold’ meant I would have run into the nearest fire pit and killed myself. What I am being trained for I do not know. I don’t know even why me. Something to do with what Fek and the ‘thants do or rather intend to do. The Drag elder who said I was to be included is called Mouse. Why would any Drag ever agree to being called Mouse. No one messes with him though. I don’t know why. He looks just like any other recorder and we are the lowest. Anyone can tell us what to do and how to do it. We are the major brunt of jokes, pranks, put-downs and of course blame. But not him.

The highest class are the warriors. There is rank there of course, as with all aspects of our lives. Grackt is the champion warrior in this settlement. Makes no difference to me. I just avoid the entire class. No idea why I am even thinking about this. I should be worried more about what they intend for me.

The first lunar has been intensive physical training. Why? Recorders do not need to be strong, fast, whatever. Most of us are short sighted from long arns in near darkness trying to record events. We are given the left-over food, sleep in the coldest dampest shelters and can be kicked or hit by anyone who feels like it. So why get stronger? Not so we can fight back. That would be suicide.

We also had classes in what was called our true history. Lord Sauron was not well spoken of. I am beginning to suspect Hu influence in this narrative. Our Lord hated smiggles. That gets sounds of amusement. Like we did not already know that? Our enemy, the Hu did also. Did not know that. But, they had no problem using whatever the smiggles came up with that would benefit the leaders and warriors, usually the same.

It is rare that a smiggle is allowed to mate and contribute to our kind, so why do we still exist? It seems that the smiggle ‘gene’ whatever that is, is something called ‘recessive’ and can reappear if both the mal and fem have this gene. Still low odds. Of course, some hatched smiggle learn quickly to fake being normal and do good enough to pass at least at the lower levels. Being a grunt warrior is still better than being a smiggle.

I suspect that if it were not for the desire of the grand and glorious to have their deeds recorded for generations, we would not exist at all. Killed as soon as smiggleness was seen. Even now many eggs are smashed before hatching, suspected of being defective somehow. Smiggles for sure.

There are now three of us, myself, Fek and a new one just arrived, Hpr. All mal for the moment. Rumor has it there are fem being trained separately. Forbid the idea that we ever got together and produced pure

smiggle hatchlings. I am too tired to mate anyway. Just a fantasy.

We are woken up in the middle of the night and led off. I am too tired to remember how or where. At least there is a fire. We huddle to keep warm and help stay awake. I nod off anyway. It is wonderful to be warm and asleep. A rare treat.

When I wake, I notice everyone else is waking up too. At least I will not be singled out. Mouse comes in.

<sup>th</sup>Listen up. If you understand what I com, raise your right arm. <sup>th</sup>

We all do so. My mouth falls open. That was not Drag or Hu, the two com I have at least heard before. Now I remember, it is ‘thant com! We can understand ‘thant now! How, why, are not known, but I am thrilled to have learned any new com, but ‘thant, is beyond wonderful. Beyond any dreams I have ever had. I am doing my happy dance. I don’t care if anyone else makes fun of me. Mouse shakes his head, but shows amusement.

<sup>D</sup>Can we com ‘thant too?<sup>D</sup> I ask Mouse.

<sup>D</sup>Not yet, but soon. More training and changes need to happen first. What, you did not think this was the end of training did you?<sup>D</sup> That grin I recognize. Usually seen just before being beaten up by a warrior. Guano.

Hpr asks me, <sup>D</sup>What is a ‘thant?<sup>D</sup> Not com’d correctly, but I get it.

I am confused, I thought having met one was a requirement to be here. Maybe it was just me and Fek and of course Mouse. I suspect Mouse has known of them for some time though. Which is strange as they have only been here less than a solar season. I have read the records on them that I could find.

A lower class warrior enters our area, <sup>D</sup>Celebration of Sauron’s Return at dusk. Be there!<sup>D</sup> She roars and walks out. The yearly ritual of making fun of the smiggles. We are required to be there to record the triumphs of the warriors. It goes on for arn and arn and arn. We get hit a lot to ‘help the com sink in’ is what we are told. Does keep us awake. I could easily sleep through the entire thing, even with all the noise making, boasting, threats, and so on.

Mouse tells us, <sup>D</sup>Best get some rest before then. This will go on till dawn. The two tribes are merging. That will make is much worse than usual.<sup>D</sup> Great. How do I rest knowing I will likely die tonight? Why is our tribe merging with this one? We have met several in my time, never merged before. What has changed. I curl up next to the fire and try to sleep some anyway. Shaded by a large bolder to keep the sun off my face helps too.

# Earth One

A third pod called awareness of the strange one

Eyes are confused. Sonar does not register anything there

They just can't help but mess with me. Cet are good, but not at everything. Sonar only works with something of different density. There is one that confuses our eyes but does not show as solid. A Meep. I never trusted those things. The perfect ones to spy on us if I was not already high TK.

By now the Church of Whales has made it down all the coasts. No point in going further inland. No Cet to be hunted unless you count the occasional river dolphin. The local Hu there would never allow it, as they rightfully worship their superiors. The ones passing the command along are only needed for a generation. After the old ones are gone, no one would even think of hunting us any longer. We become just another deity in their stories.

Recently we lost three more and one was a young calf. Going after an old adult I get, sort of, though still not right. Where this happened was among those who were warned. I need to make an example. If I went on mass equivalent I could take out an entire village. That is what I should do.

Hu are like dogs, if you don't strike fast they do not connect the crime with the punishment. I pop over to the waters nearest the village. Hu are amazingly stupid. Right now, their boats are on the water and they have spears. Not needed for fish. They do not believe the warnings or they are so hungry and desperate they don't care. Not a valid excuse.

I fill their boats with fish and issue a final warning, *Leave or die!*  
*NOW!*

TP is so scary to those who have never experienced it that it usually works. I wait to see what happens. Each boat throws all but a few of the fish over the side. Not starving then. Miracle fish, commands broadcast in their heads and they still don't get it? Amazingly stupid. Stupid sen have no rights in my thoughts. I watch them and they are still hunting a small right whale who got lost from the others. I sink their boats. Cold water takes care of them. There are a lot of reasons why fishers do not return from a hunt. I send a note to the local Church of Whales to back up my actions and to warn the local villages.

I do a thorough scan of the surrounding areas to be sure there are no other boats out hunting my kind. I then alert the local pods to be on awareness and report back if they sense anything as well. Finally the locals now have permission to sink any boat actively hunting us. NO mercy! No more games, no more chances! This stops NOW!

# Rap Eden

I now have two packs of TKs under my direct command. There are others scattered about our settled space to keep an eye on things. These are Watchers in the classical sense. They do not interfere, but do report back to us. No surprises.

During my training I was impressed by the Hu. Still don't like them, but they also went through a period in their history similar to what we are experiencing now. Lots of feudal lords trying to conquer territory for resources or just ego. I have no problem is they are good at command and coordination. If they can bring Raps higher up the sen tech ladder. But, they are just after personal gain and bragging status, they make me very mad. I have not gone all through this just so some fancy Rap can look good for a few years. Yeah, you will grow old, get sick and die. I did. The difference was I had set up well in advance how others could take on my tasks and keep it going. It did not end with me.

When I visit different locations it does not take long for me to see ideas that were started on Madscar and continue to hold influence, even in far away lands. My effort now was just to be lost again.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, you are needed at the meeting in less than an arn.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Thanks for the reminder. I will be there.<sup>R</sup>

The com has changed of course, but we still call it standard Rap. New tech means new coms. New plants, animals, ideas also add to our com. This was expected. I still find pleasure in doing things by physical means alone. No machines, no TK, just grunt and work hard. Cutting firewood for the kiln is a pleasure now, not a chore.

I go to the meeting, but am clearly not participating and really do not want, nor need, to be there. I slip out when an argument breaks out, as it always does. We have a good library, in Rap script, that even covers some of the history of the other Earth froth sen. The idea is to learn from others and not repeat their mistakes. This is very difficult to do. Each thinks they have the answer and want to try it or convince others to try it. The world is large enough, population and resource wise now, to allow for some experimentation. I actively encourage it. Not everything needs to be based on the millennium old Madscar model. Actually none of it should, different time, different needs.

I wander down to the docks. Sailing is still relatively new for us. Fortunately, it is at the wood and cloth stage. Better for our environment too. Burning carbon was a huge mistake of the Hu and a few others. Not on my watch. Of course we are staying close to the coast line for now.

They are loading a ship. I slip in with the others to help out. Time off.

# New Edwin Land

<sup>th</sup>The ones watching rand and Drup on Earth Two have returned. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Send them to me once they check in with the recorders and have fed. <sup>th</sup> They had access to ‘wild’ lichens. Not always a good idea. A med check is part of the process with the recorders when send off world.

That gives me a few arn before then to prepare. Rand and Drup cause problems. That is a given. Everywhere they go this happens. Not intentional, they just don’t think ahead very far. They were here less than a luna and have changed us forever. Workers are demanding, yes demanding, time off to have ‘fun’ of all things. At first I thought it was a virus of some kind. In the countless incarnations and billions of years in this one, this has never happened. Because of the diversity imperative I have been advised to watch and wait. No sign of any genetic infection. Are there psiotic viruses?

I scan and just as they are leaving the recorders I pop over.

<sup>th</sup>They have it now as well. When they left they were clear. They had to have caught it on E2. We kept them isolated, as you advised, till then. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>This will definitely reduce our efficiency. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>It would appear that the Queen and I are the only ones who have not caught this? <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>So it would appear. It is not terminal. No ‘thant has died of it. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>But it does waste time. <sup>th</sup> They affirm. I leave. It is not the physical aspect of repeating the behaviour or I would have it too. The Queen would not of course. I make my way to the feeding station they would use.

They have just left, but not in the direction of my office. I follow. Sure enough they have joined others and have begun the wasteful behaviour. It will be at least an arn before they tire. I return to my office.

There have been twenty three meetings over the “R/D” contamination on just E2 alone. This does not count the other systems they have infected. The strange thing is that they have not infected the local sen on E2. Only ‘thants appear to be affected when they visit E2. Again, it is not the act itself. The Hu have been acting this way since their creation and till now have never infected others. Rand was once Hu, but so were countless other high TKs. Clearly not just the physical.

Wait, there was a reference to a visit to Bug. I look this up in the archive. They all appear to have been affected on that visit, but when they returned, they were fine. Could Bug have been the true source? They do not retain their forms when visiting or returning. Is it connected to the physical form? Could just placing an infected ‘thant in a new form cure them?

They finally arrive. I keep them waiting till I finish my report. This is what wasting someone's time feels like. They are as patient as well, 'thants.

<sup>th</sup>Report. <sup>th</sup> I do not look up.

The senior one offers a written record. She finally gives up and places it on my desk. I read it an arn ago and ignore it. The Library will want it though.

I finally look up and stare at them. They bow and leave. They are still young. Probably should have sent more experienced operatives, but I wanted a pair who had not been infected yet. If there was no infection on E2 and they had passed it on, I would have never heard the end of it from the high council.

I am wasting time fussing over something that in the entire scheme of things is trivial, I think.

The situation is out of my claws anyway. The high council decided to let this one play out, as they say.

Sauron set up the Drag as a way of messing with the Hu, just as he had done two froths ago. Tewk messed with this new creation without his knowledge. This much is part of record. As Watchers we were not to interfere.

What the council decided was the Drag were not a 'natural' sen. They were fabricated in a fraction of the time necessary for selective breeding of any local life form. They were set up to try and delete the Hu from E2. A way of Sauron trying again to achieve his goal of domination of earth and ultimately at least this regional area of the galaxy. In his mind he was wronged by everyone. This was to be his revenge.

The Drag are not stable. Almost impossible with such a rush job. Already they are showing weaknesses, self destructive behaviours that will collapse their culture and possibly even their genome. Even natural sen have a definite lifespan. All we have to do is wait. In all likely hood, R/D will speed up the process. I have been told not to interfere. I Wait. There is no sen more patient than a 'thant. I can wait a long time.

Back to studying the virus that has infected our colony. Of course we are not the only 'thant colony, but to be safe I have closed off all contact with other nearby colonies. They would have done the same, even if it has never happened before. Ever. Given my association with the Thirteen, maybe this is not a surprise to anyone.

# Earth Two

The solstice party commemorating our Lord Sauron has gone all night long. We now have three colonies combined into one super colony and this celebration is of course much louder than past ones. Each colony needs to prove themselves stronger, louder, better than the other two colonies. Just seems stupid and a waste to me.

Not interested, even to record. I am hiding in the records hut, sorting through my latest writings. We have never had ‘thants before so I am being very careful about my records. This could mean a lot to future recorders. This is where it started. Until the ‘thants arrived we did not try to bring our separate colonies together. We will run out of resources soon. Unless they decide to take what they want from the weaker colonies, or even from the Hu. Hu have higher tech, but we are stronger. Great numbers on both sides are likely to suffer.

I am getting very tired and keep falling asleep. I finally blow out the fat light and curl up. I won’t get much sleep until they stop. It already seems to be getting quieter or I am so sleepy I am no longer hearing them. It is amazing to me that all of the Drag recorders have now learned ‘thant. I think it is because we have five vocal cords and can hear a large range of sounds. Recorders are the only ones so far to learn ‘thant. That might be because we are, well, recorders. We are practiced at paying attention to sounds, ideas, events.

I wake as someone enters the hut.

<sup>D</sup>Well, what do we have here? Another smiggle.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I thought we already got rid of them. How did we miss this one?<sup>D</sup>

They grab me and hold me down. Someone has an ax and they proceed to chop off most of my tail! I am screaming from the pain and the indignity. Only traitors and thieves are punished in this way. I have done nothing to warrant this! Then did proceed to gather all my precious records and anyone else’s present and set them on fire! This represents years and years of records. Why? Then gather all my writing tools and the empty skins and throw them on the fire, which will soon be large enough to burn down the hut as well.

Distracted by they desire to destroy, I wiggle free and escape into the darkness just before dawn. Two follow, but my life is in danger. That provides the incentive to move faster than I ever have in my life. They are also tired from fighting all night. I escape into the canyon and trees. Once it is light they will be able to track me easily. I scramble over rocks to hide my trail.

I stumble over something and look down to see what it is. It is a fellow recorder, Fek, in pieces! That is what they meant by finding another

one and that they had thought they had gotten all of us.

My tail has stopped bleeding, but is now very dirty. I need to clean it to avoid an infection. That means water. I remember a stream underground in a nearby cave and head there. I take a very difficult path to the cave going over rocks and around in circles to confuse them.

When I reach the cave I am exhausted and barely able to proceed. I hope I have thrown them off my path. At least long enough to clean myself and rest some. I have to navigate in the dark without my candles. They destroyed everything I had. I hear water and work my way towards the sound, only to fall a few meters over a ledge, falling into a small pond fortunately. Probably what saved me. If I had hit my head on a sharp rock I would not be worrying about being caught. I do my best, in spite of the pain, to scrub the dirt out of my stump. I crawl up the opposite side and fall asleep. My balance is way off. Surprised I made it this far. Pain and fear are great motivators I am learning the hard way.

As a recorder, a smiggle, I know pain. We are often hit ‘accidentally’, especially by the younger warriors. I always have bruises and many small scars recording these encounters. But, never has a recorder suffered the humiliation of a tail loss, much less death. I mourn Fek as best I can, knowing I will likely die soon as well. What happened? What changed? Are the others dead as well? Mouse? The ‘thants? Not the ‘thants, it is clear they would survive. But why?

I think about it some. Grouping together. Killing the recorders. There is only one explanation. They intend to make war on the Hu! They will steal their food animals, kill them, eat them, and assume dominance of this world. They are fulfilling Lord Sauron’s command. The end of days is here!

I am too tired to do anything till I rest. How do I warn the Hu? I don’t even com Hu. They are just as likely to kill me on sight if I run to them. I don’t even know which direction to run.

Do the two ‘thants know how to get there? They would have to know! When I wake I need to find the ‘thants. Then I can die, knowing I have fulfilled my purpose. There is no way the Drag Warriors could have killed the ‘thants. No way right?

I do not sleep well.

# CoTu Farout

I volunteered for this mission. A chance to see Pilot again and finally get to go on an away mission. Our new Captain, Ceph Tal is fine, just not the same. Not everyone has nine brains. There were some real shakeups. Sen who thought they were great did not measure up. No surprise to us. All the staff know where those who think they are top roost really are. Being on the service staff we saw it as entertainment. No one expects much of us, yet we solve most of the day to day problems without notice.

Team leader for this mission is one of those who was demoted. Not a happy nester, or what was it the Ba set up for personal space? Hanging space? Ba Reign is not happy and tends to take it out on the staff to try and prove she still has it, is still important, is worth staying on board.

It is peaceful down here. Lots of green hills. I was expecting magenta, but it makes sense that not all Farout worlds would be that color. We were warning not to eat anything, tempting as it might be. Just being able to breathe real air again is wonderful.

The package we are to deliver appears next to us. The other three staff and I grab corners and follow Ba Reign. Did not need to be told of course. She tells us anyway, ^Keep up you four. We don't have an eternity down here.^ Yes idiot. Right away idiot.

Ba Reign is impatient and shows it. Need to get back to showing off in front of the other officers dear? I need to be careful. Technically she can TP my thoughts, even if it is immoral except in an emergency. Think of this as a test dear. If she reacts to what the staff think we will know she was listening when she shouldn't. She really cannot have any more demerits right now. Maybe she would make a good staff after the limiters were applied? I show amusement.

We are not really needed. Ba Reign could easily have lifted the package with TK, but protocol and egos require our assistance.

*Ku Nas, nice to see you are doing fine.* Who TP'd that. I look around. There is a strange shaped blob like thing near us.

+Captain, is that you?+

^The Captain is still on board you dumb duck.^ Oh, a racial slur. Ten demerits. We are not even remotely related to ducks either.

With a shriek, Ba Reign disappears. The four of us cheer!

We all bow to her, +Thank you Captain!+

*She was always a bit of a pain. Sad to see that has not changed. I was really hoping that Cept Tal would be able to fix that.* She TPs all of us this time. We all show amusement.

She then comes up to the package and begins to unpack it. We jump in and help. We were supposed to do that and would have been reprimanded

if an officer had seen us slacking. Not as worried about Captain Pilot. She was always one to help out. I sure miss her.

*Excellent.* The packaging disappears and what looks like sixty four Comp are activated and hover in formation near us.

*Follow us. I will show you around. CoTu is a very different world than any you have encountered before. Very nice sen though. Zgx will meet us there. We are both doing fine. I am actually enjoying not being the one in command any longer. Should have done this much earlier.*

The Comp hover above and slightly behind us. They are all over the ship and we are comfortable around them and I hope they are around us. These look very new though. No dings or markings yet. Some sen have taken to labeling them with markings to tell them apart, even though they all com with each other and can assume any role needed. For staff they are just pleasant to com with when we get lonely or stressed out from confrontations with officers.

We all relax and make small chirps to each other. Nothing important, just feels so good to be out from under such strict observation all the time. Hope Ba Reign is enjoying her discussion with Ceph Tal. I show amusement.

We do not take the straightest path. Captain is allowing us some extra time outside. So rare for staff. If she was Ku I could fall in love with her easy. Sorry, Hu are just ugly. No feathers at all. I shake with just the thought. Suddenly a feather cap appears on her. Oops.

+Sorry about that Captain.+

*Not your Captain. Just my local name is so long we would be here for arns. Pilot is fine.*

Ku Cack asks, +I read that CoTu are colonial tunicates? Sentient, way ahead of any of us. What do they need Comp for? Not complaining, just curious.+

*Comp are the only ones who can use multiple channels at once to handle CoTu com across distance, specifically planet wide. We are setting up a communications network.*

I ask, +Is there a chance they will get to leave Farout?+ Meaning they are deemed safe to interact with other sen.

*That is part of what the four of you are going to help us with. Ah oh, to use a Hu expression. Guano in Ku also works.*

We were chosen not as a special treat, but because we were expendable. Not needed. Easy to replace. I wonder if Ba Reign was also considered expendable, but rejected by the CoTu. I feel amusement.

# Earth One

I was brought here to do a job. I am doing it. They may not like my methods, but they work. I am getting results. Hunting deaths are near zero. We are still vigilant however. Never trust a Hu. Especially one with a spear.

\_Pod meeting is starting\_ No rush. We are not Hu always going crazy about time.

Sen need to be challenged to grow. I get that. Without it they wither and fade. The trick is to scale it so there is not too much. The Hu attack on the Cet was so strong historically that we did not stand a chance. Since the fall of Hu from Helper V it has gotten better, but the damage from centuries of relentless attempts to exterminate ruined our people, our culture, our ecology, even our languages. It has taken thousands of years to get back even this far.

We lost so much. We have had to reinvent almost everything. Never again! Never again! Any Hu starting to go after us again will not be tolerated. EVER!

The last Cet incarnation I presided over ended up with super Cet. That was a mistake also. No challenge when you are superior to everyone around you. It was exciting, but when I think about it, it was more about outdoing the Hu and not raising us up. The Hu are the ones making that mistake this time. Super TKs are a mistake. No mortal beings should ever be raised to that level of power and control. The super 'thn were a mistake also. I am convinced it was a response to the super TKs.

I have been in Control. I have seen the archives. Super 'thn and super TKs were not supposed to happen. I doubt it will be allowed ever again. This is not the path to enlightenment as the Janes would profess. Not the path to understanding of The Question.

I am hoping that a gentle culture of thinking sen in cooperation and understanding will do better. I am counting on the Cet being able to get further than any others.

If we can hold it together long enough.

I must be vigilant.

I know the other TKs are watching carefully.

I will not be given another chance.

# Di Eden

White and Libby made an unannounced visit. An inspection more like. They have just left. Guess we passed or they are waiting for this 'learning opportunity' to have its intended affect on our knowledge. Wisdom the hard way is what we refer to it as.

There are no other settlements within a least a luna's walk. We have time to get things set up and be ready. We are advisors but not leaders. We have our own stone building a little ways outside town. We are growing vegetables and lots of melons. No pressure, lots of free time to think. Both of us are doing art projects of sorts. Well, just making our home more interesting is what we call it. I like to do intricate stone carvings on the outside walls. Slayer is more into wood carving functional art that also serves as furniture. Even if we technically do not need to eat or sleep, we still get visitors who do.

I dig a well and line it with my stone carvings trying to be helpful too.

We attend meetings every quarter luna. We stand in the back and only offer suggestions when asked. Sometimes they are very sure of what and how something should be done and other times it is just routine management stuff, like how to portion out a harvest or a surplus of something unexpected.

We ask questions when it appears they are going to make the same mistakes Di have made in the past, like over using the ecology around them, or oppressing a group in the interests of expediency. Funny how being in a hurry is an excuse to cut someone out of a share or fairness. Just temporary is never temporary and next time never happens. Be fair or go back to the others.

Is that to say there are no arguments? Of course not. We do not always offer suggestions or solutions either. We really do need to learn how to make this work together. What a concept. The Raps do it. Remember them? How did they get so much done with so little. And we were beating them and nearly starving them as well. Do you really need so much personal space or so much food or shiny things? No you don't. You do not have to become Raps, but learn from everything you know or have experienced. We saw Rap Eden from orbit, we know it can work.

We came here because of gangs of bullies attacking us. This makes all of us very sensitive to anything resembling this situation. We don't beat Di who make mistakes, but offer opportunities to make amends and corrections to avoid the situation in the future.

Not paradise but we are trying to be better than what Di were before at least. We also know that Libby and White are doing this elsewhere.

# Earth Two

Being in the cave, I have no idea what time it is. Have I slept for a few arn or a few solars? I have plenty of water, but will need food soon as well. My tail is not as sore, but I need to examine in the light. I have no idea how to get out.

Fortunately my sense of smell is still working and I am able to follow my own scent and blood trail back to the entrance. Fresh air never felt so good. Dark outside though. I am out and not trapped, a good start.

A full moon so I have enough light to make my way, but where? Everything is very quiet. Likely they found all the game worth eating by now. I decide to make my way closer to home. Judging from how hungry I am it has been days at least. I go slowly and carefully. Trying to be as quiet and invisible as possibly.

I find Fek again and decide to bury him, though the few critters still around and of course flies have already found the corpse. It is all I can do for now. I mark the grave with a set of stones that I will recognize, but should not draw attention to this spot.

I get close enough to home to be able to see and hear what is going on. Nothing. I see no one. No sounds. Collapsed from exhaustion or gone? Some of the huts and other structures are burned down. Intentional or accident? My hut is ashes. My entire existence reduced to nothing. Am I the last recorder living?

I get closer and finally gather enough courage to go into the colony itself. There are scraps of food which I instantly consume. A little ash will not harm me.

<sup>D</sup>Who is there?<sup>D</sup> I freeze, then hide behind a hut. They do not come out, so I cautiously look in. An old fem. I don't remember her call.

<sup>D</sup>It is me, Midj. What happened?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You are a recorder? How did you escape?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I lost my tail and all my records. I might as well be dead.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>As long as you have your memory, the records live. Come in and sit.<sup>D</sup>

She offers me some tea and a small amount of food.

<sup>D</sup>If this is the last you have, it is better you keep it. I can find more somewhere.<sup>D</sup> She gives me a look of great doubt.

<sup>D</sup>Once this is gone, we both will die. It has been eight solars since the sun disappeared and returned. This was seen as a great omen. An omen predicting their triumph over the Hu. The Drag would rule the world.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Silly Drag. It was just an eclipse. Any recorder would know that. It is not an omen, not a sign of victory. I found Fek, dead, do you know of Mouse or any others?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You are the first Drag I have seen since the sun disappeared. They all

left immediately after.<sup>D</sup>

I hear someone outside. We both get very quiet. Neither of us could defend ourselves against even the weakest warrior. Someone enters.

<sup>D</sup>Looks like you two are the only ones left. I lost track of you Midj. Glad to see you are still breathing.<sup>D</sup>

It is Fek.

I must have fainted. Not a very Drag sort of thing to do.

I open my eyes to see Fek standing over me.

<sup>D</sup>How? I buried you!<sup>D</sup>

He examines himself, <sup>D</sup>Clearly not me. I am fine. You on the other claw seem to be missing a tail.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>All of the records have been burned. There is no food. We will die soon as well.<sup>D</sup> I was sure I buried Fek. This does not make sense.

<sup>D</sup>You two need to come with me. Others are waiting. And we have food and clean water.<sup>D</sup>

I hear ‘thant speak outside. I run out to greet them.

<sup>th</sup>You two are alive! Thank the gods they did not get you as well.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Midj, your ‘thant has gotten very good. You should know, no one kills a ‘thant. They were always safe. Unfortunately the warriors have figured out how to shatter the ‘thant poo.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Weapons even the Hu cannot defend against.<sup>D</sup> He affirms.

The old fem comes outside and drops her cloak. It is Mouse!

<sup>D</sup>You are not going to faint again are you?<sup>D</sup> She asks. I bow deeply in appreciation. My world is not entirely gone. She comes over and looks at my stump.

<sup>D</sup>Not bad for a beginner. We can work on that later. Should grow back in a few lunas. Well, at least a shorter version anyway.<sup>D</sup>

I have gone from total despair to unimaginable elation in a snap.

I have a life again. I have hope. I have companions I can count on. We are a team.

Then I think about all that has to be done. The records, the Drag attacking the Hu. Do they know?

<sup>D</sup>The Drag are going to attack the Hu to fulfill Lord Sauron’s mandate. We need to warn them somehow.<sup>D</sup>

Fek and Mouse show amusement. Clearly I have not been told everything.

Mouse whispers to me, <sup>D</sup>They know and are ready. We will help in our own way.<sup>D</sup>

How?

# Rap Eden

The two Di are gone from the orbital station. I wish them the best. I would not want to trade places with them. We each make our own mess.

I have joined the crew of the Storm Wind ship. They are always looking for competent willing crew, so it was not hard to convince the captain.

We have a preference for live meat, but can eat dried or cured if we have to. We will stick close to the coastline and visit islands to hunt for fresh rations when we can. All crew are expected to watch the fishing lines when not otherwise assigned. Easy and relaxing duty actually.

Being near the coast, especially near deep canyons means a lot of nutrients come up and feed the seaweeds. That makes for great fishing, but has other side effects as well.

I hear cursing from the stern, but as I am not in charge, I wait to find out what it is this time. Less than an arn later, still in the water, the entire time, a number of Raps going back and forth getting tools and long poles to try and fix the problem, to no avail.

Finally I wander closer to the action and overhear that the rudder has fouled in the aforementioned seaweeds. All this cursing over seaweed? Why doesn't anyone deal with it?

Finally in frustration I jump overboard with my knife in my teeth, swim down to the rudder and cut the seaweed loose. Takes hardly any time. I only surface twice for more air to make what I did believable. I then climb back on board and go to my assigned task.

<sup>R</sup>Rudder is clear Captain! We are moving!<sup>R</sup>

Everyone scrambles to get back to their assigned positions and tasks. The captain and first mate come up to me though.

<sup>R</sup>Ro, what did you do?<sup>R</sup> I must have looked confused. I thought it was obvious.

<sup>R</sup>We thought you were trying to kill yourself by jumping overboard. Then the rudder was clear. Did you do that?<sup>R</sup> No, I just like taking a nice relaxing swim after cleaning the deck all afternoon.

Then I get it.

<sup>R</sup>Wait, you mean no one else on board knows how to swim?<sup>R</sup> We are on a ship on the ocean and no one knows how to swim? That is insane, though I do not say it out loud. I do shake my head in disbelief.

The expected order comes.

<sup>R</sup>Next time on shore leave you will teach everyone in shifts how to do this swim thing you did.<sup>R</sup> They turn and leave.

Does this mean the two of you as well? At least they understood how essential the skill is. Should not complain, though I am still upset that I had to even demonstrate it in an emergency. Maybe they are not as far

along as I thought they were. Clearly I am the only one who can or was willing to jump in to help. The water was not that deep even, though over everyone's heads. Maybe that was it. Shallow streams and near shore is one thing, but out in deeper water is scary. Ten meters should not be considered deep. If we ever cross oceans it will be much deeper, though of course no one would be expected to dive to the bottom then.

My knife was well oiled, but I clean it anyway. Can't afford rust and I have to set a normal example of how to care for ocean going tools. Wait, how did they build the ship without Raps who could swim? All kinds of inspections would need to happen before we left port. Clearly I have more work to do. I also need to watch how they build a ship. Could it all be done in dry dock? How many leak and are abandoned? Would be a good idea to scan our ship for structural defects.

We are never alone, even during rest periods. I pretend to sleep, but instead scan areas I am keeping track of. There are always settlements in trouble of one kind or another. I can send messages to the lower TKs in our group to take care of most things that come up.

I was put through TK training and leader training. Rush. They said it was somewhat easier because Rap Eden is still so new. We would grow together. What they were really saying was I was on my own with minimal or no supervision. They said because I did so well running Madscar this would be easy. I am sensing a trap. There is always a trap.

<sup>R</sup>Fish on deck!<sup>R</sup>

That means we have sailed into a sweet spot with lots of tasty fish. We all scramble topside and take the first available drop line to monitor. I have found that wiggling it occasionally makes the bait more tempting. I am not the first though. Several others hook ones first. Finally I get one and haul it up. We are going to eat well today. Extra will be dried and saved for quiet days. These are sailing ships, that means the wind is not always with us, the fish are not always biting, the seas are not always calm.

There are millions of Rap now. No longer possible, if it ever was, to maintain watch. And we have only reached a third of the possible settlement areas. Some will be easier than others of course. We leave the special places for our harder cases. Builds character, or so I was taught in training.

Sunset soon. The sky is turning red. Of course I can no longer appreciate it as a norm would.

Need to ask the captain the route we are taking. The hold is empty, so that means we are picking up a load. That could also mean we are set for years of moving needs from one place to another. No passengers yet.

# Earth One

<sup>H</sup>Feels good to be home. There is nothing like the smell of the desert air. Well, a lot greener than we we started here, but drier than the coast. Mostly brush and cactus actually.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>You are rambling, which incarnation old one?<sup>H</sup>

I shrug. It was very dry the first time I was here, more like the surface of Mars than Earth. This time I started out as an owl and she was a turtle. Hu form is not as much fun. I am thinking about norm Hu of course. Even TK as a Watcher is not much different. Can't exactly go flying around in Hu form. Too easy for someone to notice. Even at night. No fun at all.

<sup>H</sup>The trail up to the mesa is back. I have not noticed any Drag yet though.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>I suspect that Drup and Rand are having a good time on E2 at the moment. Fortunately the Drag population is too low here to cause that kind of concern.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Did you ever like being in 'thant form?<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Preferred Bug myself.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>The running is grand. Such freedom, and all without flying.<sup>H</sup> I affirm.

<sup>H</sup>Add to that the existential threat of freezing or frying if you stop.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>There is that.<sup>H</sup>

We are here for a meeting with the Elders of course. When we reach Hotevilla we are immediately directed to an outdoor fire circle. A fire has already been lit. Gets cold fast here after sunset. Everyone else is quiet and well dressed for the cold. We could have met inside. What is going on? I scan. Ah, someone died inside. It will need to be purified first.

We wait. The Elders love to wait. When in doubt, wait.

A Meep appears and then morphs into Hu form.

<sup>H</sup>Puu! To what do we owe the honor?<sup>H</sup> Turtle exclaims. We both rise to give her a hug. This was her old stomping grounds too. A very long time ago. She was even born here in one incarnation.

<sup>H</sup>Being in Hu form is so damn restrictive. How can you stand it? Oh, Cat sends her regards as well. She had a meeting with Ron and Squeak?<sup>H</sup>

The Elders each rise to hug her too. Of course, at least the Elders, know about all of us. They are our eyes and ears for the norm world. It is amazing what you miss when you only think in high TK terms all the time.

<sup>H</sup>What happened to the Drag?<sup>H</sup>

An Elder rises, <sup>H</sup>They have elected to all join the others on Earth Two.<sup>H</sup> She sits. So it has finally happened. Likely our next stop then. None of us would leave the fate of anyone in Rand and Drup's hands.

They mean well, but something always seems to be missing.

The usual formalities are dispensed with. Everyone in Hopi Land is doing well, as well as norms can. There have been deaths and births and such, but nothing out of the ordinary. A peaceful existence really. Some of the younger ones have taken on the task of long distance message running that the Drag used to do.

E2 Drag have a totally different culture. That should be interesting. The E1 group is much smaller and far less violent to other higher sen. They of course are still meat eaters and that naturally involves some violence. They elected to not join the E2 group directly, but set up shop further north, north of the Hu settlements even. It will be a harder existence. Lots of game up there though. Much easier than the E2 group's choice of south of the Hu.

<sup>H</sup>You are zoning out Owl. Try to stay on task. <sup>H</sup>Yes Mistress, sigh.

Puu finally asks the question I have been expecting, <sup>H</sup>What the hell is going on with Barb? <sup>H</sup>Yep, that's the one.

An Elder comments, <sup>H</sup>We have heard rumors that she has declared open season on all Hu on all the seas. <sup>H</sup>

Given they do not have radio or other com, it must have been months old to have reached here.

Turtle answers, <sup>H</sup>We are Watchers now and are not so quick to interfere. The numbers have been small and the Hu are staying out of the ocean, at least in boats. They still fish from shore as well as go after snails and such in the tidepools. <sup>H</sup>

I add, <sup>H</sup>And of course lakes, rivers and streams. <sup>H</sup>

Turtle gives me a dirty look. Just trying to be complete.

<sup>H</sup>Has anyone talked with her to be sure she understands the mandate she was given? <sup>H</sup>

I ask, <sup>H</sup>Was she given any mandate other than deal with the cetaceans? I don't remember anything. <sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>And that is how you get into trouble almost every time. You have to be anally specific with high TKs or they will wiggle their own way. You know she has a chip on her shoulder about Cet and Hu. <sup>H</sup>

Turtle points at me, <sup>H</sup>He thought we would deal with it, IF it happened. <sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>It has happened! <sup>H</sup> Puu morphs back to Meep form and pops out.

You know you are in trouble with your kids start to tell you you are wrong.

<sup>H</sup>The old folks home is starting to look attractive Turtle. We could set up on the mesa and live the simple life. <sup>H</sup>

She just shakes her head. The Elders laugh. Of course they do. They are already essentially retired.

We pop to my old incarnation stomping grounds on the coast. Then

fashion a simple kayak out of duped skins and branches. No spears, no fishing gear, just us and two paddles. When the sun rises we are on the water in what was Monterey Bay. This bay, because of the deep canyon and lots of upwelling used to be packed with Cet. No one else is out of course. A few are tidepooling, but the tide is coming in, so they will leave soon.

This early the swell is low and the wind is light. Actually quite pleasant. We remain very low TK so as not to arouse suspicion. It does not take long before a few curious gray whale calves check us out. The parents are not far behind. They slap the water and everyone leaves. Soon we have a few orcas checking us out. They even nudge the boat. They suddenly go deep, in formation. Explains how they do the deed. Just like going after a sardine ball, only we are the ball. Too big to swallow, but small enough to capsize. In these cold waters it would be difficult to swim back to shore and not drown or suffer hypothermia.

A simple sounding would have told them if we had metal on board, but they don't even bother with that.

As soon as they make contact with the boat we pop all of us five hundred meters in the air. Weren't expecting that I bet.

A moment later they disappear.

***You are not wanted here. Leave at once.***

*Or what Barb? What will you do to us? We have no weapons, not even fishing lines. We are no threat to anyone.*

***All Hu have given up the right to be on the seas. No exceptions.***

"I got her," Turtle announces. We all pop to orbit. Barb can take care of the vacuum, but that is about all she can take care of because of her extra size.

*We said you could protect the Cet from Hu predation. We did not say you could then declare open season on any Hu you encounter.*

*Too fine a distinction for the level of cultural development they are at. We are still recovering from what the Hu did to us. Send me back if you do not like it. I don't care.*

Quieter at least.

Turtle turns the statement back on her, *You have always been able to leave. You agreed to the terms. If you cannot abide, then leave yourself. It can always go back to hunting Cet being allowed again. The numbers were low and no threat to your population. ALL sen have predators, even Hu. Ask them about the puma, bears, and others.* Not to mention each other.

She is quiet and then pops out. Half an ocean away. She can return to Bug at any time. We all know it. Now we wait. It will take time to effect the change at any rate. She needs Watcher training. Still on GOD mode.

# New Ceph Eden

~It's cold Rooi.~ We are further north than we have ever been, but still there are Ceph about. There is a settlement of sorts here. Not much though. Appears most fend for themselves. All live along the coast, spread out far enough to not get into arguments over food and other needs. No one appears to be in a leadership position. We have taken up a location at the edge and have dug a cave to hide from the elements. The worst I have ever experienced. I do not ask why. Rooi always has a reason, best if I just go along. Being TK we are not in any real danger of course, just have to pretend to be the same as everyone else.

We have been at this for eighteen short day seasons.

I go to the shoreline. Has been picked over pretty well. I gather some seaweeds. There are some crustaceans. We have enough for a soup of sorts.

Ceph Eden is in trouble from what we have seen so far. Our population has fallen significantly. We can fill the world again quickly, but only if conditions improve. There seems to be no desire for that to happen. Ceph have stopped working together. Most locations are like this, weather is better, but similar tendency to spread out and avoid contact.

I follow Rooi to a stream and then go up stream. Not the easiest task, even with shoes. She stops at a particularly muddy location. I test the feel.

~This is excellent. Would make a great clay Rooi.~ She gives me a flash like it is obvious. We are well away from any other Ceph, but not that far away. Why hasn't anyone else found this location.

Then she does something totally unexpected and against Watcher protocols. Am I witness to a crime, a Watcher crime? She uses her TK to make a complete ceramics studio and housing units. Enough for a whole colony of artists. Everything looks norm made, right down to imperfections and mismatches. As a Luss, even I am impressed. We usually concentrate on our forms and not so much on surroundings.

She looks at me, I sigh, well the Ceph version. I gather what I need and head down to the stream with the excellent clay waiting. Then I stop. Rooi stares at me like I am losing it.

I DS back to the site, gather what we need with TK and come back. She points to the processing table.

~Why are we doing this by arm? Can't we just TK it to finished clay?

~

~We need credible clay dirt on everything. You have something else to do?~ Well I have certainly had practice from the previous locations. She helps out. Actually feels good to be using muscles and movements even I

have come to love. Who knew that ceramics would be so, well wonderful. Maybe it is something unique to being Ceph? Hu have been know to do ceramics, but never at this level of quality. They really do not have the sensory equipment. Our entire skin surface is a sensory heaven for anything tactile and taste oriented.

A luna later we have a well lived in look to the studio. Clay dust everywhere. Broken pottery, kiln has marks of use. We each have our own studio apartment and spend time in the others as well to leave traces of being lived in.

Finally we get our first curious one. A young mal. Beggars can't be choosers as the Hu com. Except during TK class, none of us had ever met a beggar. Those that I met certainly were very choosy. Everyone has standards, even at the bottom of the social hill.

I set Ceph Sat to work gathering and preparing more clay. It may seem cruel, but you make a better ceramicist if you understand intimately the entire process, and working the clay is probably the most essential part. Besides, he would do with some more muscles on those arms. I understand that they do not feed well near the shore. We have lots of fresh water fish, crusts and snails. Add some seaweeds for seasoning and we are eating very well.

When com gets shared that we have food we will get more showing up. Will need to be selective or we will get taken advantage of. Rooi told me not to worry, there is plenty of work for everyone.

We are soon sharing rooms and need of more space. Ceph come in with building experience, they bring others or draft some already here to help with the heavy work.

I finally get it. Rooi is making a Ceph town and maybe even the beginnings of a city. She is not going to wait for them to get going again. She has planted her own seed to start the reawakening of Ceph culture.

Definitely not Watcher.

I ask Rooi, ~Did our OM here ever sporulate?~

~A long time ago Liss. Why do you ask?~

~Usually after spore formation a culture goes into decline. No longer needed by the resident OM.~

~An OM can produce more than one batch of spores Liss. Didn't this happen on Farout?~

~There are no OMs on any Farout world. Not allowed.~

She stops the wheel and looks at me, ~That explains a lot. Farout really was a prison to prevent more spores from happening from 'defective' OMs. Was never about the sen at all. We got it all wrong.~

~Not entirely. OMs are judged by their sen after all.~ It is clear I have given her something to think about though.

~This is an interesting thought. What if Farout was not a prison, but a

sort of specimen jar for sen that were thought to be interesting.~

~And only TKs could be long lived enough to take care of themselves. No OM, so no pressure to produce spores. Like bugs pinned to a board as the Hu naturalists used to do.

~Question Liss, have any other sen than the ones associated with us ever escaped Farout.~

~None that I am aware of. Of course I have limited information, but the Luss history, what you would com as legends say none. The Hu+ escaping is what I believe set off the scare among the super 'thn.~

~A potentially dangerous sen escapes confinement meant for study and bites back.~ I affirm.

~I am going to ask something very un-Luss like. Where did the idea of Watchers come from? It seems a perfect way to sabotage the turnover caused by all of you.~

~Keep us all quiet. Not causing any more problems. Let's them regroup and hopefully grow strong enough to contain us again.~

~Or destroy. Clearly too dangerous to allow to exist.~ Destroying entire worlds would certainly suggest this.

Rooi immediately makes a CatBox and sends it off to multiple locations.

~The others need to com these thoughts.~

~Alternatively, my being a Luss, I could have been programmed to set this exact discussion in motion to send you off track. There must be a reason all the rest of the Luss are back on Farout and not allowed near other sen.~ She makes another CatBox and sends that off, then looks at me.

~Anything else Liss?~ She has another box ready to go.

~I think I have caused enough trouble for one day. Think I should go back to the clay prep area to keep a watch on the new ones. Even Ceph can get lazy and try to get out of physical work when no one is watching.~

I really have no idea if what I com is real or 'programmed' into me and set off by key ideas. Can I even trust my own thoughts? I like Rooi and wish her no harm. Should I even exist?

Rooi gives me a hug. Ceph do not hug. Only Hu do that disgusting thing, but I accept it in the nature it was given. She must be thinking the same thing and now both of us are worried.

# CoTu Farout

Cotu form is interesting. I thought I would miss breathing, but the other senses more than make up for smelling and tasting in the Ku way. The other CoTu have been told that we have all taken a vow of celibacy or whatever the CoTu equivalent is. That gets us out of the frequent exchanges of bodily zooids. If that is their sex, they do a lot of it and often.

We have been tasked with teaching them how to best use the sixty four Comp we have brought down. As they were designed for sen very different from them, this could be a problem. Fortunately Zgx has experience with Comp and is much closer to the CoTu in life understanding, though it is confused by so much zooid exchanging. Might be an artifact of being sent to Farout? Not my problem.

Though the Comp are not strictly sen, they have enough awareness and curiosity that they are clearly amused by this assignment. They zoom around poking into everything. Locals have come to ignore them even. There is no privacy in their existence, so the Comp are really not that different, except they have no zooids to exchange of course.

Pilot announces, ::You have a Comp class soon, best get ready:: I affirm. Each of us in in change of sixteen Comp and an equal number of paired CoTu students. This is a very tiny percentage of sen present on this Farout, but it is hoped that once they are evenly distributed around this world and of course their zooid exchanges will also help spread the information. The Comp are in instant com with each other and with their CoTu partner. This will allow for the first time and communal com network for the CoTu.

Pilot thinks this will initiate a profound change in the culture. As long as they are trapped here I am not convinced it will mean much. Oh, Pilot says we are not trapped here and can leave with her anytime we want. Her decision of course, but she is one of the few high TKs that I would trust with that decision. Too many others we have met would not think twice about leaving us to suffer and die in a foreign space.

In some ways the Comp are more like the CoTu than we are. They will respond to any label you assign to them and from that point on, any Comp will also respond to that call. They are all linked at all times. More like one consciousness with sixty four nodes than individuals.

The CoTu get this intuitively and are soon using them beyond anything we have ever imagined. I am beginning to suspect that this was the real reason we have been invited down by Pilot. She said that the higher TKs on board would not have adapted so easily. Their own sense of self was too strong. Interesting.

# Ba Eden

It will take many years for the dust to settle. Longer still to rebuild. I really thought the Ba were immune from this form of insanity. I read the Hu histories. I understand now how and what they went through. Some Hu are very nice sen. I am coming to the realization we all want to think our sen is better than the others, right.

What I am especially having trouble with is the Watcher directives. I have failed. I cannot live up to this ideal where I only watch and do not intervene. I spent a very long time re-reading journals of other TKs. In almost all cases they did not do something in the open for norms to witness. We have been Watchers of sorts from the beginning. Even the Hu nemesis Sauron, was careful not to be open about his 'guiding' the Hu to the state he wanted them in. ONLY other TKs ever learned about what really happened.

The first Ba world war ended, not because I went in and simply removed the fascist power block, which I could have done in a day. Most of the Ba were not even aware that what they were doing was so destructive. Removing the leaders without correcting the causes that allowed it to happen would have only meant a continuation of the thinking. It might have even gone under notice and hidden, only to arise again in destructive ways.

Again Hu history, the part just before Helper V, offered great insights. Helper V did solve the immediate problem, their OM was dying. And this was done without TK help, but at great cost. They never again were a tech 5 culture. For one thing the planet would not have survived the environmental cost a second time, but also because the survivors no longer trusted tech to solve their problems. Tech often ends up being the easy solution that comes back to bite you very hard. Better to go slow and careful. Both sen have short lives and it is hard to give up fast solutions. Plant trees do generations after you can benefit is a hard concept to teach when there are immediate needs.

^What are you doing Alessa,^ Flor asks.

^We need to leave records of what happened, so future TKs or even norms can learn from our mistakes.^

^You are just feeling guilty about breaking the Watcher codes.^

^No, actually I do not feel guilty. We did the right thing. Watcher codes are great during 'quiet times' but not during an existential crisis. Ba could have ceased to exist as a tech sen. If any had survived we would have returned to the trees and cliff dwellings, with not chance of rising again.^

^Just means some other sen would have risen.^

^No, it would not have happened. Too much was destroyed. Too many ecosystems destroyed. I am Ba, my primary duty is still to the Ba. Not to be superior to any other sen, not to deny another sen a chance in the sun, but . . . ^

^You feel guilty for not having seen this coming. Ku has also had its low points. It hurts to see Ba suffer, but . . . ^

^Not as bad as your own sen suffering in front of you. ^ She affirms.

^It is as if by making things 'smooth' as the Hu com, I set up Ba to suffer this way. I failed to notice all the suffering that so many were feeling. ^

^The ones left out. ^ I affirm.

^The ones left out. How could I have missed them? I was one in my pre-TK existence. I was one! ^

^It happened when we were consumed by the super 'thn, the Tafa and the Cult of Perfection, the world killers. We could not be everywhere at once. Even I thought Ba was safe, it was peaceful, it was a glorious time. What could go wrong? ^

^It seems that ALL sen are basically selfish or lazy, or something. The temptation to take more than you need, to hoard and then, even worse, to do anything to defend that hoard and that place in culture. ^

^The fear of death is a mighty motivator. ^

^But look around, everyone dies, even we will at some point, granted we have a huge advantage, we have been to control and so on. But for a norm there are no exceptions. They know it is coming. NOTHING can prevent it. At best you might get another year or two, but it will happen. ^

^The Diversity Imperative. ^ I sigh. Yeah, the Diversity Imperative.

^I would have been much worse if no one ever died. It does offer some relief for the oppressed and some accounting for the greedy. No one escapes judgment. ^ A Hu concept that has crept into Ba culture. Not sure that is a bad idea though. Sen need to see the results of their actions.

^Here is the report you wanted on the Holy Ba cult that is spreading. ^

^More fun. Bound to happen as a backlash to recent events. Random chance is never an accepted reason for pain. We need to blame it on someone or something. Just don't give them the idea of Satan. Last Hu concept we need to introduce. ^

^The Ba version is called Raptor and yes, it is spreading. ^

^Back to work then. No vacation for us. ^

^There never was. Not part of our job description. ^ I show amusement.

^At least there were no nuclear weapons. ^

^Poison gas was bad enough. If they had developed genetic weapons it would have been worse still. ^ Though less destructive to the world.

## Earth Two

<sup>D</sup>I have something for you Midj,<sup>D</sup> he hands me three objects. I am not sure what any of them are. He senses my confusion, takes one the block like objects and spreads it open. There are leaves inside, all white, very thin. Then he takes the third object and unscrews part of it and uses the remaining part to write on the surface of one of the leaves.

<sup>D</sup>You lost your records. Use the first book to write down as much as you remember. Use the second to record your new observations. All of us do this, even the ‘thants actually. Well, at least our two. More on that later.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I did not lose them, they were violently destroyed in front of me. You called these two objects a ‘book’. Not Drag com. What is the last object called?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>The books are a Hu invention, not currently being used by the Hu though. The second is called a pen. I will show you have to fill it with ink and how to care for it. Just thought you might want to get started.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Does any of this matter now that the Drag will destroy the Hu, thus fulfilling Sauron’s directive?<sup>D</sup>

Mouse shows amusement. Not a normal Drag trait.

<sup>D</sup>That will not happen. More later. How do you feel after your sleep?<sup>D</sup>

Strange thing to ask. What has happened? I look around. Everything seems okay. All my body parts are here. Tail is less sore even.

Wait, all my body parts are here! How is that possible? No one heals that quickly. It is full length even. I stretch it out and touch it to be sure it is real.

<sup>D</sup>You approve?<sup>D</sup> He asks.

<sup>D</sup>How? Why? We are smiggles. We do not deserve full tails. They will just chop it off again. I am not sure I can go through that again.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>How will become obvious later. You need to start your training.<sup>D</sup> He picks up a pebble and throws it directly at me. It stings.

<sup>D</sup>Again.<sup>D</sup> He picks up another one and throws it. What is going on? Did I escape the warriors only to be tormented by Recorders now too?

<sup>D</sup>Stop it!<sup>D</sup> I finally yell.

<sup>D</sup>You stop it. You have the ability now. Don’t use your arms, use your mind. Think about having a shield around you.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>How am I supposed to do that.<sup>D</sup> I close my eyes. It will not make any difference and might protect my eyes at least. The pebbles stop. What? Why?

I open them. Mouse is still throwing pebbles at me, but they stop a short distance away and fall to the ground. Did I do that?

I concentrate on a pebble at my feet. It rises on its own. <sup>D</sup>How?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You are now a part of a unique group of sen that have been granted special abilities. Fek, Rand and Drup all have them as well as myself.<sup>D</sup> He demonstrates by throwing another pebble at me, without touching it. Arms at his side. I easily bat it away, not just stop it.

<sup>D</sup>I think I like this ability.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>There is much more, but it takes time to learn. We are leaving for the northern front. Grab your things into the satchel at your side. You will really only need a few tools and your writing supplies. You are the official recorder of our group. You will be given time every evening we can for you to work. Oh, you will not get as sleepy now, well, except when a new ability is being granted. You will get used to it.<sup>D</sup>

I stand up. My balance is off. I was getting used to no tail. It quickly comes back though. I follow them out of the settlement. We go north, towards the Hu settlements, though it will be many days, even running to reach them. Likely to encounter the Warriors along the way. Not looking forward to that. Pebble are not going to stop a battle ax. Never thought I would think it felt good to run, but it does now.

It becomes forested. When did that happen? I have never seen so many trees together. The soil looks different as well. We stop at a stream to drink and rest for a moment.

<sup>D</sup>Where are we? I don't recognize this place.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>We are setting up a base north of the Hu. The Warriors will not expect us to come from this direction. Just around this small hill, we will stop and join the others at our camp.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Wait, how did we travel a hundred runs in a few arn? We have hardly been running at all.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>You want to run more, go ahead. Lots of open space around the camp. Or you can start recording our journey.<sup>D</sup> He looks at me like I really should start recording.

<sup>th</sup>One more thing, record in 'thant, not Drag. If the Warriors get a hold of your journals, which they should not, but if they do, they won't be able to read them.<sup>th</sup>

I show amusement, <sup>th</sup>No Warrior can read anything in any com. But I will do as you ask.<sup>th</sup> He shows amusement and affirms. Guess we have leaned 'thant.

When we reach their camp I notice a Warrior Drag and look for a place to hide. Fek notices and brings me to meet her. Huge. Dangerous.

Mouse asks this one, <sup>th</sup>Did you get away alright?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I 'fell' off a cliff and died. They will not be suspicious.<sup>th</sup>

Mouse turns to me, <sup>th</sup>This is Midj, our new recorder. Anything you want put into the official journal of our time can be com to him.<sup>th</sup> She affirms and greets me. Politely. Strange. Still afraid of her though.

<sup>th</sup>Close your mouth Midj.<sup>th</sup> He turns back to the Warrior, <sup>th</sup>He suffered

greatly before we could rescue him. All better now.<sup>th</sup> Not sure of that.

<sup>th</sup>My call is Talks, on account of as a hatchling I learned to com very quickly.<sup>th</sup> Mouse gives her a dirty look. There is more to this story. Also the first Warrior I have met who can com fluent ‘thant.

Mouse nudges me.

<sup>th</sup>Sorry, my call is Midj.<sup>th</sup>

She gives me a sour look, <sup>th</sup>We will need to come up with a better call. TK3 at the moment. Come back to me when you reach TK6 and we will choose something else. No honor in having the call of Midj.<sup>th</sup> She turns and leaves. What is a TK? I have a feeling I am going to spend a long time in training, just when I thought I was done with my Recorder apprenticeship.

Fek comes up to me, <sup>th</sup>Let’s get you settled. You never have to worry about theft here. No one will touch your personal pouch. Just remember where you left it. Yes, even we occasional forget things.<sup>th</sup>

On the way to what look like sleeping tents I notice our two ‘thants.

<sup>th</sup>Rand, Drup, you are here as well. Thank you for joining us.<sup>th</sup>

Fek looks at me, <sup>th</sup>Which one is Rand? I point to Rand.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>How do you tell them apart?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>It is obvious. How can you not?<sup>th</sup> I am confused.

Rand comes up to us.

<sup>th</sup>Midj learned ‘thant com before TK. We are all good friends now.<sup>th</sup>

Fek looks at both of us, then turns to leave, shaking his head.

<sup>th</sup>Nice to know they don’t know everything isn’t it.<sup>th</sup> Rand coms.

I show amusement, yes indeed it is nice. I feel like a bird having fallen out of my tree. It does indeed fell good. Did Rand teach me? I could com ‘thant even before the solstice event. Lunas before even.

Rand bends down, gathers a huge amount of soil and proceeds to build a structure out of it. I touch it after she has moved on to do another on. Very solid. Not ‘thn metal, but very hard.

Mouse comes up to me.

<sup>th</sup>Here is some information you need to record in your new journal, even though it is very old information. It is very new information for you.<sup>th</sup>

I recover my journal and my pen. This is so much nicer than the old way of preparing skins and ink. I nod I am ready.

Mouse proceeds to com to me the real story of Sauron, not the legend stories I was taught by the Drag elders and Warriors. I can see the overlap, but not the same at all. And, he is still alive! That would be exciting. I have so many questions. I have been warned that I am never likely to get a truth from him though. He lives in a fantasy still.

# Mars One, Thirteen

We come in on Mars 13. The barely livable alternative we can evac to in an emergency. The TKs we left behind on M1 and done some work here at least. Almost enough air tight enclosures and emergency supplies now. If Mars One is ever attacked, it not likely we will get everyone off. It would not be to our enemies advantage to give us advanced warning. Worst case, we can put part of our population into stasis till we are ready.

It is cold, windy, sand storms, just like the Mars that I grew up on. I am enjoying this, even if no modern Martian would. We have become a spoiled race. This can likely be said of nearly all sen. Look back a few thousand solar rotations and life was very different. Certainly was on Di Eden and Earth. There is always some nostalgia for the 'good old days' till sen actually have to live that way again. Funny how that works.

*This looks good Ron, ready to leave.* Squeak is getting anxious. Given the changes happening on Rap Eden, I can't blame her. She needs to trust her TKs more. Too reliant on her in my opinion.

We pop over to an unpopulated corner of Mars One. That was not so easy to find. The poles are still the best place to land. We can handle the weather that no local could or at least want to. Not much different than the current Mars 13 near the equator actually. Wusses.

From here we TK shorter distances. Normally we would just come in above the world and choose a spot to land, but they now have a lot of objects in orbit, including a few space stations. We would be noticed. We even had to time our polar landing for when nothing was overheard. Ah, they are also harvesting asteroids to build out the space facilities. There is a lot out there they could use. Ceres has a rather large base.

Squeak coms, *They are pulling asteroids together to produce world size locations in the belt. I have contacted the Mars TKs and they say the population is approaching one billion now.*

That is a lot. *I would not have recommended going that fast.* Dangerous. Shortages usually are settled in wars. Something we have never experienced, but our genetic code still has the necessary components to bring this about. It was thought at the time it would never reach this point. Well, it has. They really have no choice but to go outward now.

*Wonder if Barb knows about this. Didn't she go galactic the last time she ran the Cets.* I affirm. Nothing like competition or a nice hungry predator to bring reality back on you.

Europa has life on it. We knew that and now they know. They have landers and orbiters. They are definitely investigating. Won't be long before they find the others. If they ever get DS we will really have something to worry about.

We reach the TK center, coming in with DS. No norm could enter the actual center. There is a reception area if they are curious. All they would find is a fabric manufacturer. It changes over time too, to remain believable. Last time we were here, they were processing desert cacti, well, Martian versions anyway.

<sup>M</sup>Welcome. Been a long time. Why are we so honored?<sup>M</sup> I would be suspicious too.

I answer, <sup>M</sup>In the area, thought to check in.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>And?<sup>M</sup>

Squeak spills it, <sup>M</sup>We are having some trouble on E2 and worried there might some spillover. No signs of DS yet?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Not yet, but their tech is progressing rapidly, as it does with high tech cultures. I would be more worried about E1. Easy access, no apparent tech present. Sooner or later they will test it.<sup>M</sup>

I smile, <sup>M</sup>They would be rudely awakened if they tried.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>The whole jar of nemotodes.<sup>M</sup> We all affirm.

<sup>M</sup>The now ancient warnings are wearing off. Might need a refresher course?<sup>M</sup> I ask them. They smile and affirm. I think they are going to enjoy this too much.

<sup>M</sup>Monsters will not work. Way past sand ghosts.<sup>M</sup>

Squeak morphs to her Rap form, <sup>M</sup>How about some sen of a different kind?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Add in some minor TK abilities of the scary kind?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>That last won't work. They are more impressed by tech.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>A starship cruiser. Does not have to be Enterprise class, though that would definitely work. Have it 'warp' into orbit around Mars, 'transport' a few diplomats up and a few exotics down.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Nothing that looks remotely Mars or Hu. Ceph and Crust would be good.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I think we can work something out. Shore leave would be good for the crew too.<sup>M</sup>

That would make an impact on the pop. Maybe too much. Like when the Vulcans visited Earth. Another incarnation.

<sup>M</sup>Ah, this goes way beyond the Watcher directive.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Work on it, send a Catbox to tell us what you have decided. If you need a cruiser, let us know and we will make it happen. Can't promise any specific sen though. We have a lot to choose from now.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>One crewed by Drag would work.<sup>M</sup>

And give them nightmares for eternity.

<sup>M</sup>Diversity might be more effective. Otherwise they see just one enemy and not a consortium of sen all working together.<sup>M</sup>

# Earth One

“I found the tag. At the bottom of the Marianas Trench.”

“Surprised she did not shove it in a thermal vent. Any sign of her or any of the Cet?”

“She took her ball and went home. Sounds a lot like you Owl.”

“Me, when have I ever behaved that way?” She gives me a dirty look. Okay, many times. Don’t like being bullied. I hate authority and being told what to do.

“I don’t like bullies. Admitted. We were norms at the same time and place in one incarnation. The bullies there were nasty.”

“You had it easy compared to a lot of others. Whiner.”

“This is going to really mess with the ecology.”

“The fish populations are going to swing wildly till a new equilibrium is reached. There were not always Cet here to eat them.”

“Do we tell the Hu they can go fishing again?”

“They will figure it out.”

“Do we try and find Barb? I doubt it will be easy.”

“If I was her I would have picked Ba, Di or Ku. They don’t do ocean hunting.” Though they are starting to do shipping.

“Don’t put all your Cet in one basket. Likely she spread them out into many worlds.”

“I say let her blow off steam. If we hunt her, she will just grow even more paranoid.”

“Then she would get really nasty. Laying traps, etc. I definitely do not want a TK war.”

“I wonder if she sent any to Ceph Eden?” We both smile. Mortal enemies since the beginning of time, well on the two Earths anyway.

“Thing are starting to get very interesting on E2. Surprised no one has found Andi University yet.”

“That is strange. Talk about overturning a TK nest. That would get nasty.” We both smile. Good training opportunity for the students, not so nice for the Drag.

# Rap Eden

The Captain had me train as many Rap as I could how to swim. Some are better than others of course. I should not have to go under the stern again at least. Not that there are not a lot of other things that need doing. It feels great to be doing physical work again. TK is nice, but too easy most of the time.

I admit it, I really do not miss all the endless meetings. Trust those who work under you. I learned that as a norm. Still holds here too. I get regular updates and offer suggestions when asked for. I need them to be able to work on their own. A thousand years and we are still learning this? I feel like I am working with hatchlings again sometimes.

Much better onboard a ship. Limited Rap interactions.

<sup>R</sup>Ro, get your tail up. See if you can untangle the lines on the topsail.<sup>R</sup>

I acknowledge and make my way up. We are close to shore as expected. Fog bank just off the left side. This where all the seaweed is you know. The stuff that jammed our rudder last time. We have a spotter at the bow now too. She signals to the pilot when to bear right or left. Helps, but not perfect. Especially when the sun is at the wrong angle and we get a lot of glare. Or the surf is choppy, as it is becoming right now. The fog will be gone soon.

I get the lines untangled and drop the sail. That will give us a little more speed. The main sail is still rolled up as we make our way through the weeds. That is when I notice a ship further out. Rare we ever see another ship. Bow pointed towards us and muted colors.

I chip a warning of an approaching ship. There is scurrying on deck. Not possible to tell without cheating what their intentions are. None of us have cannon yet, but some Rap can throw a fire spear far enough to catch a sail and then the rest of the ship. They are riding high, that means no cargo. We are riding low, full load. I don't like this. I signal two more chips. Get ready for something nasty.

No way they have not seen us at this point. Our Captain hails them.

<sup>R</sup>State your intentions or leave us alone.<sup>R</sup>

They hail us back, <sup>R</sup>Give us your cargo and we will leave you unharmed.<sup>R</sup> Pirates. I was hoping the Rap would not go this route. I signal my team. They all jump overboard, away from the pirate ship. Unlikely they will have seen them. If they did it would be because some of the crew did not believe them and were hoping to make it to shore. Not a nice place to be abandoned, but better than dead.

The Captain hails them back, <sup>R</sup>Leave now and you get to keep your ship.<sup>R</sup> That has to confuse them, a lot. We hear Rap laughter coming from them. They have turned their ship broadside to us, very close. Perfect ac-

tually. Their crew is at the railing with knives and swords at the ready.

The Captain signals and fire arrows descend on them. We don't want their ship, but they want ours. They dare not do the same to us. Instead they scramble to put out the fires. Diverting their attention from what we are really doing. Their ship starts to sink lower in the water. Our crew comes back on board on the far side from them, signaling success. They join the others at the railing facing them. Our numbers appear to have doubled.

There is yelling and soon all crew on the pirate ship are scrambling, grabbing lumber, lines, sails, whatever they can.

We raise sails and slowly pull away from them. The holes are big enough to give them something to worry about, but not enough to drown everyone on board or worse cause them to board us and seize our ship. Oh, right, they likely can't swim. Amazing what a couple of claws worth of holes drilled into your ship can do. I did not work in a shop all those years for nothing. Making steel has gotten better now as well.

I come up to the Captain, <sup>R</sup>Getting pretty desperate to attack us, not even knowing what we are carrying.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are a food ship. If they knew that it would mean they are hungry. We need to be careful on the shore leave coming up.<sup>R</sup> The Captain says nothing. Obvious statement on my part. We are always careful. I go back to my duties. Mending a sail was where I left off before being sent top-side. I can smell Cook. Using those fire fruits we picked up last stop. I love those things. The others think I am crazy for eating them raw. Must be a TK thing. Most TKs like chocolate and fire fruit. Even better mixed. Not native to Rap Eden, but we managed to sneak a few items in. Can I help it if all Raps like them too. Spread very fast. We could make a fortune if we used money like the Hu. Too bad for that sharing rule. Used to. Hu don't use money any more. History sucks.

We make it to port without any further surprises. Everyone is on edge all the same. Half the crew are allowed off ship, once they unload the cargo of course. I am one of them. Captain was a bit reluctant letting her best guard go, but I promised to be quick. I like to check each location for my log book and make contact with local TKs, if present. Should be two here. A mated pair. Stops others from trying to pair with them at least. As much as I would like to think mal and fem are equal, they are not. They are different cultures and have access to different roles and locations.

I make my way to a visitor kitchen. Most of the crew will end up here. Cook is good, but has limited resources to make our meals from. Here the rat is fresh, warm and still bloody. I bet it would be better with fire fruit powder. Hmm, I remove some from my satchel and dust it on top. Yes, better. A mal next to me looks at what I am doing and asks, <sup>R</sup>May I try the spice you are using?<sup>R</sup> I affirm and hand him my container. He adds some

to his rat portion and hands back the container.

<sup>R</sup>Oh, that really does it.<sup>R</sup> Thank you sailor. Guess you do learn some things on all those voyages you are on. I show amusement and continue with my own meal. The mal is telling others though. I finish up and make my way outside before others ask for some. They can get their own. And no, he is not TK. Guess norms like it too.

I find the forge and explain what I am looking for, showing a drawing I have made. I put in some work time to make up for the request by chopping wood to make charcoal for the furnace. They finish first, a simple request, but I always give more than I take. There will be other attempts to board us. I want to try out a few ideas with the crew to get their opinions. And no, I am not ready to introduce cannon or other explosives. A cross-bow with a steel arrow, like I am now carrying, however is will within the tech limits. Can be used hand held as well. We would need a lot of them to be safe. Iron weighs a lot and takes up space that could be used for cargo, sails, lines, fresh water and food. Nothing goes on board without a great deal of thought and consensus.

I make my way to a spice shop to see what new spices they have here. I will take some back with me for cook, along with some fresh bird and rat. Not bad for a few arns off ship. The other half of the crew want their turn before night as well.

One last stop. A small room off a side street. I give the correct knock from inside the door. Only a TK could do that. It unlatches by itself and I enter. Once I close the door I can be TK again without fear of being seen.

A recorder approaches me, <sup>R</sup>State your call and TK level.<sup>R</sup> This is the part I always hesitate on. Too low and I will be ignored. Too high and they will be afraid of me. Unfortunately I have limited time and need answers, <sup>R</sup>Ro, TK7.<sup>R</sup> Everything stops suddenly. Not the Ro, but the seven.

The recorder is good and it does not phase him, <sup>R</sup>You have some proof of TK level?<sup>R</sup> I give my best Hu smile, morph into a Di with a gain in size and strength. Barely fitting in the room with a ceiling this low.

<sup>D</sup>Proof enough or do you want me to DS everyone here to another froth?<sup>D</sup> I morph back to Rap. Hate being a Di, but it does impress.

The recorder affirms notes it in the log and goes back to other tasks. The local leader comes up to me, bows respectfully. I bow back. Formalities done.

<sup>R</sup>How may we be of service?<sup>R</sup> You may think it strange that they do not know who I am, but very few associate my name with the legend from our past. I prefer it that way.

<sup>R</sup>We were approached by a pirate ship a few arns out from port. Know anything about that? Are they becoming a problem?<sup>R</sup>

She hisses loudly, <sup>R</sup>Only the desperate resort to piracy.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Or the greedy. Would hate to see our world go Hu.<sup>R</sup> She affirms.

She brings out a map, <sup>R</sup>Where exactly did you encounter them. We are keeping recs of encounters and have posted spotters on some of the local ships. Locals have all been warned. As you can imagine, com gets around fast. <sup>R</sup>The map already has some sightings marked. I add one for us.

<sup>R</sup>We put holes in their hull. They won't be attacking in the near future. Also got a read on their Captain and crew. The crew seem to be low level Rap who would have a hard time on their own. They are desperate. Looking for something other than actual work. I was not in contact long enough to learn where they got their ship from. <sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Stole it from a dock two ports north of there. We have extra security and alarm calls set up now. Pass this on to any others you meet. <sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am due back on board. <sup>R</sup>I bow and leave the way I came.

Interesting. I would rather the locals figure this out and solve the problem themselves, but all the TKs have permission to go ahead and do what is necessary, if it gets much worse. I will not have our sen ruined almost after starting. I want to see them have a chance like the other sen I have met. I admit it, I want us to do better than whatever is happening on Di Eden without us.

I really need to get out of the habit of making my self and knowledge indispensable. I never set out to do this. I really do want to be an observer, a Watcher, a nobody. Just not in my bones to not step in it when needed.

When I get back to the docks, our ship is gone! A Rap comes up to me, <sup>R</sup>Are you Ro? <sup>R</sup>I affirm. <sup>R</sup>Captain has dismissed you. Do not try and find them. <sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Do you know why? <sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Something about subverting the authority of the Captain. <sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Do you know anything about the pirate ships? <sup>R</sup> She looks confused.

<sup>R</sup>You mean the hungry Raps who have banded together to beg from more well off Raps? They are not allowed in port any longer, even though they only take abandoned wrecks that would not last without a lot of repairs. Most ships just give them some food or help some with repairs and everyone leaves without pain. <sup>R</sup> I thank her for her com and make my way back to the TK center.

I am in no danger of going hungry of course. I totally misread the situation. Makes me feel like a young, hungry Rap looking for any kind of work and learning how to defend myself. I can also see why the Captain thought I was trying to take her position. The crew were beginning to trust me more than her. Never a good thing.

It would appear I still have a lot to learn. I need to be a nobody and I need to instruct the other TKs to do the same, though I suspect they are already better at it than I am. How did they not know though?

# Earth Two

A third ‘thant comes up to us. Who is this I wonder. Rand and Drup go up to her.

<sup>th</sup>We were told to report to you. What do you want us to do?<sup>th</sup>

Drup answers, <sup>th</sup>How many came?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Head Consort Edwin approved one thousand three hundred and fourteen.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>More than enough. Thanks. Follow me and I will explain what is needed. Basically we are to surround the Drag pack south of us to prevent any from escaping.<sup>th</sup>

Not only are the ‘thants stronger, but with this number the Drag Warriors do not stand a chance.

<sup>th</sup>Wait, you should know the Drag have ‘thn metal weapons.<sup>th</sup>

The leader looks at me, stunned, then turns to Drup.

<sup>th</sup>This one coms excellently. You have done well to teach it.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>He learned on his own by observation. A TK3 at the moment, but he learned ‘thant before his upgrade.<sup>th</sup> What is an upgrade?

<sup>th</sup>Most unusual. I will report this to Edwin upon our return.<sup>th</sup>

Rand comes up to me, <sup>th</sup>We build our homes from ‘thn metal. We certainly know how to deal with the very primitive spears and knives the Drag think they invented. And we are VERY fast.<sup>th</sup> She then runs off to join the others.

I have a lot to record in the second journal already.

I fall asleep at my recording. I do sleep less now, but seem to need at least an arn each night. Soon it will be dawn. I pack my things.

Others are waiting at the fire circle when I get there. Talks is there.

She comes up to me, <sup>th</sup>Midj, you need to come with me to see something. Something that all Drag should have seen before this entire mess started.<sup>th</sup> I am confused. The others here already know of this place?

I affirm, not knowing what this is about. I admit, I am not very comfortable around Talks, as she is still wearing her Warrior gear. I doubt even with my new abilities I could survive an attack by her. I look to Fek and he affirms it is safe. Still.

We travel for less than a half day. Just over the crest of a hill we look down on a valley below, I see it. It makes no sense to me at all. There are projections coming out of the ground, but these are not rocks of any kind I have ever seen. We descend into the valley quietly. We proceed until we are near the center of these strange rocks. Talks then stops. She points at one of the large rocks with a lot of strange holes in it. Never seen holes that shape before.

<sup>th</sup>This was built by Hu thousands of summers ago. These structures

nearly covered the entire world. The Hu had built a civilization so fast that there were ten million million of their kind when it fell.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>The Drag did this destruction?<sup>th</sup> Or Sauron?

<sup>th</sup>They did to themselves. They were always competing. Always fighting. Millions died ever summer and every winter by their own arms. The weapons were horrendous. Entire settlements large than this could be destroyed at once. But, what finally brought them down was a tiny little creature, so small, no one could see it. It was an infection that spread among them so fast that nearly all of them died. What you see around us, in this place that was left, is a reminder that ALL sentients, no matter how great they think they are can fall.<sup>th</sup>

A memorial not of greatness, but of false boasting. We remain for several arn contemplating their false feelings of importance. We walk back to the others quietly. No com. We arrive after dark. I really do not want others to see me right now and go straight to my records to write what I have seen. I do not fall asleep this night.

They find me the next morning staring off into the distance at apparently nothing. Just open ground. Talks is sitting next to me. Both of us silent.

Finally I ask, <sup>th</sup>Do the current Hu know of this?<sup>th</sup> She affirms. No wonder they have never taken up weapons of destruction. I would not either. I would be so ashamed that I would rather die than harm another.

Mouse comes to get us, <sup>th</sup>Come, this needs to be recorded as well.<sup>th</sup>

She starts. We get up to follow. No com. Running to catch up. Running is much easier now for me, almost enjoyable even. If I had not just seen the memorial to stupidity. A path the Drag could easily have followed. Most likely will if given a chance.

I know where we are going. Due south towards the Warrior camp. When we get there, no one is present. They left a mess of course. I had heard the order for the ‘thants to surround them. Was this part of their struggle?

I ask, <sup>th</sup>Did the ‘thants kill them all?<sup>th</sup> Talks motions no.

Fek also answers, <sup>th</sup>Remember how we came here. At some point we passed through what we call a portal. That portal allowed us to travel a long distance quickly. The ‘thants herded them through a portal.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Where are they now?<sup>th</sup> Mouse answers, <sup>th</sup>No longer on this world.<sup>th</sup> She shows amusement and Talks does too.

A shimmer appears before us. A portal? I have never seen one this close before. I want to touch it, but they hold me back.

<sup>th</sup>Mouse, Talks and I will go to the Drag on this new world, to observe. You will see us again when your studies are complete and you are ready to join us.<sup>th</sup> What studies? Rand and Drup nudge me. When I turn back, Mouse, Talks and the portal are gone.

# Bug Eden

\*I was sure she would head here.\*

\*Silver, just where do you think the Cet would be in this world?  
Frozen or cooked? Not enough ocean or water of any kind.\*

\*But she liked this place so much.\*

\*Not any more. The days are too fast. No way to run them now. You know she hated being confined in the tunnels.\* True. Given the faster days, the hot side did not melt and kill everything and the cold side could almost be tolerated if you had shelter. A few more decades and it would be like any other world. Boring. I get why Barb would not hate it here. Nothing Bug about it any more. It was the Bug's choice though. Not ours.

\*We will need to find a new playground to do our thinking in now.\*

Myra pops in in Meep form.

***No indication she returned here, even for a visit. When she left it was forever. Decision made.*** Meeps are always so loud!

*She liked the tidally locked nature of this world, but there are no Bug froths.*

*Tidally locked worlds are the most common worlds in existence.*

*But the water ones that could support the Cets are rarer.*

*Still a lot of territory to scan.*

*Maybe we should just leave her alone.* Of course Turtle would com this. Likely right too.

*But, remember what happened last time she brought the Cet to full power? They took over the multiverse. You want that again?*

*Antagonizing her is more likely to set that off, not less.* True.

***You were the ones who brought her back to Earth One.*** Myra pops out.

*Way to rub our antennae in it Myra.*

*She is already gone dear.* I know that.

*It would be smart to go someplace we would not be expecting.*

*She is only a TK7. How far could she go?*

*Drop it dear. You know once she brings her pod up, they boost each other. She could be a nine easily by now. Especially if she thought you were hunting her.*

\*All Hu are alike. Thar she blows, man the harpoons!\*

Does not have the same impact to com this in Bug.

# CoTu Farout

::We are ready to split up. Each of you takes eight Comp with you. The remaining Comp will be in reserve in the event we see locations that need to be filled in after we are done with these.::

At least the constant training and drilling is over. Yes, I know, the learning never stops. We knew that when we signed up to be on the Enterprise. However, being assigned only to low level maintenance tasks was not part of what we thought would happen. Join Enterprise, see the multiverse. Right. Dumb cluck.

Not that morphing to a very strange creature was expected either. At least it is off ship and only Pilot, whom we all like, is above us. She actually includes us in discussions and decisions. That certainly never happened on board. We finally feel part of an actual flock.

We each gather our eight Comp, turn them on, and instruct them to follow us. We all say goodbye to each other and hope to meet again after we are done. Scary to be all alone on a strange world in the middle of nowhere. We are flock creatures. Guess I need to make a new flock out of the locals that I meet. Talk about being obsessed with zooid exchanges. Takes forever to explain it is not safe for us, or them. We are honest and explain we are not from this world, but have been sent to help them.

They are fascinated by the activated Comp. They have never met a solidic life form before. Some attempt to follow, but a few DS jumps dissuades that. The jumps do reinforce the idea we are different at least. It just makes them more curious and more interested in zooid exchange though. They want to be able to do this as well, and they think an exchange will give them that ability. It won't, but they think it will, so we are approached continuously. Some even try to bribe us with gifts of special food or fancy objects they have found. Were we ever that way as hatchlings? I suspect we were. Only a vague memory now.

We are all TK5s now. Can sustain our own forms indefinitely. That is a relief. Never know what could happen out here.

The landscape is boring. Very little variation. If not for the builtin location abilities of the Comp, one of which we each reserved for ourselves, we would be lost almost immediately.

I am here. Time for the show! Only one Comp will stay here, but I need to show how they interact to convince them they want one to be stationed here. Remember I com'd that there is very little variation? Well, they think the same and wonder why anyone would even want to com with another some distance away. My biggest job is convincing them the Comp are more than just another play toy. More variation than they get.

# Cat Eden

Probably should call this New Cat Eden, they have been through so many. They come in, play for a bit, defeat all the predators, grow bored, meow for a new world to conquer. Lazy fur balls. Oh, we had complete training on them at Andi. Hope Midj does well there. He does not even have to go very far. Been on Earth Two the entire time. If the Drag only knew. They never had a chance. As a Jane told me at Andi, 'Ego is a terrible thing to waste.' Not sure if this was a joke, which Hu are obsessed with, or wisdom. I am thinking the latter.

Talks is the one I am most worried about. I was never sure she would remain loyal to the TKs. Would have been so easy to flip and assist the Drag. But even she knows that given the amount of resources that 'thants and TKs have there was never a question of outcome. Especially given the insistence on the Drag of attacking the Hu. I feel sorry for the small settlement of Hu they did attack and kill, but we needed to be sure they were serious and this was not just boasting. Even Sauron was good at that.

We are out of sight of the Drag pack. We can see them by virtue of our TK, but we are too far away for them to notice us.

A Cat pops in next to me.

*Thanks for taking on this task Owa.*

She rubs up against me purring very loudly. I have a feeling this is not going to be a hardship for them. She purrs louder. I keep forgetting they have no etiquette in regards to TP. She sniffs me.

*Do all Drag smell like you?*

*Given how much exercise they have been doing, likely much worse.*

*Stupid Lizards. Ah, that is the Owa I remember. I show amusement.*

*Indeed. I pause. They are ready, go ahead and announce the rules.*

*There are no rules. They are live dinner, pure and simple.*

At least they will learn what it means to be on the other side of terror.

Owa looks at me concerned.

*No, they cannot morph to a Terror. Horrible creation.*

*We defeated them as well.*

*But at great cost.*

*Needed to weed out the weak.*

She pops into the center. They back up and ready their weapons. A dozen more Cats surround their pack. They all roar at once.

Owa takes down one and rips its head off easily. Let the games begin!

They scatter. Won't help. Cats LOVE to give chase. Not fair, but they have more of a chance than they gave the Hu.

# New Rajk Eden

#We have our own world again!# And it is glorious. Soft sand that is easily to dig and form homes in. Lots to eat, water close by, sun in the morning and stars at night. On our Farout world there were no stars other than our sun. So beautiful.

What is not so beautiful is that I need to supply new candidates. I am the head TK for Rajk Eden. I need to supply a team to run this place. I need to, and this is the worst part, have a 'thn pup to grow up with us. I am the only one high enough here to ah, do the necessary deed. I am told it is not sex. Gave that up when I became TK. Best part of the entire process. Constantly pumping out pups to satisfy the predators waiting is not my idea of a fun live path. Most would disagree, but I am much happier without it. Now I have to 'mate' with a 'thn to make a pup for them, then, worst part, raise them to sen, and oh, that only takes minimum of sixteen million years. No big root right. I have only been TK for a thousand or so winters. I am to young to breed.

#Boss, a new request has come in. Someone with the call of Pilot.#

#What does she want? Have not heard from her in a long time. She was the Captain of the Farout survey ship, the ah, Enterprise.#

#You still have the worm Boss.# Hard for a TK to not remember. Part of the curse actually. Every mistake, wrong com, confusion, everything. You remember it.

I affirm to continue.

#She needs some helpers to volunteer for duty on some Farout called CoTu, short for Colonial Tunicate. Whatever that is.#

#Normally a sea creature. Thought to be on the same evo line as us, very distant relatives.#

#These are land forms.# Sounds creepy as hell. On land? How is that even possible.

#Any young pups up for adventure?# Sounds like a suicide mission, but that is not my call. The young ones are as stupid as rocks. Best to weed them out early before they hurt anyone else.

My call is Baga, mal. I am TK. I graduated from Andi University. I served my time doing push work for others. I am my own burrow boss now, well world boss. I make the tough turns for the betterment of all.

Right. I think I need to find a nice warm, dark burrow and rest for a bit. Can't rest as TK. The mind never stops. I close my eyes anyway.

# Andi University, E2

<sup>D</sup>Br'thn, why am I here? And where is here?<sup>D</sup> There are so many strange looking sen.

*You are still on Earth Two. Andi University is a requirement for all TKs training under our care.* I like Br'thn. Took a few days to feel comfortable with her too. I also feel sorry for her after what our creator did to her, mostly neglect. Who neglects their hatchlings? Seems to have recovered from whatever harm was done her. I was told she is a mother herself now. It is an honor to be escorted to Andi by her. After a lifetime of being a 'smiggle' by Dark standards, I am not used to being the center of attention.

*TK Fek was here before you. They are aware of your needs and of your sen peculiarities.* Not sure that is a good thing. Never liked being a Drag after how I saw them behave. Nervous, I check to be sure I have my satchel and my record books. Both are there. Barely had time to finish the Pre-Encounter one. I could go over it a thousand times and still find things to change. I need to let go and concentrate on my life now. How do I describe all that I am seeing in the first day even?

There are a lot of 'thn about. Many are smaller than Br'thn. Have not seen any larger yet, though I know her mother is larger. Hope to meet her at some point. I hurry to catch up with Br'thn. Very easy to get distracted looking at everyone else.

We enter a stone enclosure. There is a table with a sen behind it. Not sure what kind. Br'thn coms with the sen who affirms.

*TK Midj place your past record book on the table. You will only record in the second one from now on. The past record book will become part of the library archive here at Andi.* This sen sounds different in TP. Fek and Mouse sounded similar. Wonder why that is? Do different Sen feel different in TP? Br'thn does, but she is a solidic. A 'thn.

Seeing their impatience I bow and place the book on the table. Making sure it is the correct one, several times. I am so nervous. I follow Br'thn outside. I have yet to see another Drag.

I see a form that I think I should know.

*Br'thn, is that sen a Hu?*

*Affirmative Midj.*

*Ugly creatures.*

*Remember, you are likely ugly to every other sen here as well.*

I am not the most beautiful Drag to have ever existed. Far from it. But my new tail looks nice. My feathers are groomed and in place. How could I be seen as ugly? I follow Br'thn.

Around the corner from Records is a huge building, is that what they

are called? It has a climbing structure and several levels. We enter the large open hole in the center. A lot of sen inside. There are many tables with a sen on the other side of each.

When we enter everything stops. All the ones behind tables rise at attention. Not sure why. We proceed to a specific table, I think.

*High 'thn Br'thn, welcome back to Andi University.* Formal. Why? I look at Br'thn again. She is the only 'thn I have personally met, so I do not understand.

Br'thn bobs an affirmation. I learned that is how they affirm. By bobbing.

*This is my student TK3 Midj, Drag mal.* I do a bob.

The sen checks some record sheets. Apparently finds the notation about me.

*You may proceed. Thank you for checking in.* The sen looks behind us to the next sen waiting. I turn to look. Looks like a very large version of what Drag would normally hunt and eat. Impossibly large. But, she, judging from what I can see, has garments, satchel, tools and even foot coverings. I look down at my own feet and feel embarrassed. Wait, where is her 'thn guide?

I am not used to being inside any large structure and am soon lost. I keep following Br'thn though. We stop at a door. I am learning. Very dusty. Looks very old in fact. I have seen abandoned Hu enclosures that looked better.

*A brief knocking on the wood panel is considered polite when visiting an instructor's office.*

No indication of how hard I should knock, but considering the condition of the wood, I am gentle.

"Enter." That was com'd in Hu. How do I know Hu and how do I know it is Hu?

I open the door after I figure out how it works. TK3 helps there. It is even worse inside. An old Hu sits behind a table. They like tables in this place. We enter and I close the wood section behind us. Always return objects to the location you found them in. That was certainly beat into me enough times.

"Br'thn, why have you brought me an obvious smiggle? Dinner?" I was not sure I heard this properly, but once I do, I raise my feathers in anger.

*This was done as a courtesy. This one is under my care. ANY harm to him will result in serious pain to you. Even if done by another. Midj is a student here, registered and affirmed by the High Council. As such this com carries their backing.*

When we leave I ask who that was. *Sauron, my father and Drag creator.*

*Sauron, as in the God whom the Warrior Drag worship? That old Hu is Sauron?*

She affirms. *Most sen are required to take classes from Professor Sauron. This is done to educate them on what happens when a wrong path is taken as a TK. You are excused from this requirement. You already know his story as you recorded it in your Past Records book.*

And lived it through countless beatings by the Warriors. I wish they could see him now. I show amusement.

Br'thn comes to face me less than a claw width away.

*Any sen can fall victim to the thinking of Sauron. NEVER forget that.* She does not hit me or remove my tail at least. Lesson heard.

Br'thn shows me to my living space. Others will take over from here and she pops out.

I look around and see no obvious entrance. I scan the inside. There are others inside and they know I am outside. Rude. I pop into an empty space.

“Look what the Cat dragged in.” A Hu. Ugly things.

I then recognize the large rodent sen from check in. I turn to face her.

<sup>D</sup>I am sorry I do not know your com yet. I learn quickly though.

Happy to see you again.<sup>D</sup> The Hu, not so much.

“Stupid Reptile, she does not com lizard.” He is a nasty one.

“And we eat Hu for snacks.” I lick my lips and smile. Well, it looks much worse when we try to smile.

A ‘thant pops in. Not much room now. It is Rand! I rush up to her and give her a hug. I am not so alone now.

<sup>th</sup>I am glad you are here Rand. This place is so strange.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Br'thn told me where you were. Wanted to make sure you made it here alright.<sup>th</sup>

Rand bows to the rodent sen, #Welcome Rajk Queen.# He TPs me what he com'd so I understand. Whoa, I can now understand Rajk now too.

I bow to her, #Forgive me your highness. I did not know.#

The Hu bows to me for some reason. The Queen shows amusement.

<sup>th</sup>I need to get back to Drup before he causes any more trouble.<sup>th</sup> He pops out.

“Who are you?” The Hu mal asks. He is showing visible signs of fear.

A new one for me, “A student at Andi University is what I am told. First day, so I am still confused about how everything works.”

#Hu tend to think very highly of themselves.# She shows amusement.

#You have never met a Drag Warrior. They only have violence for brains.# The Hu has no idea what we just com'd. Good. I think I might like it here.

# Cat Eden

TK Fek journal.

The Drag population has been reduced by a third. Seems to have stabilized for the moment. Cats are not pack animals and prefer to hunt alone. This is their weakness, which the Drag soon realized. The Drag are pack animals. If you see one, there are more about on all sides of you.

I work mostly with Sylvy, Owa being too proud to worry about prey animals. She is much higher TK than I am, which suits her fine. Without TK I would be the stronger one no doubt, even as a mal.

The Drag have found a cave system to nest in. No Cat is going to enter though a narrow passage and face an entire pack of Drag with 'thn metal spears. With the 'thants gone now as well, they will have to be careful about not loosing their spear points. Though the ones who herded them here did leave quiet a mess. The Cats know this, and it is in open ground, watched ground. Some of the Cats have taken to burying the 'thant scat. The Drag will not retrieve any more points without luck or sacrifice.

Sylvy takes a nap. No TK needs to sleep, but for Cats, this is a passion, a calling, a need so strong they must nap. I have not slept since my last upgrade and that was only because of the needs of the upgrade process. NEVER believe a sleeping Cat is unaware though the eyes are closed. Impossible to sneak up on them, ever. The Drag have yet to learn this fact. I am ashamed to admit I was hatched Drag. Maybe being a smiggle gives me an advantage. Certainly did not in my early years.

I pop into a hidden chamber of the cave complex to better understand their thinking. They are still Warriors. The surprising thing is that they are just beginning to understand that tech is an advantage. The Cats HATE tech and will never use it. Beneath their precious dignity. Being dead is beneath my dignity. Anything short of that is better.

They are getting better at using the forge. This is good. They were beginning to become too dependent on the 'thant shards. Impossible to forge or change. Only chips and flakes of limited use. Metals can be shaped, forged, sharpened. So many uses. No sen gets far without metal forging. Sure some use bio arts to make useful designs. Some skip straight to TK arts, but they are definitely the exception.

Knowing that metal would be important I studied as much as I could. From all the sen in the sphere of the Thirteen. So much knowledge. I am a terrible Watcher. I sneak TP thoughts to those working at the forge or gathers of ore, free metals being rare. They are starting to get the advantages of alloys.

Do not get me wrong. I do not intend to make the Drag more powerful than the resident Cats. More of a standoff with respect and dignity for both. Not sure Cats are capable, but I will worry about the Drag side. I feel amusement.

Being among the Cats has been interesting. Of course we occasionally got a Cat student, briefly, at Andi. They get bored quickly, especially when they are told repeatedly they are not allowed to 'play' with the other sen students. Drag never play with their food. In, out, eat, done. What they both have in common is the need to feel superior and to use whatever means they have to display this, true or not. Sauron was the father of lies, but I think he either got lessons from the Cats or influenced their evo as well.

We all took classes from Sauron at Andi. Mostly hot air. The constant bragging and puffing up. His feathers they would always be on full display mode. Of course all this looks very silly in the Hu form. He is forbidden to assume any other form though. He ruined the Hu, so they returned the favor and made him a permanent Hu. Seems fair. A Warrior would simply have dispatched him and been done with it. The ultimate smiggle in their eyes. Amusing as Sauron gave us, the Drag, that word and thought. To be undone by your own creations must be humiliating.

Must pay attention. This is the critical step in forging a titanium alloy sword.

What I find especially amusing is that these thoughts I share are seen as coming from Lord Sauron. If they only knew they come from a once bullied, beaten, smiggle of the lowest order. Smiggle led indeed. The only thing that saved me was the timing. I grew larger during a time of limited Hu – Drag interaction. There were a few Drag who helped as runners between Hu settlements. That was just a ruse to learn more about the Hu and to always know where they were and what they were doing.

It we had not moved the Drag to Cat Eden, the Hu would be extinct from their point of view. Then they would have succumbed to infighting and the lack of tech they were dependent on stealing and taking from the Hu. They did not know about Andi on another continent. That would have really been a rude awakening and extremely humbling experience for the Drag. Better they learn here and now. They are not the greatest.

I hope this is giving the Cats what they need as well.

*Stupid Lizards taste great.* Sylvy has returned to the awakened state.

*Question Sylvy, do stupid monkeys or stupid lizards taste better?*

*Stupid Lizards. The Stupid Monkeys stink.*

We can agree on that one.

Talks and Mouse are supposed to relieve me. Where are they?

# §il Eden

hard to imagine, but in the distant past we were solitary. we can now trace ancestors back nearly two hundred million years through fossil remains. we were very big and very stupid. nothing more was needed, so it worked. now, we are no longer solitary mega hunters. rulers of the sea. that gradually changed over the last sixty million years. so much had changed, we needed to work together to survive. climates change, species change, we changed. now it is rare we are ever alone. there is always someone around, even if of a different cast. at the moment four i§il attend me personally. they are very useful for running errands and passing messages that aren't urgent.

§Meeting in five alns. § i affirm and they leave my quiet space. we may work in groups now, but it is a §il right, written into stones, that every §il has a right to quite space, no matter the cast. i am not as patterned as some and don't mind reminders, if done quietly, discreetly and rarely.

we have casts in land, water and air currently. i am on land, but do enjoy a long swim when duties permit. we have casts that are strictly meat eaters and some who are strictly plant eaters. one who only eats fungi. i am flexible and enjoy any food prepared well.

the meeting is about the problem that came to our attention several gen ago. we had become too complacent. boring would be the proper call. we were not growing in our thoughts. everything seemed to be written in stone, when only the right for quiet space should be. new thoughts, and new tech especially, were extremely rare. we searched for a gen for a possible solution when one presented itself.

we do have a cast that specializes in the psiotic arts. i have minor abilities myself, though not officially part of their cast. too big is the problem. psiotic arts work best on those of a certain size. can't be everything. cast envy is a dangerous path.

right, the solution. a group of sen arrived that there is no recorded sightings of before. though of our world, they were totally unlike us in many aspects. instead of scales or feathers, they had very fine hair. but the surprising thing was their need to be in water at all times, though they did not breath underwater as the fish do. like our water casts, they surfaced at regular intervals to exchange air. also like us though they came with an entire cast system. some of the largest ones ate only the smallest kind, others, more like us, ate fish. the last, of a medium size, were capable of bringing down an isolated §il when they hunted in packs.

since our cast system was agreed upon, we have not hunted other §il. strictly forbidden. having no others to pose a threat, we became soft. we stopped innovating, stopped looking for solutions to needs. why was it

we needed a threat to life to be able to achieve new understandings? we are not immortal, we all die, but something about the threat of a violent death spurred creative thought. our culture started to flourish again.

others of the new sen ate food that might have gone to one of our casts, or to our prey that were dependent on the same food source. since the new comers were granted cast rights we were not allowed to hunt them either. this would have been dangerous. some of them were very high psiotic cast members and this could not be determined by physical characteristics. what might have looked like easy prey, could turn on you and you became prey for them instead.

§your visitor has arrived.§ i acknowledge and leave my quite space to meet with them. we have genders, but this life form, which is even hard to call a life form, is certainly sen, far higher than we are, does not appear to have a gender as we understand it. they have not been forthcoming as to any aspects of their culture or system of organization. we did learn that this one being was responsible for bringing the new ones to our world.

i make movements of respect to the honored one. It changes color, which I can only hope is reciprocal.

§thank you for meeting with me honored one.§

*how is the arrangement working for you?*

§though we appreciate the service of the new ones immensely, there might be an adjustment that could be made to help everyone succeed?§  
*proceed. it continues to change colors and shapes.*

i pause. how do you tell a sen who can move worlds what you would like done?

§is it possible, to maybe, if this works for you as well, to ah, maybe reduce the numbers of the new attack sen? they are perhaps too effective at this time. it has been a very long time since we worried about something eating us. those of us on land are of course safe, but we need the resources of the seas as well.§

*you are referring to the orca cast? i affirm.*

*this is excellent com. a problem has arisen on their home world that the leader of the cets refuses to acknowledge. she was hurt badly by events in the past. without the attack cet on their origin world, other species are growing out of control and threatening their entire ecology. those that they ate while there have now over populated. this has ultimately reduced the numbers of those who ate sea plants and small ones.*

§thus threatening their world's oxygen recycling.§

*affirmation*

§i believe we can come to understanding. all that remains is to try working on the numbers needed on both worlds.§

*this can be gradual and done carefully. i will return in a few years.*

# CoTu Farout

~Pilot, this is becoming annoying. We have duties as well. We are not your transport service.~

::Appologies Ceph Tal. This project is sanctioned by the Thirteen. Take it up with them. Are we still on track for the next delivery? Does not have to be Enterprise. You can get someone else to do it. Much smaller package.::

~You intend to dupe it once it arrives.~

::Something like that. Nothing down here is like anything we have encountered before. Safe sailing Tal.::

The sen I requested DS down are looking around very confused. The Enterprise leaves orbit and DSs out. My four Ku, now CoTu rise to greet them. It was amazing how fast the four adapted. They actually love this assignment. I never realized how bad things had gotten on the Enterprise. Being at the top of the chain of command means it was too easy to delegate and forget. I hope I never do that again. Humbling.

The two Rajk start digging a hole in the soft ground. They really do not like being in the open. This is good. We need experience in subsurface life. Oh, the two Luss subtypes came too. Excellent. We need their stealth capabilities and experience with new sen worlds. And a single Sal. No one here has experience in land water interface zones.

A Trident comes up from the surface of the small lake near us.

A Trident Usy reporting for duty. I should inform you that it is difficult to maintain in a full air environment.Δ

::You are free to return to the lake till needed. Study it carefully. Learn what else lives there and how they integrate with the rest of life here.::

ΔUnderstood.Δ Usy returns to the lake.

The Comp have been distributed and the locals are learning how to interact with them and, most importantly, become a much larger community by the com capabilities the distributed Comp allow.

There is some kickback. Any change is met with suspicion. With ANY sen. There are not the hierarchy problems here of other sen we have met. One of the reasons this location was chosen. The NEED to be in charge, to be the top dog (Hu, Ku, whatever) is so ingrained in most cultures. Here the dominant culture is about helping. Given the lack of diversity of life experiences here, it is not easy. I think it is mostly someone else to interact with, up to and including exchanging zooids of course.

The exchange process allows the CoTu to very quickly learn new skills. Wish all sen could be so open minded and adaptable.

# Bug Eden

\*Turtle, they found the archive. It is empty. All of it is gone.\*

\*You know that was bound to happen eventually.\*

\*Still, you always hope it won't be today.\*

Day length has shorted to about thirty six Earth hours. Not sure it will get any shorter. Most still like some daily variation in temperature and light. Nothing like glaciers and molten landscapes now. The poles still have ice if someone needs that. Tunnels still connect everything. Oh, and the tunnels now have high speed transport as well.

The population has tripled, but now holding steady.

\*We are naked Silver!\*

To adapt to the mild temperature variation, bodies no longer have time to change. Modesty has not taken hold yet fortunately. They wear what is needed for the tasks to be done. Farming is now outside with only specialty crops, like fungi, still below ground.

Industry. They have that now as well as the pollution that goes with it. They will figure it out.

Properly adorned now, we mingle unnoticed. This is strange given how most sen react to outsiders.

*They know who we are Silver. Wake up. Acknowledge and keep moving.* Sign, the fun is gone.

*No sign of Barb?*

*None. It is as if she was never here. She would have hated all this though. Likely would have gone rogue seeing this.* I affirm.

A Meep comes in. None of the locals are shocked. They just make their way around us now. Nothing to see here, just keep working. Ah, the Bug ethic to always be moving is still here at least.

*Welcome Puu.* Turtle coms.

I have found Barb. The locals do not want to be part of our sen community and have asked not to be disturbed. She is safe, they are safe.

*Works for us. Thank you for the com.* She pops out.

*All we can do is wish her well and know that others are looking after her now.* He affirms.

Given her animosity towards Silver this is not surprising. Even though the Silver here is not the Silver she knew and interacted with before. We have plenty of other tasks to work on. As long as she does not try to rule the multiverse again we are happy and hope she is as well.

We pop out.

# Rap Eden

The pirate mistake has rippled through the entire TK pack. How could we have missed that one? They were all trained as Watchers and it was my interaction and mistakes with the Captain that exposed it. How many other misconceptions do we have? I also bite myself for failing to read the other ship or the Captain, who knew their real purpose.

No one is to be marginalized or left out on my Rap Eden. That is what the Di did to us. Did to me. Never again! I have called for an all tails meeting. Some are coming from a distance, but everyone should be here by now.

We are underground in a large chamber. These are all TKs and can 'see' in the dark. But we don't like being confined, thus making everyone here nervous. Good. I wait. I need to calm down to avoid going rogue myself. Finally I enter as Ro. A norm of no importance.

<sup>R</sup>This is a private meeting. You are not on our list.<sup>R</sup> That was rude.

<sup>R</sup>I was told to be here. I don't even know where we are. Or why.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Are you sure you are in the right place?<sup>R</sup> Still rude. Others have taken notice and are waiting to see what I do.

<sup>R</sup>I spent years on a ship. I understand following orders. I was ordered to be here. I am staying.<sup>R</sup> Now let's see what they do. I take a stance like I am not going. Make me. They don't move either. We stand staring at each other. At least they do not forcibly remove me.

I pick up TP chatter. Wondering where the Alpha is they were called here to meet. Some are very nervous. That is normal. Especially for the low TKs. I TP my second and he comes in quietly and stand in the back. Smaller than me and very unassuming. One of the reasons I picked him. You can't be a good Watcher by coming in like the biggest baddest Rap.

We wait.

My Second TPs me, *Are they cooked yet? Smells like it boss.*

I TP amusement, *A little bit longer.*

They are getting nervous and starting to fidget. I remain calm and motionless. Some, who have not been here before, start to scope out the room. Trying to figure out why we are here no doubt. Why a 'norm' is here with them. They dare not express in front of a norm. Good.

Second comments, *Oh, that was really smooth Boss. Really smooth.* He is showing amusement and others around him do not know why. Finally someone opens a door and stares out in shock. Others turn to look. There is a rush for the door. Soon everyone is outside. Second and I are the last to leave. The room dissolves behind us. No one notices because they are all looking the other way.

*You win Boss, remedial training definitely.* He shakes his head like a

Hu. I will admit I was not expecting it to be this bad. Are they all really this inattentive? Going to be a long training I suspect. Granted they went through Watcher training at Andi. I did not, just given the summation and rules after. Some here are nearly five hundred years old. I would have expected them to be better than this.

<sup>R</sup>I have a question. Has anyone ever met this Alpha you are waiting for? And who was the Alpha before them.<sup>R</sup> I wait.

A few turn when I com.

<sup>R</sup>How do you know about our Alpha? Who are you?<sup>R</sup> Finally someone asks a good question.

<sup>R</sup>Isn't it obvious?<sup>R</sup> I show amusement. They are not amused though. Second is and can barely contain himself.

<sup>R</sup>No fair Second, you knew all along.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Just never believed it could be this bad. I went to Andi. We were taught better.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>But so long without an Alpha riding them, they got lazy. Nothing worse than a lazy Rap.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Indeed.<sup>R</sup>

Some finally figure it out from our com and come to attention. The rest seeing this do so slowly as well. Still not sure and confused.

I morph to full Raijin once everyone is looking at us.

<sup>R</sup>Welcome to Watcher Remedial Training. From your present performance it would appear we will be here a long time.<sup>R</sup> Second affirms sadly.

<sup>R</sup>I want a typical village appropriate for this climate set up as soon as possible. I want farms, rodent enclosures, a functioning city government, craft shops, forge, everything. Fill the roles needed. We will run through a number of scenarios to test and teach you the ability to blend in and get the **correct** information. Based on your misinformation I was made to look the fool the last time I was here.<sup>R</sup>

I pause for effect, <sup>R</sup>That will NEVER happen again.<sup>R</sup>

Ron and Squeak pop in. Behind me. I still manage to notice them.

<sup>R</sup>The two behind me were my teachers. Still are. If you thought I would be hard on you, you have no idea what you are in for. Now MOVE!<sup>R</sup>

I turn, they both show amusement.

"I know, I was as bad as they are. Don't need to beat me about it."

<sup>D</sup>No beating, just nice to see you on the other side.<sup>D</sup>

Even my second is not sure what was com'd. Good. He should have been better too. I motion for him to join the others to help out. No one here remembers Di any longer. One good thing at least. One good thing.

Checker pops in to help. I assign her and she gets to it. Team Rap.

# Di Eden

!They are making the same mistakes with the Checkers they made with the Raps. Don't they realize the Checkers are just as smart as they are? Granted not as strong because of their size, but just as smart.!

!Di have the unfortunate tendency to equate size with superiority. Enough Checkers have been beaten and killed for them to be wary of the Di. What would you do if you were a Checker?!

!Leave town.!

!And go where? Di have colonized nearly every space that can be lived in. There is a reason why the Jungle Checkers managed to hold out and be free for as long as they did. Not a Di in sight.!

!Checker Eden? They could do it, but I really do not want to get in the habit every time there is an injustice of making a new world for the weaker ones.!

!That won't work. The remaining Di would simply find some other difference to exploit and blame on the 'inferior' group for their status and treatment by the superior ones. Your tails are too long, that is why you are not smart enough to handle this task. Just stick to manual labor.!

!I am convinced that the only reason the Dark/Slayer experiment is working is because it is isolated, self reliant, and there are no Checkers present.!

!When was the last time we visited them. Might be time for an 'inspection' again. I affirm.

We find them on their little home outside of town.

!This place looks a lot like the place we used to run.!

!It does. Impressive that they got so many details right.!

!Checker welcomes you. A Checker? Looks like . . .

!A Jungle Checker. Nice touch.!

Dark and Slayer pop in, pretending to come out of the home. Carrying treats to serve. Melons and other delicacies. Nice. Libby shows amusement,

!They are attempting to bribe us White.!

!Works for me, let's eat. Their Checker goes straight for the exotic tropical fruit. I show amusement.

After eating Dark and Slayer look at each other then at us.

Dark finally coms, !The Di Checker situation is getting worse.!

We affirm, !Not just in your sector. The Di just can't stop seeing someone smaller as inferior, dumber, and so on.!

!Checker smart!! Of course you are.

!Still a bit young to understand all this. And we shield her from others who would wish her harm.!

!Was not afforded the ten thousand year advantage or TK status our Checker received.!

!She earned it. I wonder how things are going on Rap Eden?!

!We did a fly over. Seems they have it much more together than we do. The Checkers there are seen as equals and participate in all aspects of life. How do we do the same here?!

*They do not see the com we see dear. Be nice to them.* Libby TPs me.

! I would guess a lot of our Checkers would run at a chance to join them on Rap Eden.!

All goes silent.

I finally com, !Then they would fail yet again. Without the Checkers, Di would pick on Di with longer thinner tails, or the wrong color neck feathers, or something. Almost every sen in our Earth Froth has this problem or similar ones. We are Watchers now. They have to figure this out themselves. We can't do anything overt and certainly nothing that shows our TK abilities.!

!And a sudden displacement of all the Checkers on Di would be noticed. ! We all show amusement.

!We could even the odds. Give Checkers TK2 status. Just enough to hold their own in a fight.!

!And the Di would learn to shoot them on sight out of fear. Di still far out number the Checkers.!

!Give them their own homeland. Madscar is where the Jungle Checkers came from. Turn over the island totally to them.!

!That would only save them for a short time. This culture is already scratching back to TK3 status. What happens when they can easily launch a military against an unprepared Madscar population?!

!Without the Checkers helping, they are likely to fall back to TK2. Cracking rocks for a living. ! Slayer is not very optimistic.

!Checker like serving Di. Easy work and free food and shelter.!

We all turn to look at her. So easy to forget she is there.

!Watcher Checkers! She then offers.

!They would make the perfect Watchers. Much better than us anyway. They go about unnoticed and see everything.!

!A Checker as 'underground spies' as the Hu would com.!

Libby coms, !What makes you think that is not already happening?!

Dark and Slayer go silent. Are they really that dense that they did not notice? Maybe we need limit them for being so slow?

They look at each other.

!We have already started here. So far, it is working great. We get far more intelligence from the Checkers than we ever got from the TK Di.!

I take that back. I show amusement and nod affirmations.

# Earth One

Our old stomping grounds. With all but a few Hu on the Hopi grounds, it is empty. Smells great. I morph to Owl form. Freedom. Why any sen would want to be a grounder is beyond me. I catch an updraft and fly to the sky.

An eagle is soon on my tail looking hungry. I do some fancy maneuvers to throw her off. An owl out in the day is pretty suspicious I suspect. Must be a sick owl, easy prey for a hungry eagle with chicks to feed. Sorry dear, not that kind of owl. I dive at a speed not possible for an owl. The eagle tries to keep up, but finally gives up for easier prey. Maybe I have dissuaded it from hunting owls now as well.

I fly down to Hotevilla. Turtle is waiting of course. She ruins all my fun. I morph to old Hopi elder form and come out from behind a kiva.

<sup>H</sup>Having fun dear.<sup>H</sup> She has morphed to an old fem elder.

<sup>H</sup>You never let me have any fun dear.<sup>H</sup> Emphasis on the dear.

<sup>H</sup>We are not here to have fun dear.<sup>H</sup> Emphasis on the dear.

We sit outside soaking in the sun. Another elder slowly walks by and snickers. He knows who we are. They don't care. We are just an amusement to everyone here. We don't cause them any problems and they provide us with a meeting place and cover when we need it. They know we will protect them no matter what happens as well.

A local TK finally decides to make a presence. She sits down next to us. We wait. Moving fast is a gringo thing, not a Hopi one. At least not the Hopi as they are now. No gringos anymore anyway. The heat and the emptiness seems to demand a slower lifestyle. The heat is come back. They had a period of lower temperature, but now it is back to drought, sheep, corn, beans and squash. The trees are gone. Back to looking more like Mars than Earth. The locals are happy. They knew the paradise feel was temporary.

Did allow them to spread out some. Not everyone is concentrated in one place any longer. That will be better for them. Not putting all their eggs in one nest kind of thing. Owls and turtles both know about eggs and nests. Main reason all of the TKs are spread out. On a much larger scale of course.

<sup>H</sup>Orcas are back.<sup>H</sup> She gets up and leaves. After a while, we get up and head back down the trail. Both of us have been scanning and have located them. Pacific ocean off the northwest of former America. Old stomping grounds. We need them. Without the cet the entire ecology has gotten messed up. The sharks filled in some, but not the same. We need something to fill in the rest of the gaps as well. A big mess.

# Andi University

I am excited by all the classes. The others think I am crazy. They complain about everything. How can they? There is so much to see, so much to learn. How others solved common problems all sen have. Some more effectively that others gives me a variety of ideas. What would work with a tame Drag culture, not a warrior one.

Turns out most sen have a warrior class of some kind. At least as part of their history. The ones who overcome this period survive. The ones who don't, well don't. They eventually consume themselves or an outside force makes a meal of them. No culture can exist as purely sen. Too much is needed to sustain it. It sucks the strength out of them and they wither away and die a slow death or a violent one. There is always a stronger sen willing to take their place. Or a famine, plague, infighting, something.

Hu Dave is a pain in the tail. He was very critical and sarcastic till he saw who my friends were. Now he grovels to be helpful when facing me, and still nasty when I overhear him talking to others about me. The Queen and I get along great. The Rajk culture is far different than other sen. The highest is the one who serves the most. I like that concept. No one is left out, all have a place of respect in their culture. We are pretty evenly matched as to size and strength without TK. For some reason all three of us ended up having most of our classes together. I have always studied alone, so this is a new concept for me.

#I should have been a Rajk. I was one of the lowest most picked on, beaten up, of the Drag. Still can't believe I am here.#

She responds, #You need never worry about that again. From what I have seen, we both fit in beautifully. Enjoy and stop worrying about Dave. The other Hu I have met are much nicer. He does not com Hopi, so I wonder if he is from outlier group they are just now introducing to Andi.# And TK remains uncom'd.

She and Dave have one class I do not share with them. After their first class they come back to me with a lot of questions.

“What is a smiggle? Have I com'd that correctly?”

“Why do you ask Dave? Did someone call you one?”

“The instructor called all of us smiggles. He said we were worthless and should be ground up as feed for rats.” I show amusement. Fortunately Dave now knows that that looks like from me.

Queen enters next, #That Sauron teacher is a real turd pile.# She never swears, so he must have made an impression on both of them.

She continues, #He called all of us smiggles, and not in a nice way.#

“How come you do not need to take his class Midj?” Dave asks.

I answer in Hu, “Though he was responsible for both of our sen com-

ing to being, we were aware of it very early on. Our Warriors worship him. Now they are on Cat Eden being hunted as prey. We too failed at living up to his goal. Understand, Sauron is in a lot of pain. He blames his pain on others, never himself. He wanted, in both our creations, to produce a being who could, along with himself as alpha, take over the multiverse, or at least defeat the local 'thn 'overlords' as he coms them."

Dave is silent. Queen shows amusement. She gets it.

Queen asks Dave in Hu, as Dave has never bothered to learn our com, "Why are you here Dave? What did you do before Andi?" I am attentive.

He looks at both of us, "You are the Queen of your people. A big shot." Whatever that is. He then looks at me, "You are friends with High 'thn and 'thants, even com with them. It makes sense for you both to be here. I am nothing. I scratched the ground to try and raise food for my sisters and brother. My parents were both killed in a raid. We have moved so many times, I have no idea where I was when bullies took away everyone else. I ran. I am a coward. A worthless nobody." He breaks down crying. I have seen this in other Hu and understand it somewhat now. Queen and I look at each other, not sure what to do.

Queen coms, "Dave, you would not be here if they did not see something in you they wanted. Not everyone, in fact probably no one we see, will end up a High TK. We will be assigned back to our home world to work in the background. In fact, you have the perfect training to be a nobody. A sen who can blend into the background without notice and observe what is going on to report back to our leaders. Being a nobody is very difficult for me. It is likely I will be leaving soon. I do not need much more training for my role. I will for the rest of my life be a low TK."

He turns to me, "What is your story Midj?" Getting better at my call at least. He wipes his tears.

"As we have time before our meal, I will com my story." I proceed to do so.

At the end, even he is laughing at some of the events.

He coms, "I would sure love to see the Drag Warriors getting hunted by the Cats. I am told the Cats rarely if ever make an appearance here."

"Br'thn told me, their lives are very different now. That should be a lesson to all of us. Power, used to bully others, will eventually be met with pain. Let us never get so full of ourselves that we fall into that trap."

They both affirm.

"I will com to the leaders here. Likely both of you can be excused from Sauron's class. Almost no one makes it all the way through I am com'd." I turn to Dave, "You really need to learn other sen com. Besides being a survival skill, it will make you better liked by others."

I turn to Queen, "You might enjoy being in my exercise class. Tough,

but helps.” She shows amusement.

#You are clearly not a smiggle, so why are you here?#

#We have no smiggles as I understand the term. No one is disrespected. The young ones are dumber than rocks, just like any sen, but no smiggles.#

#That must be paradise.#

#Until a large snake or owl decides you would make a nice dinner.# She motions with paws about her body, #I would make a very nice dinner. That exercise class is sounding great.# I show amusement. I am having to attend, because as a recorder we are never in good shape. Why waste the extra calories needed to build muscle on a smiggle who will be dead soon anyway?

Within a luna all of us are working together, helping each other and even going out on our free time together. This amuses our instructors for some reason. Other cabins, as our homes are called, have not been so lucky. Some sen have been sent home and others end up with new cabin mates. Dave is even learning both our com. Well, he can understand me, but no way a single voice box will ever be able to produce our com well.

If we are all going back to our worlds after training, why learn other com? There are no Hu where the Drag are now and the Cats use TP with other sen. They even refuse to acknowledge if you try to com Cat. I am enjoying the challenge and learn other com quickly. Up to seven now. Ceph is going to be a real challenge. I am starting to learn how to interpret, but no chance of responding other than basic arm signs.

We are on kitchen work today. Fascinating how different food is for each sen. I will taste almost anything, even if it would not be very filling for a Drag. There are two foods we all seem to agree on, something called dark substance and a vegetable with a real hit to it. Combine them and we are over the moon. Right, not all the sen have a moon. Very good food. I was told that dark substance is not normally enjoyed by all, but for some reason all TKs like it, even if not a food for their sen. Plant based material is definitely not a Drag food. More for me when I get back then!

Though Queen and I are both exercising this class, we do different routines. I mostly run and weight lift. She can weigh lift, but running is much slower for her. She can push an amazing amount of anything around though. Guess it is from being in burrows underground all the time. There is always a new tunnel to build or repair. I wonder how her sen are doing without their leader? Is there a king to fill in while she is here training?

Neither Dave nor I will be missed, so we are both learning to just enjoy the variety. Dave has ‘chilled out’ quite a bit now. Who would believe that my new best friends are a rodent and a hu. And not as food either.

# New Edwin Land

<sup>th</sup>Well we messed up another one Rand.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Afraid so Drup. We could always leave?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am tired of failure. I want to make this one right. I actually enjoy being a ‘thant.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Me too. I also like our new little buddy.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You two are not getting out that easy.<sup>th</sup> Shit, Edwin just showed up. Now I know we are in trouble. Maybe we should have staid at Andi.

<sup>th</sup>We need to host the first year Andi students for a tour.<sup>th</sup> Wait? What?

<sup>th</sup>Boss, we don’t allow low TKs here. Besides, we have already given lectures in their classes. They know our part in the froth and everything.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They are not coming here. Exactly.<sup>th</sup> Huh?

Turns out Edwin has built a ‘thant world two froth jumps over. Did not know there was even a world there. When did they build that one? Same desolate location. Lots of lichens at least. Not my favorite flavor of course. Edwin says we are teaching not eating. No fun. We even have a fake queen and chamber full of fake eggs. We could not fake the grubs so easily, but they will only spend a short time here. Not as big as home, but big enough to give a short tour of. Since this is to be a yearly event, we will leave it set up for next year. Fun, we get to do this every year now. Sigh.

We get back to Andi in time. That is a first. We are always late, well, until we became ‘thants. Something about this form works against that.

<sup>th</sup>I think we have found another rule to try and break Rand.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I agree Drup. We have a rep to maintain after all. We can screw up, but we can’t be late? Where is the logic in that?<sup>th</sup> I affirm.

They are arrayed in front of us. All ninety eight of them. Oops, one shows up late. I like that one better already. Of course Midj in up front.

<sup>th</sup>Midj, you will be our assistant for this tour. You are already fluent and I know you have studied for this.<sup>th</sup> He affirms. A lot of library time.

Drup suggests, <sup>th</sup>Midj, why don’t you take the rear. We don’t want to loose anyone. That would make Edwin and the Janes very mad.<sup>th</sup> Even he shudders at the thought. I know he would rather be up front with us, but there will be plenty to do. He can com with the other ‘thants we have positioned around the fake colony. That will be a big help.

Rand opens the portal in the hill. Okay, inside a tunnel in a cave. Nothing obvious. She comments, <sup>th</sup>Normally you will never know where our portals are. This one will not be here when we are done.<sup>th</sup>

We let that sink in to their young minds. <sup>th</sup>You will not be able to get to us whenever you feel like it. We control access to our world. Never you.<sup>th</sup>

Getting through the portal was the easy part. We came from a cool cloudy sky to a very sunny clear sky, very warm. TK sen are not body shy and most are removing what they can still carry. I notice some have sample vials and notebooks. Each sen has a different TK series. Not all TK 3s have scanning capability yet.

How is Midj picking up com from other sen so quickly. Is he the exception to the Drag series? Worth paying attention to, besides being a nice sen. He is even friends with his Hu cabin mate. The three of them are always together. Even now they are together at the back. Normally these sen are mortal enemies. Interesting. One or all will have to morph to be a team after graduation. No one would believe this in the norm world.

<sup>th</sup>Wake up Drup. Are you leading or following?<sup>th</sup>

Other ‘thants go about their work as if we are in a real colony. They casually go around our team. This is normal for any colony. Anything can happen and we have all learned how to be adaptable. We are not a termite or ant colony. There is no such thing as an adult ‘thant below TK7. We rise in rank as we learn our colony. Rand and I being the exception of course. Grubs start at TK3. The resemblance to our students is not surprising. Below three and they are too easy to kill if the colony is invaded. Granted, we are much stronger than any normal sen and the ‘thn metal exo helps a lot too. The Drag Warriors could have made some very painful dents though. Nasty sen.

We are not ants, but life has similar needs. And we are underground and look like large ants. No ants eat lichens though.

<sup>th</sup> being the original Watchers, we are also responsible for initiating the Froth at the local ‘thn’s call. Please follow us.<sup>th</sup>

We enter the froth chamber, well, not a real one, but a good simulation of one.

<sup>th</sup>We set one up in every star system, not always on the planet with sen. Better actually that we don’t. Many of your sen will reach a tech level soon, if not already, where you could detect even a masked void this size and want to investigate. Even the ‘thn shielding would be interesting to most who have not encountered it before.<sup>th</sup>

Midj comments, <sup>th</sup>Usually they are kilometers below ground.<sup>th</sup> Good Drag. I was going to add that bit.

The necessary twelve plus one ‘thants come in and take positions. A simulated link occurs. Lots of special effects. We did learn a lot from the Hu of old. Spielberg would be proud. Old vid lib from our starship days.

<sup>th</sup>Once initialed, the froth wave radiates from this point. TKs are not duped, but are partitioned into one froth or the other. Same with resident ‘thn and of course the ‘thants themselves.<sup>th</sup>

~Are the norms aware that anything has happened?~

I hand back to her in Ceph, ~No, totally unaware and yes, they are

duped along with everything else. Does not matter how complex the tech.~

^Even atomics?^ What is a Ba asking about atomics for? Ah, yes, the last briefing mentioned they almost came close to total annihilation. Tough lesson for any sen. The Hu themselves barely survived that step.

Rand affirms. That gets everyone squirming. Most of course have never been near such a device, but they all had classes on it. A well trained TK is a good TK.

I add, <sup>th</sup>Actually atomics are easier to dupe than sens. Far less complex, though equally dangerous. <sup>th</sup> That gets a round of amusement.

We pass chambers with freshly laid eggs, simulated of course, and then the young grubs hatching and feasting on lichens freshly gathered.

<sup>th</sup>You will note that the grubs fecal material already has a high concentration of <sup>thn</sup> metal present. <sup>th</sup> That gets an expression of awe from most of them. Midj is glued to the glass separating us from them of course. Drup nudges him to get back to his share of the group. Lots of discussion among themselves. Why is this more impressive than the froth? It is just poo after all. Silly sen. I will never understand them.

<sup>th</sup>Ah, lunch is being served. <sup>th</sup> Yes, we make them sample a variety of lichens. Midj is taking notes of how each one looks and tastes to him. He is a smiggle among smiggles. Do they realize yet that Sauron is a smiggle? Granted he had a persecution complex, megalomania and who knows what else as well. We screen that out of our recruits, thank goodness. We definitely do not ever need to see the second coming of Sauron.

Rand comes up to me and hands in <sup>thant</sup>, <sup>th</sup>Did you read the latest Catbox update from the CoTu world? That is a place I would like to visit. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They would never let us come within an incarnation of that place. I am sure Control has even been warned about us. <sup>th</sup> He affirms and gives a <sup>thant</sup> sigh.

Midj is right next to me. Shit.

<sup>th</sup>What is CoTu and what is Control? <sup>th</sup> Double shit. He can <sup>thant</sup> hand.

Rand saves me, <sup>th</sup>Something that is covered in an advanced class. Graduate level work. TK7 at least. <sup>th</sup>

*You made that up Rand.*

*You want him nosing around asking questions and then when he is questioned why even he knows the calls he heard from us?*

*Good call Rand. Good call.* She affirms and goes back to her students.

Need to remember to use tight TP when a student is around, especially Midj. How did he learn so many com that quickly? He will have mastered them all before graduation. Strange.

# Rap Eden

The hardest part of being a leader is knowing when to be humble and eat old rat guts. I am sitting at the edge of the dock. I have been here an arm, going over what I need to com. I am not pretending to be a norm any longer. Outwardly I am Ro, but inside, I am using my abilities. I know exactly where everyone is and what they are thinking and doing now and planning to do later.

I am patient.

The Captain is careful. Not everyone obeys the rules and she has a lot to lose if she sinks her ship or loses it some other way. The smaller ships can be quite annoying when entering a port. I am spotted. I only know because of TP. They have been told to ignore me or be left on shore. No one wants that.

They dock and off load their cargo. No one comes near me or acknowledges me. Did not expect it. I am patient. Of course I cheat. I am no more into pain than anyone. Something the Captain does not know.

The Captain remains on board. I would not expected anything else.

The crew has their shore leave. The sun sets. They come back late and a little bit worse for wear. Normal. Being on board, even near enough to shore to see the shore most of the time can be boring. The Captain will try and keep everyone busy. Most of the maintenance and repair occurs during this times out of port. Counter intuitive, but works.

The sun rises, I am still here. The crew helps load the new cargo. Some are beginning to get nervous about my presence. Rap are not known for patience. I think back to my Ronin days. Definitely not patient. They remove the tie lines and slowly leave port. I sit until they are out of sight. I have to allow for the Captain being at least TK1 maybe even two. I wait longer. Night falls again. I sit.

I am watching the ship with TK. It changes course and heads for the new town we have built a short distance away. Captain got the message I left in her log book. In the message I offer my sincere apologies. I am used to being in charge. A hard habit to break. I was not in change while on board and had no right to subvert her authority. I would have hated it if one of my team tried that. I told her about the new town in hopes that she could get the lost ones there. No Rap should ever have had to suffer the way they have. The town will give them a new chance. There are dry dock capabilities, housing, food growing, everything they need.

Checker comes up to me, followed by my second.

*The others are watching them check the place out.*

*We had better get back to our pack before they start crying like Hu.*

We meet them back at our local hangout.

Once I have them assembled and fed I begin.

<sup>R</sup>All TKs make mistakes. All of you have, I have, my teachers have, their teachers have. The 15 have and still do. Part of what it means to be sen. But, we never give up. We have all just worked hard to help Rap we have harmed through our mistakes. Yes, I made mistakes on this as well. I assumed too much and acted too quickly. How can we help prevent this next time?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Clearly define the problem.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Listen to all solutions, no matter how crazy.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Work on how to improve possible solutions.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Implement on a smaller trial basis to find the problems.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Slow careful methodical, repeat as needed.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Be willing to admit we messed up, mitigate and start over.<sup>R</sup>

After everyone calms down, I ask, <sup>R</sup>And what does that mean?<sup>R</sup>

Everyone shouts, <sup>R</sup>NO MORE PIRATES!<sup>R</sup>

That becomes our response to every mess up, personal and together. A pack cry, a personal cry.

<sup>R</sup>We have a lot on our task list. Number one, the Checkers are being taken advantage of, again. Have we learned nothing from our time under the Di? They are as smart as us, smarter in many ways.<sup>R</sup> I see Checker looking at me.

There is low com going on. Finally someone shouts, <sup>R</sup>Ronin Story!<sup>R</sup>

The response is cheering and tail slapping. They have reached their limit of lessons today.

<sup>R</sup>We have done a lot today, maybe one story would be good.<sup>R</sup> Checker coms. I pretend to not be sure, then give in reluctantly. They have earned it.

<sup>R</sup>Let's see, have you heard the one on how I met my teachers and what a mess up I was for years afterwards?<sup>R</sup>

They have, but it is unanimous they want to hear it again. Helps soften the pain of what we have been through.

So I begin.

<sup>R</sup>It was a time of turmoil. Of hunger. Of pain. We were new to Rap Eden and did not know how to take care of ourselves yet. Packs separated and fought over everything. . . .<sup>R</sup>

Checker comments, *They really did a good job on the Lost Village. It really does look like it was built and abandoned by norms.*

*This only proves they can do it when they know someone is watching.*

Checker shows amusement. I do too.

# Enterprise

For some reason Fem Di make the best librarians. I only met Libby a few times at TK meetings. She seemed to be very nice and easy to work with. As we tend to recruit smiggles, we don't get the best social skill sets. I don't blame them, they were made this way by the near constant bullying by everyone else who thought they were worthless and annoying. Not broken, just different. Anyone who has had to meet and com with as many sen as anyone on board the Enterprise knows this. Every sen would be seen as 'broken' to some other sen. Not, but survival strategies are different in different environments and evo lines.

We are orbiting what we hope is a sen plantimal world. None of us has ever met a sen plantimal. Yes, I know this is like saying sen animal. All of us are very different, I am sure it is true of them as well. We are told by those who have visited Control that there are actually more plantimal worlds than plant/animal worlds. From a pure efficiency point of view it would certainly be easier to reach the spore stage for any OM on a plantimal world. Works without even trying. No tech needed either. I am guessing they are ready to spore very soon after reaching sen status. How long that takes I have no idea. Is it even safe to use a Way Back scan that far back? Even a few million is a stretch for our crew, and we have done that many times.

^How do we know what a settlement looks like? How can we collect samples without cutting some sen in half or worse?^

~We do the best we can and hope they can forgive us our ignorance after.~ And hope they can't shoot us out of the sky. Just because we cannot sense tech does not mean it is not there. Worst case would be if they have animal sen or 'thn protectors watching out for them.

+First samples have reached the research isolation chamber.+

Ku Jay suddenly looks surprised.

+They are gone. The samples are gone!+

~Battle stations ensign. Take us out of orbit, prepare to far DS.~

The bridge becomes chaotic as everyone assumes their positions.

We wait. Nothing happens for several arn. We are still on edge. They run at a much slower time scale.

Not worth the chance. Ceph don't like surprises.

~Take us to our next destination. Let us hope they are less aware of our presence there.~

Everyone shows relief. Though plantimals may be common in the rest of the multiverse, they are less common in Farout at least. Good plantimals, bad animals I guess, as only the bad ones end up out here.

# New Rajk Eden

#My world, my com.# We have not learned how to morph yet, so I have to keep this tour to the TK section. Even I started out in this training area. Each sen does this before being accepted at Andi. If I am to truly be the Queen, then I need to know everything about how this sen world works and what are the possibilities for our future. Getting a tour of other sen worlds will be a great help in understanding the possibilities and the hazards, wrong tunnels, bad weeds, everything.

#Queen, what the snake are those things with you?# Many show faces of repulsion. I thought that too when I first arrived at Andi.

#Relax, some of you have been to Andi, you already know there are different sen. The Hu is Dave, the Drag is Midj, and this handsome lady is Rand. Yes, a real live 'thant and our transport. All of them are personal friends. Be nice to them. We still have a lot to learn before we graduate.# Lots of signs of amusement.

Midj licks his lips. #Not helping roommate.# But he does get the desired reaction from the crowd, first fear and then laughter. Would not have been the same among the norms.

#There were no Drag there when we went through. Cute. Does he have a girlfriend?# She looks at him seductively. Come on. Okay, that is funny.

#He is a virgin, same as all of us. Don't tease my buddy.#

That gets a gasp, a virgin Queen. Come on Rajk, you know we have to be virgins to accept the position. My cabin mates already know that Queen is a symbolic role. Most sen have some sort of weird fixations on that sort of thing. Not always the fem either. Mal are considered more virile till their first mating. Some Rajk nests have a virgin King instead. Was not a hard decision for me either once I saw a TK by accident. Yeah, I want that. No pupping for me.

Midj asks, #I thought your life was exclusively underground.#

#We needed a meeting place all TKs could attend. We are covered and out of the sun. That is to make locals very more secure, but true, this much open space is scary to most of us.#

#I bet no predator would dare attack here either.# Dave again. Can't wait to see his world. The comments I get sometimes make me wonder about his life before Andi.

Of course, Midj is studying the writings on the wall. Getting out of the library for this trip was very difficult. There is always one more thing he wants to study. Rand is with him of course. How those two ever became friends is beyond my understanding. Can you imagine Midj dancing? Can you imagine Rand being still for any length of time? Yet here they are.

We are short sighted, tunnel work tends to favor that. Drag and ‘thants are not, yet they are right up next to the work as any Rajk would be. I go over to them.

Midj has already moved on to the next panel, totally absorbed in it. Wait, is he actually reading it?

#Midj, what do you think?#

#You have a very interesting culture. I thought being underground would limit your expression. Drag are still too new to produce much more than Warrior boasting. This is great though. Do you know if there is a copy in our library?# My mouth must have fallen open. How?

Rand TPs me, *For some reason Midj is a polyglot. He is capable of understanding any sen com very quickly. Of course he studied your language before this trip, but even I am impressed. Some of these scratches represent your culture from a thousand years ago. The com has changed a lot in that time, yet he gets it.*

*Is this normal for Drag?*

*Drag Fek, Talks and the others show no sign of this ability.*

*He would be good placed on a Farout ship.*

*Indeed.* I move on. Who is Midj? The three of us would normally be seen as mortal enemies, yet here we are all together, helping each other. I know most sen, if not enemies of the ‘thant, are deeply suspicious of them. Yet Midj was the first Drag to learn their com, pre-TK. Who is Midj?

Dave liked our food, but said it needed more spice. Midj tasted it, but did not eat it, till he got to the insect course. That he really liked. Even asked for more. We knew each others food preferences before this trip, so none of this is a surprise. What I was surprised at was neither one was disturbed by being in the dirt tunnels. A lot of sen are afraid of cave ins and suffocation. Unlikely with TKs and of course we are being supervised. Strangers is the midst. Hu and Drag are known predators without TK, now what are they? We are larger than our relatives on their respective worlds. Maybe that is enough?

The special treat we brought with us was a chocolate based cake. In a room full of TKs, what were we thinking? Almost a riot. TK5 can make it, but I think they ration the good stuff. A treat, not a nutritional requirement. The first taste is free, then . . . they can get you to do anything to get it. That is why we will do anything to get to TK5 and have the ability to make as much as we like.

<sup>th</sup>I regret to inform you that we will not be visiting the Drag on Cat Eden. That is graduate level. Next stop Earth Two.<sup>th</sup> Rand announces.

“Wait, Andi is Earth Two.” Good Dave, glad you were listening.

## Earth Two

Once we got back to Andi we each had to write up reports, record in our journals of course, and lots of com about our experience and insights into what was going well and where potential problems might be. Queen was very attentive. No culture is perfect. If it was, it would break on the first challenge encountered, like the Drag did. Although I personally believe we were doomed from the beginning thanks to Sauron. That is a lot to try and make up for.

<sup>th</sup>This will be a short jump, so we will use TK instead of DS. <sup>th</sup> Rand gathers us together and we lift into the air as a dense pack. This is incredible. Of course we have had instruction in TK use, but Queen and I are both pretty heavy. We can barely get off the ground. With Rand's help it appears easy.

We are soon thousands of meters above the ground. Queen is not so happy about this, but soon calms down. We hold paws for mutual support. That surprisingly helps both of us a lot. Dave is not so frightened and does forays around the rest of us till Rand locks him in place.

<sup>th</sup>Something happens to any of you can I will be tending grubs the rest of my life. Stay as a group. In fact, Dave, hold hands with Queen on her other side. <sup>th</sup> What is a hand? Ah, a paws, claw. I know Hu, I should have got that one. Need to study their body plan and calls for each part better.

We are soon over the ocean and flying away from the sun. What started out as morning soon turns to before sunrise. Even with a half moon, there is not much to see below us. Eventually we are over land again. I can see small lights below. Camp fires? Must be middle of the night, so most have put out their fires except as needed for security.

We come to rest on a tall hill. Feels good to be on the ground again. We shake off the feeling of flying, check our gear and make our way down using a crude trail. As TK, we can 'see' far enough ahead even in the dark to avoid hazards. Of course we are proceeding much slower than any Drag would. I take the time to collect plant specimens for my collection of pressed flowers. The smallest ones can even be placed directly in my journal.

I know where we are and begin to shake uncontrollably.

Queen asks, #Midj, what's wrong?#

#This is my home. I thought we weren't coming here.#

<sup>th</sup>I com'd that we would not be going to Cat Eden. This is Earth Two. This is where you were hatched<sup>th</sup>

Sure enough we enter the remnants of the town I was in before going to Andi. Empty. No Drag present, and I did scan as much as I could. For some reason, the meeting hall is still intact. Can't be said of all the struc-

tures. The records hall is burned to the ground. Nothing remains. It was burning when I left, so this does not surprise me.

We enter the meeting hall. Only being four sen, we easily fit and it seems much bigger without the Warriors threatening me. I go over to one particular spot.

<sup>D</sup>This is where they beat me up and cut off my tail.<sup>D</sup> There are still traces of blood on the ground. The tail was no doubt carried away by some hungry little one or many of them.

Dave comes up to me, "You are safe now big buddy." He gives me a hug. A Hu thing I have come to understand. He means well though.

<sup>D</sup>Everyone already knows my story, though I never expected to be here again. There are no Drag here now, so I can't really comment on the Drag culture and practices other than they were bad. From everything I have gathered in library, it was not sustainable and would have soon collapsed anyway.<sup>D</sup>

There is a sound outside. Sounds like drums. Drag like to use drums, but these are different, higher pitch. Then the chanting starts. Strange, I do not feel we are in any danger. We just sit quietly and wait as the sound gets closer. Eventually Hu come into the hall and space themselves along the outside with us in the center.

One mal Hu comes up to us. Rand affirms a com we do not hear. The Hu comes up to me and bows fully to the ground. I don't understand.

<sup>H</sup>I will not eat you, you are safe. All of you are safe.<sup>H</sup>

The others in my group all turn to look at me. Rand shows amusement. The mal Hu is frozen. The entire Hu group then bows to us. Why? "When did you learn their com Midj?"

"The library is a wonder place Dave, you should try it. These sen call themselves Hopi. The Drag wished to destroy them. Though they had done nothing to us."

<sup>H</sup>That was Sauron's doing. He especially hated them. I have met Sauron. He will never trouble you again. The Drag that were here are being 'challenged' on another world by Toho, many, many Toho.<sup>H</sup>

All the Hu stand and hoop very loudly. *They are very happy Midj.*

Fem come in carrying baskets. Baskets of food. Enough food is spread out on blankets around us to feed everyone. There is even cooked lamb that I will like. Corn cakes, squash seeds that Dave and Queen will like. One little mal comes up and offers Rand a huge bunch of lichens. Soon we are all showing amusement. Stories are exchanged with one or more of us translating for all. Drag cannot cry, even with joy. I now see this as a failing.

*As a TK5 you can choose to come back here as a Hu if you wish.* I affirm. Four more years. Sigh.

# Earth Two

Midj coms he would love to live among them for a time. I would gain so much weight from eating their excellent food. Everything was wonderful. I might have to immigrate. I definitely have an incentive to learn their com. I quickly picked up the polite words, but I will need much more. I would be jealous of Midj except for the fact that without him I would never have known about them. Interesting is that none of them were overweight. We were part of a celebration. What are their lives like normally.

Back at Andi we go through another round of discussions, journal writing, papers to be turned in to our instructors.

Queen comes in to our cabin, #Did you two know that both Silver and Turtle were once Hopi?#

“I thought they were an owl and a turtle.”

<sup>D</sup>Before then, <sup>D</sup>Midj coms. I knew that.

<sup>th</sup>Time for our last field trip, Dave’s world. We leave in five am. Bring nothing with you except your journals. <sup>th</sup>Rand pops out. Took awhile to get used to that.

My world. That makes me very nervous and self conscious. I never wanted to see that place again.

We leave by the front gate. That makes Queen and Midj wonder what is going on. I already know and lead the way. Rand takes up the rear. We are there within a half solar. A small village. Buildings made of stone and wood. Tech three at best. We pass forge, tannery, bakery, pottery, butcher. All still here. Only been a little over a year. Likely has not changed much in a thousand years.

Midge asks, “Why are they not afraid of us, Queen and I especially? Though Rand should get some reaction too.”

I know this one, “The High TK, Rand being one, can project an image we want them to see. Likely I am the only one not so ‘adjusted’”. Rand affirms. Queen and Drag must appear as huge Hu though, otherwise people would be bumping into them and not understand.

“Watch your tail Midj, that is the hardest thing to hide.” He pulls it closed to his body and signs thanks. Knew he would be sensitive about that part of his body. I can’t imagine losing anything on me in such a way. Some heard me say tail and looks at us trying to see it. Nope. Sorry.

Queen asks, “What was your role here Dave?”

Someone I used to know clearly recognizes me, but stays away. Just stares. I am not large by Hu standards and was easy to pick on. Having three huge new friends should stop that. I smile inside. Have had enough training not to take advantage of my new status though.

“All this time you could have gone home anytime you wanted? You

lived this close to Andi?" I affirm.

"I never wanted to go back to my pack, I understand Dave. You were a smiggle here." Not a question. I did not have the advantage Midj does of being very smart either or position like Queen.

I finally comment, "I spent most of my time on small farms outside of town. Only came here on special occasions, festivals and such."

Shit, the sheriff has seen me and is coming this way.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in?" Midj and Queen look around for a Cat.

"Hello Sheriff Bose. What can I do for you?"

"See you got some new friends. There better not be any trouble while you are in town." He puts his hand on his sword to emphasize this.

"You owe me as well. Missed harvest this season. That doubles your fine." I take a gold coin out of my pouch and hand it to him.

"That should settle it and then some. We don't want trouble and will leave before sun down." He puts the coin away quickly before anyone else can see he has it. I smile inside. That is about four times what I could have owed, even with interest. He will likely short those who want a part of it as well.

"You had better. I will be watching." And hopes I have more he can get from me. Glad I paid attention in class and always carry trade goods on field trips. Never know. They mean nothing to TKs as they are easy to get more of. Sheriff does not know that of course.

I com the others, #Welcome to my world. He has a lot of 'helpers'. If we want to avoid a confrontation best we just leave. Outside of town I can show you the farmland we work to raise food mostly for the royalty. Very little gets down to the commoners.# I com using Rajk to avoid anyone local understanding us. I can hand Drag, but impossible to voice it in Hu form. We manage to leave town without more interference. A lot of people watching us though. They would love to hear what happened to me I am sure.

Outside of town is more sane. Farm land looks pretty much the same everywhere. The lower cast people do the labor, the higher cast get the rewards for doing nothing. We pass people who have been hurt badly from either accidents or war. Lower cast are used to overwhelm the enemy with their corpses. I only just missed that role because of my small size and the fact that I an escape almost any enclosure they put me in.

<sup>D</sup>How do they not know about Andi? It is not that far away.<sup>D</sup>

#How did you find Andi is a better question.#

"I was brought in, same you both of you. I really do not understand why though. I am not as smart as either of you."

#We are glad you are with us Dave.# Midj affirms. No idea why though.

We all turn to Rand.

<sup>th</sup>There are of course local TKs among the locals. Prospective candidates are proposed. A local will raise a sen to TK2 to see how they react to having extra abilities. This was done with Dave. Surprisingly, the first thing he does is what he does not do. <sup>th</sup>We all look confused.

Queen gets it, #Think, what would the sheriff have done with TK abilities? Used it to get rich and powerful. Almost anyone would. That is the first test of a new TK.#

“I was more worried about going rogue when I found out what TK was,” I comment.

<sup>th</sup>Remember the diversity imperative. We don’t just need good rulers like Queen or those good at learning com and cultures like Midj. Neither one of you two would have had an easy time merging with local workers. Dave can join any work crew and blend in. <sup>th</sup>Never thought of that as a positive before. Not convinced yet now either.

<sup>th</sup>Basically we are all smiggles in our cultures, just that the cultures themselves are different. Queen, only because of that role in your own culture, think of it as a high status. It is not in Medj. Queen will serve her sen as the lowest. The last one fed during a famine. She will share a burrow with many, work very long arn. It is only because they want their Queen to live a long life that they advance a likely candidate to the role. <sup>th</sup>Shit, I did not know. I am sorry Queen. I really thought you were above our status.

Midj comments, <sup>D</sup>You all know that the High Thirteen were all hatched or born into smiggles. A requirement for any to be accepted as TKs. There is something about those who think highly of themselves that precludes them joining our pack of losers.<sup>D</sup>

We all show amusement.

We all look at Rand.

<sup>th</sup>Yes, I am definitely a smiggle, so is Drup. They call us the clowns. Not a term of honor. <sup>th</sup>I never knew the ‘thants did this to each other as well.

We walk for a bit longer. It will be dark before we get back to Andi.

Rand starts to do something strange. She dances! Queen joins in. Midj and I are unsure of this, but no one is around to judge us. We look at each other and what the hell, we both start dancing as well. Nothing special, more just jumping and having fun.

<sup>th</sup>Ah, I have corrupted another gen of TKs. I will definitely be in trouble now. <sup>th</sup>I am not sure she is serious, but I am enjoying the freedom so much I can’t stop.

“Rand, were you always a ‘thant?” Everyone stops.

<sup>th</sup>I was born a Hu. Drup a Di. I like being a ‘thant the best though. <sup>th</sup>

# Earth One

<sup>H</sup>I came here for the food and rest. Why can't you let this go. She has the same rights as any high TK.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>It's a puzzle. I can't let go. I don't care other than to solve the puzzle.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Fine, tell me what you are thinking so I can enjoy my meal.<sup>H</sup> Sigh.

<sup>H</sup>The orcas came back.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Some of them did, not all of them.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Really, are you sure.<sup>H</sup> I nod. Was an owl too long. Can't count.

<sup>H</sup>Actually most of them. That is strange. All or nothing. Why most but not all?<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Aggh! Get on with it Owl!<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Barb is a TK7 at best and whales weigh a lot. A portal makes more sense, but she does not have the range to get far in one froth.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>But if she boosted them and then they boosted her . . .<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Still stops at eight. There are safe guards. She could have made a ship.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>To carry megatons of whales. No, unless she had help, she is close by. Another Earth froth. Even if it took multiple jumps.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>But, we have cataloged them.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>In which incarnation?<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>This one. I personally . . . oh wait, I was in a hurry. I did not spend a lot of time in the ones that did not look promising.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>And if there was a TK culture that was hiding itself.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Would have to be low tech.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Or no tech. High enough TK, you don't need tech. Plantimals never have tech.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>No, not plantimal. Cets need live food, meat if only in plankton form. That is only the filter feeders, the sperm, gray whales and others need bigger prey, anchovies or sardines, mackerel would do. Something that size. They can adapt some, but they are already stressed.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>But why? This would run havoc on a stable ecology.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Just answered your own question.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>A froth of Earth, high TK, hidden normally, with an ecological problem that Cet solves.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Wasn't that fun. Now we can enjoy our meal.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Right. Except it has gone cold.<sup>H</sup> I push my bowl away. Yes, I could have used TK to warm it up. Not the point. Owl has ruined another meal.

Now he will want to find them. Just for curiosity of course.

# Enterprise

^A Catbox arrived from Libby on Di Eden. She says there are plantimals all over of course, but finding a sentient one, not so easy. Not really needed. A Farout world called Pink has an OM like plantimal that is linked. Would not work in our case. Lots of rumors, but our TKs are not very patient and plantimals are SLOW.^

+What about Magenta? We have a lot of information on that world. Nearer to us too.+

~There is a reason sen are placed on Farout ensign.~

“They were BAD sen that upset the Cult of Perfection.” Precisously.

!Given this is not part of our primary mission, but only a side project done for courtesy reasons and we are already out here. . . .!

~Set a course for Magenta.~ She is right, we have wasted enough time on this. Besides, CoTu is in Farout. To each their own.

~Alert the away team. I want a plantimal, in seed form. Something small enough to send by Catbox. We are not going back to CoTu.~ Not sending any more crew members to their death to satisfy anyone.

=Going to need soil as well, to know what to plant it in Captain.=

~You just volunteered to be on the team. Welcome.~

I give them time to prepare. I alert my second they will be in command while we are down there. Not protocol, but I need to be there. Captain’s prerogative.

The team gathers. We have full isolation suits and containment vessels.

θrequest permission to volunteer.θ Sal Pe. Surprised I affirm. We have our team. Pe, in spite of being the leader at Sal, is working out well. I think Pe prefers not to be in command. Much easier at a lower level, though it gets harder again at the lowest levels. The sweet spot as the Hu com allows some use of your mind without subjugating all of it to stupid rules by sen above you who have no clue. Yeah, I was there at one point. Was not happen when Pilot left us.

We have a lot of information on Magenta. The debriefing of Randy and Drupy was thorough. Snap was not as helpful. There is no reason to believe the plantimals are only on land. I almost would like to gather the marine ones. Not much water on CoTu. Then there are the Luss. We return them to Magenta. Going there is likely to require a thorough decom of Enterprise. We will not go straight back. Hate decom. Ceph skin was not designed for that kind of abuse.

We take this slow and by the book. No mistakes can happen on Magenta.

^Magenta’s limiters are off line Captain.^ Yeah, there was that aspect

as well. The crew will monitor from orbit. I don't trust the Luss and likely taking the limiters off line alerted the Luss.

On the surface, three Luss decloak in front of us. Of course.

~Luss Li, we meet again.~

~You promised to leave us alone and never return.~

~And you had promised to stop interfering.~

~We learned from the best, you. This is simple in and out. Just need a few plantimal seeds. Sen variety. I don't want to be here either.~

~But there are sen above you ordering you here.~ I acknowledge.

Two Luss decloak and hand me a small container of seeds. Another reason for seeds is no Luss can hide in them. We will still do decom though. We definitely do decom. Fooled too many times by Luss Li.

Back in orbit in the decom chamber I reveal that I had also gathers seeds myself. The others admit they had also.

θany possibilities these are actually Luss seeds? would not put it past them.θ

~We keep them separate.~ I make the Catbox myself. I want these things gone ASAP. I place them in the box, seal it and send it to Pilot. Good luck Captain. Hope this helps. Do not call me again unless you want your old command back.

~Okay, prepare for decom.~ We all remove our suits and destroy them. Everything else that is not part of our forms is destroyed. The air is removed, the UV lights come on. Magenta life really hates UV. Never seen it in their evo.

A matching decom chamber appears ten meters next to us. There is enough mass inside for each of us to dupe and transfer. One at a time. I am the last one and do not do so until the rest acknowledge they made the transfer safely.

We do this three more times in different solar systems. All of them toxic to Magenta life forms and especially the Luss. All set up while we were at Magenta. No way any Luss could have planned in advance. The Luss have been banned from our space and I will not be the one who lets them loose again. Gold torques all around of course. Standard procedure.

They could not fit into a Catbox could they? They would be in for a very rude awakening. CoTu is not the place any Luss would ever want to visit. Pilot might actually welcome them. I have no idea what her assignment is, but it sounds freaky and dangerous. Her four Ku were volunteers. The section leader tried to get in and was rejected.

I have to prepare for more requests. The worst would be to have to do this all again. No more Magenta.

# CoTu

How does one describe the scene.

Open plain of lichens and mosses for as far as a norm sen can 'see'.

A portal opens and a nondescript box appears on the surface.

The box dissolves and a cloud of spores wafts from the location.

A new life form intercalates among the surrounding forms.

A minor disturbance and then equanimity.

Nothing to note the event is present.

The local sun sets on our scene as if nothing has happened.

Night and day, night and day.

::Excellent news Pilot. The package arrived and initiated insertion.::

::Now we wait.::

::When do the final sen arrive?::

::Soon.::

Only they don't know yet of course.

That would be no fun, right?

Tal thought she was cheating. I know how much he hates this place. Adult forms would have been worse. They do not adapt as easily and we would have had to wait for them to sporulate before we could begin. Ceph think they are above other sen, but sen are sen, very predictable.

The project is coming along very nicely. Thank the Thirteen for their approval and help in setting this up. The hardest part was turning over my command to Ceph Tal. She will do fine, but I loved the position as well. Change is good and I am growing more comfortable all the time with this new project.

# Cat Eden

°The Cats are stupid and lazy. They have no sense of honor and run when they feel they might loose. We stick together and fight to the death and we will win easily.°

°We can run longer and further. They depend on ambushing a single Drag. Cowards!°

°Did a coward run into the middle of our pack, take of the head of our leader using nothing by tooth and claw and leave without a scratch?°

°An act of infamy that needs revenge!°

°How is the cave system going?°

°We have moved into the large cave complex we found that has multiple access points. Work is progressing on hardening the layout. Lots of dead end paths to confuse. We know the Cats can track us by our smell, so we are placing scent traps everywhere. Lot of dead ends that will trap them.°

°They also fear fire.° Signs of amusement. We learned the hard way that tech is needed. Weak Hu used tech and could contain us till we learned from them. Now we have strength, courage and tech. The Cats have no tech.

°Food is still our biggest problem. Cats don't taste good, but do sustain us. Better to go after their food supply.°

°And as much as we hate to admit it, farming should be started. Rats get boring, but are easy to raise. Rabbits would be easier and the breed nearly as fast.°

°Taste better too. What about emergency backup plans? Another Hu trait that smacks of cowards, but could make the difference in the end.°

°We have scouts out in small packs. No one leaves alone any more. The Cats wait. Very patient. They wait and pick us off if we are ever alone.°

°On the positive side, our numbers have stopped falling. Broods are happening again. It will take a few years before we are back to our pre forced migration numbers, but we are doing well.°

°Enough talk! We fight!°

Warrior practice every day and night. Cats hunt at night after all. We have a Warrior Master who is always coming up with new situations and strategies. We are randomly chosen to be Warriors or Cats. The Warriors do not always win, which is the idea. Actually it is best when when we loose. We learn more from failure than success.

°Fearless Leader, tech has just come up with something she calls a flash bang. Scares the shit out of Cats, especially at night.° Excellent!

# §il Eden

§no change is immediately successful. we did not evolve together. this will take time. § the cet are interesting. taste horrible. but desperate §il will eat them if that is all that is available. our hunting method is to stalk prey for a very long distance. the cet are either alone or work in pods together. the pods eat small fish by forcing them together and then swimming through them with mouths open. the solitary ones go after larger prey, fish and small §il. all good. no threat to the larger §il of course. that is the way it has always been. the only difference is the cet have different tactics, speeds, smells and sounds. those who adapt will survive. a win for our culture.

the orcas. yes, problem. too good. their method of cornering prey either against the shore or using pod members to set up virtual walls was too effective. maybe in time they can return, but for now they are too destructive to our populations.

our larger sen hunt alone. we are not adverse to others, just more effective alone. also more peaceful. we do com and trade info on locations. the smaller ones hunt in packs and have learned some of the orca tricks very quickly. might have to teach the smallest ones some tricks to avoid them now.

barb pops in. TK is reserved for our leaders. we now have three ‘thn and over a thousand TK guardians. privacy, especially from other high tech or high TK cultures is paramount. high tech is the most destructive physically. high TK tend to mess with our culture. both are resented.

she is quiet. waits for me to finish my thoughts. we got along great from the start. no imposing anything on each other. discussion and cooperation, time, lots of time. we meet every ten years now. nothing of significance happens faster than that.

total opposite of what she endured on the cet primary world. we both are cautious and extra careful. the last thing we need is the Hu TK coming here. she has also shared all that she knows of the high Thirteen, control, super ‘thn. not upset the super ‘thn and the tafa cult of perfection sen are gone. that information alone was worth the new friendship and we do not make friends easily at all.

ours is a very old culture compared to the cet. we do not change easily, which is a strength and a weakness. some would see us as boring, with boring being fragile and breakable. cet provide a balance, just enough new ideas to keep us strong. we hope we help make them stronger as well. there is pain in change. cet have been hunted here. more losses than the recent hu, but very few compared to past hu.

i finally awaken to barb’s attention and motion for her to com.

§we have a problem.§ she pauses.

§go on please.§

§the humpback whales have taught some of the §il to jump out of the water and make as big of a splash as possible. even competing with each other.§

§but surely not with the humpbacks.§

§not possible. the humpbacks have had millions of years to learn how to be good at this. actually a hunting strategy to scare prey into a ball to be eaten.§

§what is the concern? this sounds like a good teaching.§

§there was worry we would be corrupting your culture.§

§listen carefully. we want you to teach us new ways of thinking. we have become stale.§

§ripe for extinction?§

§hopefully not at that point yet, but please teach us new things. we may even return the favor and teach your cet something new.§

§i would be happy to avoid what happened in a past incarnation.§

§yes, that would be a concern. together we will not let that happen.§

§the danger is the Thirteen finding out where we are and what we are doing.§

§we chose each other to hide from bullies like them.§

§some are descendant from curious monkey lineages.§

§we simply ate them when they got too annoying here.§

§that won't happen with these monkeys. the Cats already tried and failed. they let it go on too long.§

§then we had better hide well. i will alert the ones shielding us from the outside to be extra careful.§

§hope that it is enough.§

§always.§

have we made a mistake letting them share our world?

# Earth One

<sup>H</sup>Ghost get out of the snacks.<sup>H</sup> That cat cannot resist our Elder Meetings.

*They're so good, Ghost entitled to good snacks.*

<sup>H</sup>Of course you are dear, but those are for our meeting. I will feed you later. Or, you could catch a mouse or two, if your highness is not too busy.<sup>H</sup>

*Busy, nap time.* Ah, of course. How convenient it so happens to be where the snacks are. He curls up on my lap and promptly falls asleep, or at least pretends to. First one to drop a snack will be pounced on.

<sup>H</sup>Getting older. Harder and harder to come down that pole for these meetings.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>I'm sure some young one would be glad to take your place and you can take theirs in the field.<sup>H</sup> He says nothing. Did not think so.

The others arrive one by one. Ghost opens an eye or briefly sniffs the air as each one enters. When a Jane arrives, he jumps up and starts meowing at her feet trying to trip her. She relents and gives him a piece of jerky. When she sits, he jumps on her lap purring. Shameless cat.

<sup>H</sup>Everyone is here.<sup>H</sup> Our recorder whispers. Good. Getting too old to sit for very long. The title of Elder is supposed to be an honor. Mostly it is pain.

<sup>H</sup>May Great Spirit bless our meeting and all who are present.<sup>H</sup> I announce. None of us is young enough to sit through the longer more traditional opening any longer. I turn to Jane to begin her presentation.

<sup>H</sup>I feel like I am presenting a comedy routine. The high TKs can get themselves into so much trouble.<sup>H</sup> We all laugh softly.

<sup>H</sup>Barb still thinks she can make it work with the Cet on §il. Everyone is getting along for the moment. She sets high standards that are unlikely to be met by any sen though.<sup>H</sup> We affirm. She tries, but sen are inherently disappointing. Just a matter of time.

<sup>H</sup>Pilot is proceeding with operation CoTu.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Is containment in place.<sup>H</sup> She affirms. Good, experiments of that type are inherently dangerous, no matter what TK Pilot thinks.

<sup>H</sup>Poor Raijin still thinks she can make the perfect society. Free of bad behavior, oppressed ones, ass hole nobility.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Still putting out spot fires then.<sup>H</sup> She affirms. Even smiles. Rare for a Jane.

<sup>H</sup>Midj is special. We are not sure how or why yet. He should not be able to do what he does, especially with languages, before he was even TK. We are watching him. He lives with two mortal enemies who have all become friends, the totally bonded rare kind. How is that possible?<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Midj is of the made Drag. Could that have something to do with it?<sup>H</sup>

She smiles slyly, <sup>H</sup>The Drag are not one hundred percent Sauron. You all know that. I will check with the ones who worked on this project. They may know something that was not revealed in the overview.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>When does he rejoin the Drag on Cat Eden?<sup>H</sup> That gets some hissing and meowing from our group. No one here is fond of the trouble Owa and Sylvy got into. Ghost wakes up enough to see we are teasing, turns around and goes back to sleep. Jane just shakes her head.

<sup>H</sup>Various other sen are plodding along, the Ba, Ku, even the Ceph. All going through the motions trying not to upset the cart.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Afraid of drawing attention to themselves and end up on the hot seat.<sup>H</sup> She smiles.

I ask, <sup>H</sup>Where are the clowns? They did good with the Drag.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Finally!<sup>H</sup> Someone else comments and gets a laugh.

<sup>H</sup>They should have gone back to Edwin Land. Will have to confirm. Doubt Edwin wants them there either.<sup>H</sup> I very much doubt he does.

Jane looks at us sternly, <sup>H</sup>They serve a purpose. More than any other two sen, they represent the diversity imperative. Everyone else we have discussed is trying to go straight to cultural stagnation. Safe, but dangerous if anything comes in to challenge them.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>Maybe they should spend some time with us.<sup>H</sup> That gets boos and calls. I like the idea though. Maybe they should. We have gotten very stale.

<sup>H</sup>You left two out. What about Owl and Turtle?<sup>H</sup> Everyone gets quiet.

She smiles wide, <sup>H</sup>Owl is still trying to figure out where Barb is and Turtle is trying to keep it from him. She rightly wants Barb to have a chance without his male ego butting in.<sup>H</sup>

The female elders cheer. Got us there.

<sup>H</sup>To be fair, he is just curious. Does not intend interference or harm.<sup>H</sup>

<sup>H</sup>But like the clowns, he can't help it.<sup>H</sup> She shakes her head no.

Meow!

<sup>H</sup>Ghost says it is time to eat.<sup>H</sup> That gets the entire group laughing, including Jane, who picks him up off her lap and gives him a nice back rub and head scratch. The purring is going to bring the kiva down.

# Rap Eden

It was not this hard when I was mortal and ruling Madscar. Of course our population was much lower and we were not so spread out and our tech was lower and I was no super Rap.

TK classes kept reinforcing the idea that sen need to experience things for themselves. You can warn them till the sun goes nova, but they won't get it till it happens to them. Stupid sen, stupid Raps.

I decide to visit Madscar. Maybe I will see something there that will point to a solution. Madscar is now Checker Land.

I pop into a location large enough to accommodate my larger than Checker size. Checkers are going about their work and day. Totally ignoring me. If a large Di showed up in one of our towns everyone would go crazy trying to attack it or at least drive it away. Here nothing. They just walk around me and continue their task.

I make my way to the garden outside Checker's office complex. She will know I am here. I sit in meditation. The Janes taught me this trick to calming down.

<sup>R</sup>Back again already Raijin? You know I have work to do too.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Everytime I try to fix something, it only makes it worse. Even my own pack is starting to go around me most of the time. This never happened when I was here.<sup>R</sup>

Checker sighs, a Hu thing she picked up, <sup>R</sup>Stop fixing things then. Just let it play out. They will call you when they can't handle it themselves. No more pirates remember. They know it.

Besides, shouldn't you be more worried about your appointment with Pr'thn?<sup>R</sup>

I sigh this time, <sup>R</sup>That is whenever I feel I am ready. They live millions of years before they become sen. A few years one way or the other won't make any difference.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>She could be helping you with everything here you know.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I don't need more muscle unless I hand them an existence with no effort on their part.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You know they decided to call the new town, 'Pirate Cove'?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I heard. I won't step on it again.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We need to go on a vacation. Another sen world. Maybe take up pottery on Ceph Eden.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Actually that might be a good idea. Our pottery skills could use some work here.<sup>R</sup>

She looks at me before slowly coms, <sup>R</sup>No More Pirates Raijin.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yeah, I know. No More Pirates. Still it would be calming.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I don't understand why I am supposed to mate with Pr'thn and not

you. You have done a much better job with the Checkers than I have with the Raps. You have been a TK much longer. You are much better at tech things.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They don't call this world Checker Eden, so there must be a reason.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We were both used by the Di. Maybe we need an entirely new call for our world. After all, Earth is not called Hu Eden is it? Sounds like we are free to make changes.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We kept our contempt of the Di much more hidden. To the loudest go the naming rights.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>There are more Rap than Checkers only because the entire Rap population chose to come here. There are still Checkers on Di Eden. Would you move if offered your own world? Would they?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Do not tell the other Rap. We do better in the background. Make no mistake the TK council and the Checkers run this world. But we do our part more in the spirit of Watchers than as Guardians. Each role is necessary, especially on a new world such as this. One is not better than the other, just different. A case in point. Have you ever seen or heard of a Checker Warrior?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>No, that is strange, though I know you personally can defend yourself.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>By cutting off your tail and feet? The size difference here is important.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am beginning to miss my days as a simple manager on Madscar.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Wait, where is the Ronin of old? The one willing to take on sword masters ten times your skill?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I was pretty stupid back then.<sup>R</sup> Checker gives me a dirty look.

<sup>R</sup>Still stupid after all these years. Can't win. Youth is stupid in ALL sen. Part of Checker School.<sup>R</sup> Part of all schools.

<sup>R</sup>Enough, what do you have to eat around here?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I have to show you a new place. They make the best rat pie. Chopped really fine and roasted over a wood fire to perfection. Spices are supreme. Just the right heat level.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Let's go then!<sup>R</sup>

# Cat Eden

°I am a more recent grad of Andi than you two. I talked to Sauron, the Janes and spent a long time in the library in prep for this assignment.°

°I am sure you did, but we have spent much longer among them.°

Mouse snarls, °We are working together, not a game of top of the pile.°

°Most sen don't realize, Sauron was a polyglot BEFORE he became TK, much less 'thn bait. Drag were based on him. Yes, I know, Tewk fixed the genes some. No sen is just one set of genes though. They are constantly mixing and playing games. That is the strength of a heterogeneous population. Then add in the random mutations. The Drag have existed for several thousand years now. Plenty of time. Chances are low, but we have the proof.°

°And the Warriors? They are over the top sadists. Just like Sauron.°

°Oh, they left that in. Would not have been believable or gotten past Sauron otherwise. They serve a purpose now and yet to come.°

°Right now they are giving the kitties a good workout at least.°

°Both will be stronger because of this. I agree.° Talks adds, then asks, °But Midj? Really? A smiggle of the lowest order? Yes, we all agreed he should become TK and go to Andi, but I thought it was to save his life, not to come back and mix it up with these beasts.°

I smile, °I was there for his entrance interview and have gotten reports since. I am willing to place a bet right here that Midj could beat any Warrior without TK.°

Both look at me like I have lost all sense.

°The bookworm? No way.° I know the Warriors still scare Mouse.

°Spill it Fek, what do you know?° Talks is suspicious. Good.

°The Warriors gave him a good beating, cut off his tail in humiliation instead of killing him outright, like they did to the other Recorders. That made an impression on him. Do you know who his roommates are? A Hu, not Hopi, coms standard, think Visigoth heritage and the Queen of the Rajk. Do either of you know how they gain this position? Both nod negative.°

°The beat the crap out of their challengers. Inside a burrow, deep underground, without weapons other than their own forms.

°Further, he runs a hundred clicks a day, rain or sun, a black belt in Drag martial arts. Expert with hand, foot, tail, head, and sword. Think Kung Fu on steroids.°

Both show surprise, then smile a very evil Drag smile.

°This should be fun. Hope we are there to witness it.° Yeah.

# Enterprise

We are returning to a Farout world, Ta'aha Prison 1643, we visited nearly a thousand years ago to see how things are progressing. We had already determined they would not be good candidates for a return or even a new world in normal space. Still having been here, we felt somewhat obligated to check on them. Situations change, maybe they have gotten it together as the Hu com.

It was clear that the Ta'aha had been the ones to banish them and then to realign their culture. The Cult of Perfection has certainly messed up a large number of sen species. Still does. What is COP and what is just the result of a power struggle where someone decides it is only their way that counts as legitimate? Every sen onboard can point to times in their history when bullies and true believers made a mess and countless innocent paid a price for.

~A thousand years is a long time Ensign. Launch a probe. I don't want to show up in orbit to a missile array headed our way. Move us two up froth, just to be sure.~ Standard protocol. The probes will know where we are.

+Aye, aye Captain!+ They think it is funny using old Hu com. I tolerate it to help morale. It gets pretty lonely on these long missions. Of course Pilot was Captain then and I was a junior officer. This is Hu week, so everyone has been viewing old stories from the Earth froths. Next week is Di week. Each culture has a different form of entertainment and presentation of historical fiction. Ceph do not have fiction and history is defined by whom ever is in control at the moment. Still it is interesting to see how the crew react to each sen method of com in regards to cultural norms and desires.

The world below is non existent. True of most Farout space. The Ta'aha removed the excess worlds in most cases to prevent their prisoners from escaping. The fact that we have found some Farout worlds with froth extensions only means we got to the Ta'aha before they had a chance to remove the redundant worlds. It was thought for some time that the froth front did not make it out this far, but since determined that it does so, just less frequently. Or so the current thinking suggests.

We go back towards normal space a ways. Don't want to return to our mission in the middle of the planet. No star here though. Really in non-froth space then. I am surprised no one has studied these found null spaces. Pre-froth universe? Did we set up a froth event by coming here? Normally if there are no froth worlds, we simply cannot leave the one we started on. What happened here?

The natives. A sort of a cross between a scorpion and a squid. A very

efficient hunter/killer. They have beliefs, tech, low TK, culture and art of sorts. Allowed to advance they could have done in quite a few sen nearby. In this case the Ta'aha prevented that. A good thing or bad? They could have also done some epic art forms. The right of the Ta'aha to judge has been taken away, but are we any better? Probably not. Different, but not better. ALL TKs have made mistakes, sometimes very bad ones. What happens here?

+Probe has returned Captain. Sending to analysis.+

I leave the bridge to get something to eat and sit alone for a bit. No matter what the probe says, it will mean work. A tech culture that has not sat still for a thousand years could mean real trouble. How high has their TK gotten? We never sensed a 'thn present, but even they could not ignore a high TK culture. Do they have space travel? DS drives? Have they already left Farout even?

“Probe results in, but you are going to want to come down here Captain.”

~On my way.~ What does this mean?

I don't wait and DS straight in. Normally we do not allow DS on ship, but rank has privileges.

Hu Hank is not surprised.

The results are on the screen.

~What? This does not make sense.~

There is nothing there. They are gone. Cities are rubble. No life of any kind. Not even a bacteria. Surface temp is over 300°C. Oceans are gone into a thick cloudy atmosphere. No radiation.

~What caused this? Not the Ta'aha. They have been gone too long. Some splinter group? Are they still alive somewhere?~

“Captain, look.” The screen show remains. Desiccated, barely recognizable, but it is them. Fields and fields of them. Frozen in place. Just dropped dead. Tech is visible, also frozen.

^Captain, the TK levels below us, are, this does not make sense. The values are zero. Life is not possible. If we had gone down there, we would all be dead too.^

I com the bridge, ~Take us far away NOW!~

The Wayback showed it was self inflicted.

We gather as a crew and each tells of a time when it almost happened to their sen. Every sen has one or more points in it's history when they face an existential crisis. Some make it past this. Some don't.

The crew is silent. Everything is quiet. Normally I would like this, but now it is a memorial to a sen that could have been more. It could have been anyone of us. Our sen.

# Andi Field Trip to Starchaser

*Attention! Captain on the bridge!*

We are all TK6s now and recently it was decided all high TKs need to spend some time on the Enterprise. Upon graduation from grad school, serving aboard the Enterprise is one of the options. We do not need to decide right away, but the longer we wait means all the good positions will have been taken.

The Enterprise is not one of the sought after positions, but none of us wanted to miss a chance to at least visit. Instead we were offered a short trip on the Starchaser.

The Captain enters, a Ba. I read her nameplate, Captain Jas. I do my best salute as I come to attention. As do Queen and Midj. She looks over the three of us. Everyone is quiet. No one welcomes us or coms anything. Is this standard procedure?

An Ensign comes up to us, +I am afraid you caught us at an unfortunate time. The Enterprise came off a Farout mission. Nasty one. Everyone was dead on the world. The entire world was sterilized, by the occupants. Nearest we can figure it was some kind of psi virus. The entire fleet is morning, and of course worried that it could happen to us as well.+

Midj asks, +Why? Was it because they could not stand being on Farout any longer.+

+Excellent Ku com. What happened was more classical than that. Two factions who could not get along, hated each other so much that they would rather all die than let the other succeed.+

I answer, ~The three of us com in over twenty com each. Midj is actually be the best of us, but we all get by.~

The Captain asks the others, ^Is this true?^

We all affirm.

She walks up to Midj, ^Have you ever experienced other forms? You are a bit large for our small ship.^

He coms in Ba, ^Affirmative Captain, Hu and Rajk of course when we visited each other's worlds several times. Ba of course. Several others.^

He is being modest. I can see the Captain's point though. Midj and Queen barely fit in the free space on the bridge. I fit in fine, space wise. Have been teased at Andi for my small size of course. Good natured. All before TK4. After that we had already experienced so much that whatever sen form we were in seemed trivial.

^You have been Ba, excellent. Morph now please.^

We are only TK6, so it takes some time. They are patient though. We

correct each other's mistakes. A team. Hey, we are still new at all of this. We get there of course. Even get the clan medallion.

The Captain notices this and looks confused, ^What is this?^ Pointing to the medals.

Queen answers, ^We are sort of 'different' from the others at school. This is our burrow symbol.^ That gets some humor expressed by the crew. They are paying attention.

^Ensign Sy Sji, please show our guests to the Yellow Room.^ The crew show amusement. Is this a ship of clowns. What is a Sy? I am trying to remember.

=Of course Sy Sji, lead on.= Leave it to Midj to already know their com. I pick it up from the TP overtones. Now three Ba and a Sy, who looks like s/he could eat Ba for lunch. Fun. No one on board is less than TK6 and I am sure they cover for each other, just as we would.

As noted, it is not a large ship, so we get there quickly. Whoa, triple containment. This should be fun! We love a challenge.

Now I see why we are in Ba form. We suit up to enter. Normal TK is not enough? Less fun! I hate these things. They always stink and itch. At least they handle the wing flaps. Something I never needed to worry about in Hu form. Our Sy makes their own suit with TK. Smart ass.

Three airlocks later we finally enter the lab. Only to find everything in triple containment. What is this thing? Tree branches with a yellow slime mold covering most of it. Nothing moving. At least till Midj walks up to one containment vessel and places his hand against the glass. The slime mold instantly reacts and cover the other side of the glass from Midj's hand. Creepy.

*We need to see the Captain, NOW!* Midj declares. Sy Sji does not hesitate. We go through decom, takes time, out of the suits, more decom. Naked. At least in Ba form we have fur. Sort of. We then transfer to other Ba forms already to go, in another part of the ship. Even our Sy is now Ba. We make our medals again.

Finally we are on the bridge facing the Captain who is busy of course. We wait. Sy Sji whispers something to her just as she pulls free.

^Spill it Midj.^ The Captain declares.

^We have a choice, either return the Yellow to Yellow Farout or this ship will be destroyed.^

^And you know this how? That room has full limiters in place. You cannot use any TK tricks while in there.^

^Yellow t̥ɣɣ told me.^ This clearly upsets her.

^How do you know this?^

^They use a six dimensional com, Captain.^

^It took us hundreds of years to figure that out and you did it in less than an arn. Who are you three?^ We get asked that a lot.

Sy Sji coms her quietly. The Captain affirm. Sy Sji leaves the bridge.

Captain signals something to the bridge crew. Nothing oral and a hand com I am not aware of. Could be internal to the ship itself. I would certainly set that up so any potential adversary could not intercept everything com'd.

We feel a sudden lurch as the ship moves to DS space. It is really moving! I turn to the other two who have clearly noticed this as well. No one on the bridge coms anything though. They are all paying close attention to their instruments. The star field on the screen disappears completely for a moment and then comes back up with only a single star visible. Where are we?

+Welcome to Farout.+ An aid coms to us.

The Captain turns to us, ^You three have just be drafted for special duty. Andi has been informed. In fact the Jane in charge told us this would happen. I did not believe her of course and I was schooled at Andi, same as nearly everyone here.^

A much larger ship appears in front of us, assuming the screen is showing us the front view. The bow? I should know this. Why do they still insist on old sailing ship com?

We are suddenly in a much larger space. Not the Starchaser. This ship is huge.

~Welcome to the Enterprise recruits. You may assume your native forms if you wish. I am Captain Tal. As I understand it, you three work better as a team rather than individually.~ We affirm.

Someone inhales sharply when they see Queen and Midj in their native forms. Guess they don't get many Rajk or Drag out here. One star.

"We are in Farout." Not a question.

A very tall Hu looking form comes in and place a container next to us and leaves. Was that a Martian? I scan the container.

"Shit, that is the Yellow life form."

#And that is Yellow Farout below us.# Queen coms.

<sup>D</sup>Yellow tɬɣY says thank you. Finally.<sup>D</sup> That gets some level of nervous amusement from the bridge crew. They understand Drag?

The Captain turns to Midj, ~You are the first Drag aboard any star ship. You are the first Drag to visit a Farout world. Don't mess this one up.~ Suddenly we are on the surface of the world. Without any obvious protection. Shit. What have you gotten us into this time Midj? Last time I was the trouble maker. We take turns getting us screwed royally.

"Is that yellow mountain coming towards us?"

Queen reaches for the container, removes the lid and sets it down. Midj encourages it to leave I have already lived longer than my normally appointed time, at least true in the village where I was born.

# Rap Eden

<sup>R</sup>How come you have always used the call, Checker? I thought that was your sen call.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>It is and I am the head of the Checker sen.<sup>R</sup> She sighs, <sup>R</sup>Just easier. Our own calls are very long and complicated and we hate the shortened form. Just call me Checker please. And quit asking too.<sup>R</sup> Right, don't touch the tail.

<sup>R</sup>Ro, just do it. We need a vacation. Someplace no one knows us. I have just the place. Prepare for departure. Nothing needed but us.<sup>R</sup> In a snap, we are in the middle of a jungle. I am high enough to instantly know where we are. The middle of nowhere. No Raps or Checkers anywhere near us.

<sup>R</sup>A real vacation!<sup>R</sup> Checker shows amusement.

<sup>R</sup>Just like the first time they put us in the middle of nowhere, which later turned out to be Madscar, but at least I did not know at the time where we were.<sup>R</sup> I turn and stare at Checker. She could have gotten us out in a moment. What TK was she even back then? At least a three.

We make quick work of setting up a camp site. Shelter and fire pit are just like our first one. Jungle is different of course, but it is still a jungle.

<sup>R</sup>Bet there are good things to eat around here.<sup>R</sup> Checkers can eat almost anything, but do appreciate rat tartar as much as we do. Of course we can dupe anything now, but not the same.

Sitting around the fire after dark I finally ask what has been annoying me, <sup>R</sup>Checker, how come Madscar is so perfect and Rap Land is a mess?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Who said it was a mess? Two totally different concepts. Checkers always played the part of house and garden servants. Not big enough for heavy stuff, not fast enough for note passing. Small enough we stay out of the way in most homes.<sup>R</sup>

She continues, <sup>R</sup>Think of it this way. Checkers are Watchers and Rap are Guardians. We are organized and get things done. Raps are ready for anything. Something new comes along and you see it as a challenge. We recoil in fear till someone else tells us what to do. There was never a Checker Ronin, sword in hand, taking on Di many times her size.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are better together than separate.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Do you believe that or are did you just com it?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>As Checkers are really just smaller Raptors, we should call this world Raptor Eden and not just Rap Eden.<sup>R</sup> Not big stupid Di at least.

<sup>R</sup>We have to be less picky about what we eat too, but essentially true.<sup>R</sup> Checker asks, <sup>R</sup>Can we eat now? The monkey is done.<sup>R</sup> Tasty!

# CoTu Farout

::The Yellow will not be coming. That is going to mess us up. I was counting on them.::

::What happened?::

::According to this CatBox note, some recent grads of Andi on a one day field trip can com with the Yellow form. A one kilogram sample of Yellow threatened to destroy the ship if it was not immediately returned to Yellow Farout.::

::They complied rather than take the chance I assume.:: Affirmation. I dig around in the CatBox.

::What is this? Hidden along one edge. Looks like a microscope slide. Why would they send this?: I hold it up confused.

Pilot takes it from me, concentrates and then shows happiness.

::It is a live Yellow sen sample. We just need to take care of it like we have the all the rest of our recruits.::

I ask, ::What does it eat?:

::Anything we offer it. Very adaptable and not picky at all. Even the waste from other forms works. An island would be good, so we can observe and adjust as we learn more from it and our others.::

::Guess we will be learning Yellow Farout com now.:: Pilot affirms.

::Any notes in the box about how we go about learning their com?:

After studying the rest of the report Pilot coms, ::Six dimensional com similar to the Meep and those nasty TK parasites. I am guessing that was the reason they kept it so isolated. I was captain at the time of our first encounter. We just left rather than take them on. Put a quarantine on the world. Wonder how it ended on Starchaser and how Andi grads were invited to see it? That seems to be way out of regs to expose students in that way.::

::Some one gave the order is my guess. Been known to happen right?:

Pilot shows amusement, ::Oh yeah. Too many times. I would suspect Owl and Turtle, or Myra and Puu are involved. No matter, that is their problem. We have what we need. Let's proceed to the next phase.::

::Oh course. Leave it to me. You have a meeting with the natives coming up. They especially liked the treats you made last time.::

::Every sen has it's weak point. Who would have guessed that chocolate would appeal to a colonial sen on a Farout world.::

::As long as I get some, I don't care.:: We both show amusement.

# Raptor Eden

<sup>R</sup>I suppose it is time we got back. Seems strangely quiet to me. Have not heard anything since we left.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You worry too much. They are competent. Let them do their work. I will need to diet. Too many roasted monkeys.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They were good.<sup>R</sup> She licks her lips.

We get back at night. Less people to question our sudden appearance.

<sup>R</sup>Seems very quite. Do a scan just to reassure me Checker.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Guano!<sup>R</sup> We both shout at once.

Everyone is dead! Everywhere we scan we only find desiccated corpses. That explains the quiet. Even at night something is always happening.

<sup>R</sup>A plague? Why weren't we notified?<sup>R</sup>

We pop to the TK headquarters.

<sup>R</sup>Same here! Even the TKs are all dead. At least the ones I can see and scan nearby. What happened? What are all these fibers all over everything?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Longer range scan. How far does this extend? Find the edge.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>There are Raps in Pirate Cove.<sup>R</sup> We hate that name, but they had the right to choose it. Flicking their tail at what happened. Does not make Raijin feel better especially.

We arrive at the docks. No ships. Nothing on the docks. That was not true the last time we were here. I scan the harbor.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, found the ships. They are all at the bottom of the sea.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>With holes in them. They were purposely sunk. Unless you happen to have a Way-Back device we need to find someone alive to com with.<sup>R</sup> I affirm. I am sure we are wondering how this happened so fast.

<sup>R</sup>How long were we gone?<sup>R</sup> Not a question. We both know.

The doors are all secured. I scan trembling Raps behind them. They know we are out here, but afraid to open the doors.

We make food supplies in the open center of town and sit to wait till sunrise.

The young come out first. No one coms a sound. They slowly emerge.

We ask a brave young one quietly, What happened?

He whispers back, <sup>R</sup>Spiders. Huge spiders.<sup>R</sup> He then takes what is offered and runs back to his home and secures the door.

An older one adds, <sup>R</sup>The locals blamed it on us. They sunk our ships in revenge. The spiders did not get us, but we will be dead soon anyway. Starved to death.<sup>R</sup> She walks away. Thinner than any Rap should ever be.

Raijin raises her voice, <sup>R</sup>The warehouse is full of supplies. Mostly food. We will return when we can. We will find a way to deal with the

‘spiders’ and get more help.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>How far does this extend?<sup>R</sup>

***Pr’thn, Br’thn, we need help!*** Raijin screams as loud as she can in TP.

EVERYONE can hear that! I hope she knows what she is doing. They could be on the other side of the multiverse. Likely only sens here heard that.

Everyone near us is frozen. We start passing out food pouches to everyone we see. That breaks the ice and things start to move again. By late afternoon we are finished and everyone has gone home.

<sup>R</sup>I need to see what we are up against. They said huge spiders. Stand watch. I want the first one you find brought here for us to examine.<sup>R</sup> I affirm. My thoughts exactly. Not much would scare an entire pack of Raps, much less an entire town.

Near sunset we find our first one, then another and another. We make a large pit with slippery walls so they cannot escape. As the pit fills, it doesn’t. What the? I take a moment to figure it out.

<sup>R</sup>They are eating each other!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Isolate each one then. Bubble them if we have to.<sup>R</sup> They are huge. Never seen anything like them on any world.

<sup>R</sup>Guano, small ones too. Those can hide anywhere.<sup>R</sup>

I examine one closely.

<sup>R</sup>Raijin, they are all fem and they are all pregnant. Each one has hundreds of eggs ready to emerge.<sup>R</sup>

Pr’thn pops in. We each hold up a spider.

<sup>R</sup>Not native to this world. We would know. Someone is behind this. Someone is trying to hurt us. An entire town, maybe more are dead because of these.<sup>R</sup>

*They are called Arak, a sen from another time and multiverse. You are correct. They should not be here. This is not the only world they have appeared on. Do the best you can. Help will arrive when it can.* She pops out. Guano.

Pr’thn pops back in, *They hate seawater. Expose them to that and they die.*

<sup>R</sup>It would be easier to just dissolve them.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>For us, but seawater is something anyone here can do<sup>R</sup>. True.

We spread the com and soon everyone is carrying seawater from the bay in some form or another. Turns out even a wet cloth works. ANY contact with seawater works.

<sup>R</sup>Reminds me of the Terror.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yeah, I thought that too.<sup>R</sup> I doubt it is a coincidence. Seawater is just too easy. I get no sense of them being sen either. What’s going on?

# Edwin Land

<sup>th</sup>Edwin, we have the Arak sen waiting to com with you.<sup>th</sup>

As in only one? Br<sup>thn</sup> told us they had been attacking multiple worlds. The only thing I see in common is these were all made worlds. Either because the super <sup>thn</sup> destroyed the original and we helped make another. Or two sen from the same world wanted to be separated and one needed a new space. Normally this would be a simple froth copy.

Snap pops in, clearly upset. Another made world victim.

<sup>th</sup>They die if exposed to ANY seawater. Worse than the Terror in that regard.<sup>th</sup> Snap acknowledges and pops out. They could not hurt the marine forms on Crust Eden, but certainly the land dwellers, though getting through the shell would be difficult. Maybe during molting. The only time we are vulnerable as well. We use well guarded molting chambers for that reason. If it happens in the field we are careful of our surroundings. A well dug cave before it starts is comforting.

The two clowns come into my office of course. Without permission or course. Grrr! If they were not so clueless I would be upset. They do good work when left alone though.

<sup>th</sup>The spider things are attacking Cat Eden.<sup>th</sup> Another made world.

<sup>th</sup>Seawater, same as the Terror. Now go, I have an appointment.<sup>th</sup>

They seem surprised at my quick response, but pop out. No portal for them. There is a thing called <sup>thant</sup> procedures. Pointless to force it with those two I have learned.

The Arak fem is too large for my chamber, so I exit to the surface. Trying not to show too much TK. I walk the last bit.

Warrior <sup>thants</sup> are standing by, though I doubt they will be needed and I wave them off. The Arak is not showing any TK abilities. Never a given though. I am ready.

∴Welcome Arak Sen. How may I help you∴

∴Who stole my children! And where is this place∴She is clearly very upset. I had to check the library, never having encountered an Arak before. A lush world of plants, fungi, and a lot of arthropod like creatures of all sizes. We would sort of fit in and likely the reason she is not showing fear. She will dry out fast here though. I make a sun shade and set up a mister to bring the humidity up. She does not even seem to notice. She is mad.

∴We will work together to determine the answers to your questions. We are as surprised as you are. My first guess is someone is using them as a weapon against select worlds known to us. These worlds would not be good for Arak colonization. There are already sen present∴

A worker brings in a liquid nutrient broth in a bowl, sets it down and

leaves.

∴You appear to be civilized, though admittedly ugly.∴She tastes the contents and finishes it quickly. I suspect she is very hungry from her state of panic and would consume anything. Workers bring her more. Judging from her size, she will need a lot.

I com portal workers to prepare a portal disguised as a tunnel back to her world, but on the surface. I am not going to get her to go below, no matter how big the entrance. I am surprised the small ones have not shown up here yet. Could be timing or maybe whomever is behind this knows it would be pointless to attack us.

All the same I signal the Warriors to be prepared with seawater mixers and projectiles. Basically squirt guns and water balloons. It works. Adapted to our use of course. I was a Hu kid a very long time ago, but remember it being fun. Not in this case however.

∴It would be polite if I knew your call Arak Sen, even a temporary one. My call is Ed.∴Does not translate well, but it is a sound.

She looks at me with a dozen eyes trying to decide. I do not read her as that would be very rude.

∴Arak Sen is fine.∴Cautious then.

∴May I ask how many are missing? Are you the only victim or are other Arak broods missing as well?∴

∴My entire brood of nearly five thousand. I am not aware of others, but we do not com frequently. Given a chance, we will attack and eat each other or feed them to our young.∴Surprised they have a com then. Good that I fed her clearly.

A CatBox appears.∴Excuse me, this may be important to our quest.∴

I open the box and a small Arak jumps out, sees its mother and runs to her. There is a message inside of course. From Raijin on Raptor Eden. New name, good for them. She coms that they captured this one after an entire town, including TKs were killed by them. They are removing the rest using seawater. Another note from Puu indicates the Raptor Eden was likely the first target world. I suspected Cat Eden, but they would see it as a gift, not an attack. Silly kitties.

I com to our portal keepers, *Prepare CatBoxes to all affected worlds. DO NOT KILL any more of the Arak. Contain them and feed them nutrient broth. Someone will come along to collect them and return them to Arak Eden. Full grown they are sentient and should be respected as such.*

∴Let's get you home. Those of your children who have survived are being returned to your world as we com.∴I just hope it is enough.

Next we need to find out who set this up. Clearly not for our benefit.

I suspect the disposed super 'thn or at least their supporters, the Ta'aha.

# Cat Eden

*We need to thank whomever sent over the nice new crunchy toys.  
Ha-ha! Cats never thank anyone. They are good. The hunt, the play  
and that crunch. Yes, the satisfying crunch.  
They don't seem to reproduce though. I wonder how we beg for more?  
Their bite is painful, but that is good for our lazy kits. They have had  
it too soft since we drove the stinky lizards away.  
Owa yawns, does the traditional three circles before laying back  
down.  
The stinky lizards have been very quiet since we drove them into the  
tiny caves.  
They will return in the summer when it heats up again.  
It was glorious when I bit the head off their stupid leader.  
Yes it was dear. Got them moving anyway. No one likes to hunt pas-  
sive prey.  
The stinky monkeys were the worst, so stupid.  
They did give nice back rubs though.  
Only when you trained them right.  
Took too long. Stupid monkeys.  
WHAT! WHO DID THAT?  
What dear?  
Someone stole the last crunchy toys I was saving for later. They are  
gone. All gone. Now what will I play with?  
Guess we will be back to the stinky lizards. It was fun while they  
lasted though.  
Yes, indeed dear.  
Both roll over and yawn.  
We need to put in a request for more prey. Think Pr 'thn or Br 'thn  
would help us?  
You know they are forbidden to bring sen here without permission.  
The lizards were a special case. We can't expect special treatment again.  
But we are special. We are Cats! What more do we need to com?  
Of course we are dear. Of course we are.  
You are starting to sounds like that flying rat.  
Owl dear, he is an owl.  
The turtle was nicer even if boring to hunt her kind.  
Go to sleep dear. You need rest your highness.  
Yes dear.*

# Andi

#We are certainly living up to the school motto, ‘Only in diversity, in trying every possible course, can The Question be served’ and then some.#

<sup>D</sup>Good to be home.<sup>D</sup>

“We are hardly home, I like this place way better than where I was raised.”

I show amusement. Given my life as a smiggle, Andi is a much better ‘home’. Hard to believe this is the same world. I have to wonder if the Drag even knew Andi was on the same world.

Queen is checking her mail, then shows much happiness.

#I am free!#

“Of course you are Queen, we all are.”

#No, I am no longer Queen. They accepted my abdication. I am a free Rajk now.#

<sup>D</sup>Given that we are all supposed to go back to our ‘homes’ at TK3 and we are now sixes. What took them so long?<sup>D</sup>

She continues reading.

#Ah, apparently, it had something to do with all our adventures. The High TK council requested I be relieved. My own request was denied of course. I was expecting that and was resigned to returning to that very boring existence.#

“We would have visited.”

<sup>D</sup>And rubbed it in how much fun we were having nearly getting ourselves killed regularly.<sup>D</sup>

Ceph Hua sees us and waves, then comes closer.

~You missed all the fun. We had an invasion of Araks, well baby ones. Kind of cute in some ways. Though the imperative to kill and suck the juices out of every living thing was not so cute.~

~What’s an Arak?~ Dave asks.

<sup>D</sup>It was in the updates we received Dave. Don’t you read those?<sup>D</sup> He shows amusement. He never does.

“So, if you are not the Queen anymore, what is your call?”

#Good question. Guess I could go back to my pup name, Jsyg. A bit derogatory, but fits I think. Means pain in the ass. Like you two I was always getting into trouble.#

“We have heard the stories.” Dave sighs. We have heard all of yours too, I think.

~Pay attention please.~

~Sorry, we have been on ship so long we have lost all our manners. Please proceed Hua.~ I respond.

~It was our team that suggested spraying with seawater. Actually salt water will do. It kills them. Problem solved. Well it turns out they are the young of a recognized sen.~

~Big trouble then. They can't kill and we can't touch them.~

~Not so bad. Just rounded them all up with TK bubbles and shipped them home. The parent was very happy.~ Wonder what happened elsewhere, with no TKs around to trap them? How long till they get big enough to reproduce? So many questions.

Especially, ~What happened? Why did they arrive here.~

**ATTENTION!**

So ingrained in us that we immediately stop and listen. Sort of can't help it, it is so loud.

Suddenly the four of us are in a large empty lecture hall. Hate it when they do that without warning us. After what we just went through, it is very rude. The instinct is to jump back out as fast as possible. I get why they do it to us, we seem to have been drafted to solve their problems lately. Why is Hua here though? She looks confused even.

A Jane comes in. Guano, the head Jane. That always means trouble. She is alone. Even worse. Carrying a box with handle. I dare not scan without permission.

She turns to Hua, ~Are you up to date on these three?~

~Affirmative. That was why I was there to meet them.~ She is at attention, or what passes for it in a Ceph. Can't exactly go rigid. Colorless.

*You are cleared for transport.* The Jane leaves, the box remains. Dave picks it up sighing. I look at Hua. What trouble are we in for now?

#We never got to check in. How about a nice meal and some rest?#

"Not for the three musketeers! En Garde!" He simulates holding a sword. That is what we get for watching old Hu vids while on board.

~What is a musketeer?~

<sup>D</sup>Might as well all switch to Ba form. Easier here than on board.<sup>D</sup>

#You too Hua. On a starship it is not easy being Ceph, Drag or Rajk.#

"Just as I was beginning to remember what being a Hu was." Dave sighs. He sighs a lot. We really are worn out.

Yeah, I do scan the box. An Arak in stasis. Not surprised. The report says they appeared on Cat Eden as well. Wonder what the Drag made of them? Their fangs are too small to pierce Drag scales. Would be painful for a small Cat though.

^All set for Arak Eden.^ We com together.

^How did you know?^ Before we can answer we are on board. Not Enterprise or Starchaser. How many of these things do they have anyway? Ba was a good choice. Just another jump ship, not a full size cruiser. Enterprise was nice for the room inside though.

# New Ceph Eden

The clay is feeling especially good today. Everything works so nicely when you start with the perfect clay consistency. I knead the clay to make it uniform and remove any air pockets that were missed from earlier working of it. I actually like this part the best and probably spend more time kneading than I strictly need to. No one complains when I do the prep though.

I will go for a swim in the ocean later to remove all the bits of clay I am absorbed. The sea here is much less salty than the original Ceph Eden and is safe to swim in, as long as we don't try to stay in too long. Being TK means I don't really have to worry about that, but I need to set an example. As Rooi's second other Ceph look to me as an example. Not comfortable with that, but it is the role assigned, so I accept it.

The advanced students enter first to take advantage of their favorite wheel or work area depending on what they intend to do today. We have a few urns to get our own work done before the new students arrive for class. This is our time. Everyone is quiet, intent on their own projects. My own work is currently in the kiln. Time to plan my next project.

Problem is, I can't get my mind off the Arak crisis. The CatBoxes suggested it was only the 'made' worlds that were under attack so far. We are on a made world after the super 'thn destroyed the original Ceph Eden. And yes, the Arak did arrive here. Their sen works by having a large number of offspring and then weeding them out through stress tests. Same as us. It was easy to corral them into special areas, figure out their needs and set them to work learning skills and competing against each other. No need to 'exterminate' them as vermin. We don't have the necessary seawater to do it with anyway. Yes, we do have salt and the TKs could certainly make what we needed, but why?

The Arak are more comfortable inland in drier areas. Perfect for us. We prefer the wet coastal areas. They will fit into our ecology just fine. Already some have ready mid size. Rooi and I were able to determine a lot about them by reading their seq and psiotic signatures. We do not have the advantage of having adult Arak to finish their training. The database gave no hint to where they came from either. Or more importantly who sent them.

When the CatBox came asking that any still alive should be sent to a specific location, we sent a note instead. We requested that a few adults were welcome to set up an Arak colony here and train the maturing young to live in their own area. Lots of insects and other food items. Open space. Protection from others (including evil TKs).

# New Rajk Eden

We are without our Queen until a new one is chosen.

No one dares goes to the surface either. Tons of those spider things. Where did they come from? Why?

A large 'thn appears. Almost as big as an adult Rajk.

*My call is Br'thn. We will be collecting all the Arak, spiders, to remove them back to their home world.*

I can hear it in my mind. What is this thing? I am alone in this chamber. Does not appear threatening though. If it takes care of the spiders we could go to the surface again. Never a real safe option, but even we like to feel the sun occasionally.

It comes right up to me. Smell? Does it smell Rajk to identify? It has no smell itself. Nor did I feel any breath. No obvious pores for any reason. Wait, it com'd WE. Squeak!

*Good, they have chosen well. Come with me. How?*

I squeak. I am on the surface surrounded by the spiders. They are not coming towards me though. I relax.

#What do I do?#

*You are the new Rajk Queen. You have been given abilities the rest do not posses. Like what? Did Queen have these abilities too?*

*Yes, she did. She is now much higher on the TK scale and doing important work elsewhere. Assisting the sen collective, what we call the Federation.*

Remember when you were a young pup and you dreamed of becoming a Queen or other high official. I have a feeling I may regret it now.

*Concentrate. You will find that your thoughts are enough to help you push and pull the juvenile Arak where you want it. Practice on those close to you till you feel comfortable. I will protect you from any harm.*

Obviously B'thn, strange call, can hear my thoughts. That makes it easier, especially when we are around others.

*Only the Queen can know of my existence or the existence of others with abilities. Do not use when norms are present. Only a severe threat to life is a valid reason.* No showing off. Got it. Certainly explains why the last Queen spent so much time alone. Poo, this means I will have to attend all those boring official meetings and functions. Not all fun then.

*We begin. Please move the Arak nearest you before it bites you.*

Good incentive! Without thinking, it suddenly jumps back several meters away.

*Not so hard next time.* Hey, I am new at this. Hope it gets easier with practice. Does not take me long to be herding them towards the carrier.

# Arak Eden

☞You are not of our kind.;

☞I am not. The sen I represent have found some of your children. It is unfortunate that some were lost before understanding.;

☞That is expected.;

☞Where would you like them released?;

She raises on arm and points. This is where they were taken from and where they should return to.;

☞It is done.;

She runs up the hill to confirm. Waits till she notices movement below and sees that it is her children.

I am beside her.

☞Not all are here. Some were lost before understanding.;

☞That is the way of things. She turns to return to her adult territory. I walk with her.

☞You are not of our kind. Why do you persist?;

☞It may not be safe to remain here. Whomever took your children may try again.;

☞Were they successful in their plan this time? NO. Therefore we are safe. They will find another path.;

For a semi nomadic hermit like existence, she is wise.

☞Are there many like you?;

☞There are, as well as many more, different from my kind.;

☞This brood is too old for change now. I am too old. Come back next breeding season and you may take some of my next brood. It is good to be in several locations for survival.;

☞True.;

☞What is your call? I am Yokkt.;

☞I am Tewk. She leaves me and goes back to her home, a hole in the side of the hill. A simple scan shows this area to have many such homes spaced apart so as to not impose on a neighbors hunting grounds. Or, I suspect become dinner for the unaware. A hard life. Most die within a year of hatching. Those that survive must compete for space.

Strict carnivores have a hard lonely life. As a TK they would not need to hunt. Can they give up that urge, so as to learn and be with other sen?

I will need to check in on Rooi and Liss' experiment to observe and learn.

The rest of her brood are hunting in the forest nearby. Not an easy life. Is that what eventually makes us 'civilized' the ability to have time to think? To worry about more than survival?

# Raptor Eden

<sup>R</sup>Does not feel like an Eden to me any longer Checker.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Did it ever? You always seemed to find something to complain about.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Am I that bad?<sup>R</sup> Checker just stares at me. Guess so. Guano.

<sup>R</sup>But there is always room for improvement right?<sup>R</sup> Checker stares at me some more..

Finally she says, <sup>R</sup>Let's get to work. Once we are sure there are no more Arak here, we can let the Pirate Cove Raps take over this space too.<sup>R</sup> She means eggs of course. Hatched are bad enough. Eggs are bombs.

<sup>R</sup>At least this is all they got. The rest of Raptor Eden appears to be untouched. Which is weird.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Why?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>If you were trying to wipe out an enemy or even to take over, wouldn't you have used overwhelming force?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>The CatBox said they went to many worlds. Had to space them out?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Or just a test case to see how well it worked.<sup>R</sup>

That is not a pleasant thought. They even took out the TKs present. Not an easy thing to do. If the Arak had reached reproductive and multiplied, thousands each gen, it would have taken very little time to overwhelm us or any world.

<sup>R</sup>I want to use the WayBack to see how the attack went. How could they have taken out the TKs?<sup>R</sup>

We will need Br'thn's help to use the WayBack or find one of the other High TKs. I need to get more used to relying on a 'thn if I am expected to eventually help make a new one. Worse than laying an egg and raising a hatchling.

Br'thn has been helping with the Arak crisis, so it takes a few days. We have plenty to do convincing the Pirate Cove members it is okay to move in. Next town over. No rush, just as they expand or new Raps come to join them. There are storehouses, forges, lumber mills, everything they could want, ready to go. The hardest thing was convincing them it was safe now. They nearly got hit by the Arak leaving here to the next town, which of course was them.

We also cleaned up any personal belongings and evidence of occupation. Would be disturbing to find anything from the previous Raps living here. Especially bodies.

Br'thn pops in.

*Ceph Eden will host an Arak colony. That will allow us good observation opportunities to learn more about them. The Arak fem seems to have*

*calmed down. Does not like 'thn at all, so Tewk took the lead. Not in Arak form, but more like them than anyone else.*

Ron and Squeak pop in. Nice to see them, but wish it had been sooner.

<sup>R</sup>We have carefully scanned the rest of Rap Eden and there are no traces.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We call our world Raptor Eden now, to be more inclusive.<sup>R</sup>

Ron shows amusement, Squeak is confused but then seeing Checker, calms down and shows affirmation.

The WayBack is set up and we gather around it.

We start just after Checker and I went on our vacation to the jungle. Everything appears normal.

<sup>R</sup>Scan carefully. They are likely to be hidden at first.<sup>R</sup> Checker coms.

Ron comments, <sup>R</sup>What are those things? Not Rap eggs or even Checker ones.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Smaller and rounder. Ours are more oblong. A lot of them. Scattered in hidden locations on roofs and storage areas where they would not immediately be noticed.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Go back. I want to see exactly when they arrived.<sup>R</sup> And hopefully by whom. No luck, they all appear at once. The WayBack does not show where they came from, only when they arrived.

In less than a day, they all hatch at once, and attack at once.

<sup>R</sup>Did you notice they are more concentrated around the TK quarters?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They never had a chance. If we had been here we could have saved most.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>No, too fast. You might have saved some of the norms. My guess is they were hoping to catch you two as well. If you had not been gone, they could easily have removed all Raps at least from this world.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Strange, there were none on Madscar. They apparently did not see the Checkers as sen to worry about.<sup>R</sup> Or even sen at all, much less TKs.

I show amusement, <sup>R</sup>Stupid. The Checkers were the real ones to have worried about.<sup>R</sup> Everyone shows amusement. Checker is embarrassed, but it is good for her to be valued as well.

<sup>R</sup>We know when it happened and what happened, but not who was behind it. They only attacked 'new' worlds built to accommodate worlds the Ta'aha 'thn destroyed.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>And this one. Raptor Eden was made after that whole episode.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>And they never attacked Edwin Land either.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Guess they were smarter than we thought.<sup>R</sup> More amusement.

<sup>R</sup>I think I know why. Edwin Land is full of open portals. Think about if they attacked there, succeeded and reproduced . . .<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They could have invaded all of our worlds. They must still want the rest of us alive or this was just revenge.<sup>R</sup>

# New Regional Galactic Center

We arrive aboard a Yessan ship. Popping right in would have scared them and drawn too much attention to ourselves. The ship was an old wreck barely DS capable. It is in the ship equivalent of sickbay to see if any of its systems can be repaired or better, upgraded, especially the drive unit. The crew remains on board as the three of us depart in full worship attire. To make the necessary and required six, we have Buddies with us.

We have been practicing for lunars how to do this. The physical forms, the proclamations, the extremely rigid ritual protocols. Mess up even one and we would be found out.

Everyone seems shocked to see us. A few ask for our blessing. This is only done for the ones who pass inspection, are perfect enough. We did not call it the cult of perfection for no reason. Tewk TP's suggestions when s/he can.

Our story is that we suffered the humiliation of hiding from the impure ones, world and froth jumping constantly to avoid detection. It was only when we happened to visit Hafa for repairs that we heard from the underground that the RGC was being rebuilt without the knowledge of the impure ones. That is the only reason we dared come out. Anything still in control of the impure ones would have been a threat to our existence.

Sam and I are attendants to the high priest, Tewk. That will allow us minor mistakes without too much outward punishment. We simulated scars on our carapaces to indicate we had been properly trained. We are expected to announce an imperfection and request physical punishment. This would all be shocking if as TKs we had not already studied Hu history and found plenty of examples of this kind of behavior among our own sen. If we had not been friends with Tewk for so long we would never have accepted this assignment.

Of course we have obligations to the rest, but this is an insane assignment. Never thought we would live forever, this may be the one that proves the point.

The Mechs declare our ship unfit for service. No idea how it even made it here. Tewk scowls. Tafa hate mechs. Any tech actually. They get to work anyway. We leave for the reception area. Never mess with a high Tafa priest.

Sens part as we enter the line. Others leave the line when they see us. We move to the front. A sen I have never experienced waves us through. They didn't for the ones in front of us or behind us. Interesting. So much for a quiet entrance. These are not the same sen as the previous center. Where did they all come from? Granted, the galaxy is a large place, even

for us.

We spread out. Each sen we encounter we pass a flyer to inviting them to an Altar Call. An opportunity to confess their sins and receive just punishment to absolve them. Not surprising, we get no takers. We are here for appearances not actual Tafa work. Once we become background noise we are in. We can listen and gather information without attention.

We gather after a time in our quarters and set it up as a Tafa altar. Even though no one has come for our services, we still preform them. At some point both Sam and I are disciplined for being imperfect. We actually tried, but the Tafa standard is so impossibly high, no one can succeed. Except Tewk, but then s/he is the judge of what is perfect or not. Only our Buddies get off without a whack or two.

Finally we get a visitor.

ω Welcome to the Regional Galactic Center honored ones. ω Coms in perfect Aaaha. Interesting. Not of the Aaaha lineage though. Tewk goes up to our visitor and hits it severely several times. The visitor assumes the proper stance of acceptance and respect. They missed the altar call.

I com, ω You com Aaaha very well, yet I do not recognize your sen. ω

ω All sen at the center com Aaaha. The ones who destroyed the previous center do not. There are likely spies among us. ω

ω And you needed a safe com. Excellent choice. ω

ω May I know your story? ω

Sam comes up and does the proper bow, which the visitor returns.

ω We are under threat of extinction from the Evil Ones, the Imperfect Ones, the Killers of Purity. We three are the last of the Honored Ones, the last of the Holy Order of High Priests. We have been hiding from the others for a very long time. It was our mission to find friends to continue our mission of Perfection. ω

I continue, ω It was with great joy we heard of the RGC being remade after the destruction of the previous one. To find one such as yourself who acknowledges our path is Bliss of the Highest Order. ω

ω There are others. I will take you to them. ω

Tewk, ω We must pray and fast first. Indeed a momentous occasion we must prepare properly for. ω

ω Of course, I would expect nothing else. ω The sen leaves instructions on an engraved sheet, bows and leaves.

*That was just a simple introductory test. We can expect it to get much harder from here on out. As we prepared for.*

*They still don't trust us. We would not either if the roles were reversed.*

What have we gotten ourselves into this time. An entire group of Aaaha worshipers? This can't be good.

# Andi

°How come we all have to be Drag for whatever assignment they are sending us on?° I don't think Dave is happy. Funny, my reading of Hu history said that many juvenile male Hu are into dinosaurs. We wanted to be giant squid. Different world.

He continues, °It is so restrictive.° Midj gives him a whack with his tail. °Aggh, point made. I'll be good. Really I will.° Dave is the funny one of our team apparently. Humor is not a Ceph thing. Supposed to lighten the mood before a mission. I don't want to lighten the mood. I want to be ready. But then most think of us a paranoid. Just cautious.

The Cats think of us as stupid monkeys, stinky lizards, and food. Poor Rajk. Not their fault they look like a giant version of their prey. Not sure what they think of Ceph. Oh, wait, I remember now, they call us a challenge. Not that easy to eat, but fun to try.

As to how I ended up in this pod, sigh, I needed to be somewhere, and the success on our last assignment doomed me.

We just get back from Arak and now we are ordered to assume Drag form. We can prepare better if we know what is going on leaders!

Arak was interesting. Gotta love a sen with eight legs or arms right? They are going to have trouble advancing though. They only work together as young adults. Before then they are ravenous looking to eat anything they can catch. As adults they are only interested in mating and making young. Young adults are the chance takers. They are the ones trying out new ideas and trying to make wherever they are work. That is pretty universal actually. Adults are settled in and believe they have found their spot. If it works don't foul the nest right?

Survey done, we are brought back here. We were promised some time off, since we are usually immediately pushed to the next crisis instead. Apparently it went well enough that I am now assigned to this pod. Did not work out so well in my previous assignments. We were successful, but the pod dynamics were not so good. Read my journal if you are interested. I am trying to live past it. I really want this pod to work.

Once in Drag form we spend the rest of the day running, catching simulated prey and eating it. Apparently the current Drag population prefers to cook their food. I liked it better when they ate everything raw like the Ceph do. I am clumsy in this form, as expected, but start to get better by the afternoon sessions. Dave keeps pretending to be top predator. Jsyg is our leader. Midj, the native Drag is our brains and well, I am still not sure what my role it. They said not to worry, I was accepted and that was all that mattered. Being very insecure I would prefer defined.

# Cat Eden

We come in through the same 'thant portal they did. The story is we were found hidden on E2 and forced to come here. Been on our own for nearly an octade.

<sup>D</sup>This place is pretty bleak.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Remember the Terror were here once. Still has not completely recovered.<sup>D</sup> Even I remember from our studies that was over a thousand years ago. Should have done better than this. The sen were supposed to have helped in recovery too.

<sup>D</sup>Some thought the Arak are related, but totally different froth and part of the galaxy makes it unlikely.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Could be the same OM spore set?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>And four billion years later it looks similar? Don't think so. OMs are the definition of diversity run amok.<sup>D</sup> Dave likes that word currently for some reason. He also pretending to be a terror lizard, dinosaur. Did he ever grow up? Hu never go through the 'selection' process we do. They think this is all a game.

It is Midj I am most worried about. This is his birth sen. They abused him for being different. A danger he could seek revenge. Drag are not seen as the most sociable sen to begin with. Sauron created the Hu and the Drag. There is a large violence element in bother their natures. Hu history is full of examples. Drag are still too new to see what direction they go in, stupid or smart.

We take our time, watching in all directions as would be expected for new comers. We know we are being watched.

Jsyg asks me, <sup>D</sup>Did you ever get a chance to meet Rooi?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>The one of the thirteen Rooi?<sup>D</sup> She affirms.

<sup>D</sup>Rooi is a common name, but I did see THE Rooi once from a distance before I came to Andi. All Andi students from New Ceph Eden need her approval, but I was never interviewed by her, only the committee.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Did you TK before they found you?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>That is how most Ceph are brought to their attention.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>True for the Queens as well. I think Dave is the only one of our pack who did not show some degree of TK. Now Midj has everyone worried. He is showing skills none but the highest TKs have shown.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Learning new com VERY quickly.<sup>D</sup> She affirms. Could be latent TP?

None of us have ever spent time on Cat Eden before, but Midj is still the best at Drag culture and should know what they will expect of new refugees.

Midj calls a halt. We are on a rise overlooking a long valley. There is

smoke in the distance. We have all already scanned and know it is a cook fire. Shelter does not seem to be a big thing with Drag. Everything is out in the open unless there is an overriding reason it should not be, like in the case of a small forge for making tools, especially weapons of course.

If I was not in Drag form I would have died already from dehydration. Hot and dry. A Ceph's worst nightmare. Everyone but Midj is uncomfortable. Being outside for Jsyg and the smallest for Dave. I wonder what the Drag would think if they saw us in our native forms? I spend so little time as a Ceph now, I am not even sure I remember.

<sup>D</sup>It is hot out here. <sup>D</sup>Dave of course. I would not dare com that.

Midj looks confused, <sup>D</sup>Actually it is quite nice. Cooler than usual. <sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>That is not the Drag we seek. Don't they live in caves now? To avoid the Cats? <sup>D</sup>Dave asks.

We make our way down to the smoke and it sure looks like Drag sitting near the fire, but only two. Is that safe?

Midj sighs, <sup>D</sup>Guano, not those two! Anything but those two! <sup>D</sup>Who?

<sup>D</sup>About time you four got here. Welcome to hell. <sup>D</sup>Who are they?

The one on the right hands Midj a journal, standard TK issue, also happens to look like a local recorder notebook. I did study for this mission.

<sup>D</sup>Anything else? We can leave now? <sup>D</sup>Midj affirms and the two morph into 'thants. Now I recognize them. Affectionately called the Clowns.

I whisper, <sup>D</sup>Drup and Rand. <sup>D</sup>Midj is reading the journal, gives up and throws it on the fire. Does not burn of course. Actually made from finely woven 'thn metal. Dave retrieves it and packs it away.

Jsyg asks, <sup>D</sup>Did it at least say where the main colony was? <sup>D</sup>Midj affirms and starts walking away. We follow. Back into the mountains where we just were. What a waste of time.

Dave coms, <sup>D</sup>The journal is written in 'thant of course. Means no locals could read it. <sup>D</sup>Smart actually, maybe. Being naturally paranoid I can think of bad reasons for everything.

I com, <sup>D</sup>This might actually be a good thing. We are <sup>D</sup>supposed to be recently escaped Drag. We would not be expected to know the local landscape or other sen present. Remember to look scared or curious if a Cat shows up. <sup>D</sup>I pick scared. Nasty things. Did you know they will even attempt to eat a live Ceph? We win, but it is a fight all the same. And hurts.

We do not go exactly back and veer off north of the path we took in. Not as far up either. One hill and we drop near an actual stream. I have to wade in it of course. The others just get a drink and move on. I play catch up. Ah, a cave up the side of the hill a short distance away. Evidence of recent occupation at least.

*Dinner has arrived!* I freeze. Can't blend into the background as a Ceph would, instinct I need to break. Midj goes up to the Cat and starts

giving her a massage. I would guess that not many Drag would attempt that.

<sup>D</sup>Relax everyone, this is Puss, our Cat contact.<sup>D</sup> We all acknowledge her. I make some treats, seafood flavor and place the bowl near her. She sure purrs loud. Midj affirms my action. Dave and Jsyg keep their distance.

Puss gets up, does an enormous stretch and walks off silently. I am impressed. Not even the leaves and branches crunch under her. More than I can say for any of us. Of course our foot pads are not the same and we weigh more. Well two of us do. Dave and I are the lightest.

We get closer to the cave and Midj announces us, <sup>D</sup>Refugees requesting entrance.<sup>D</sup>

We wait. I am sure they already know we are here. Drag are definitely game players. I do not like the idea of entering a narrow cave. Easy ambush possibilities. Midj is lead, Jsyg is next, Dave and finally me as the smallest. Normally size designates age and to a lesser extent, status. We are pretending Dave and I are younger ones.

Finally a small young Drag comes out, looks us over, turns to go back in, but coms, <sup>D</sup>Go away. We are full and you are not wanted.<sup>D</sup> Midj throws a huge Cat paw trophy down so it lands in front the young male. That stops him. He whistles something. A new com we were unaware of. Drup and Rand should have told us. Did they do anything while they were here?

Midj sees my confusing and coms, *Each cave has different signals to confuse the Cats.*

I should have known that, but I had very little time to study between now and our last assignment. How as I supposed to know I would be assigned to them permanently?

Of course Midj picks up the code instantly and whistles a rebuttal then backs away from the entrance. Motions us to go to the edges of the clear area. The young one looks like he is going to drop his tail. I reach into my pack and pull out some Drag chow to hand to him. He sniffs it of course. Not really that different from the Cats at Andi.

<sup>D</sup>This is good. Better than rat jerky anyway.<sup>D</sup> He coms. I suspect he does not get the best pieces either. The Cat paw remains where it landed.

Jsyg is the only one who is an expert in cave fighting. Dave and I decide to build a small fire. Our guard is surprised and looks around frantically.

<sup>D</sup>Cats are out here.<sup>D</sup> He hisses. Obviously prefers to be inside

Dave acts all stupid mal and says, <sup>D</sup>You mean Puss? Nice kitty. Loves back rubs and treats. You should try it sometime.<sup>D</sup> He faints. Do Drag faint? Even Midj shows amusement. Jsyg gives him a shove to stop it.

The Guard wakes up. We offer him more food and we all sit around

the fire relating our travels from Earth Two to here. Most of it made up of course, but it passes the time and helps our credibility. I already know there are others just inside listening. Most important was how we evaded capture for so long. I needn't have worried. Midj is known to the large one who comes out finally.

<sup>D</sup>Smiggle! I see you brought enough food for everyone inside. The young ones will be especially tasty.<sup>D</sup> She means eating all of us. Stupid warrior. If Sauron taught them to be this way I can see where the Hu got it from as well. Midj stands and shows amusement and a lot of teeth. Three more warriors come out. If the fight is fair it is not worth doing in the Drag manual. We don't fight fair. They don't know that. Yet.

Midj looks at me, <sup>D</sup>You want her? Hardly worth the effort for me, but could be good training for you?<sup>D</sup> I affirm, smile and come forward. Everyone else backs away. Our guard is going to lose it again. Not my problem. I concentrate on my adversary.

Dave whispers to the guard, it was me who caught the Cat by the way. He faints again. The bully hears it though, as intended. She just growls louder. Sound is not a big one for Ceph. Show is.

She pretends this will be easy and over with quickly. That is till she is on her back looking at the sky wondering what happened. I look down at her face and smile. A Drag smile is truly ghastly. Midj takes my place looking down at her. <sup>D</sup>WE ARE NOT SMIGGLES!<sup>D</sup> He roars. Glad we got that out of our way. I hope.

<sup>D</sup>That was fun. I hope there are more to practice on.<sup>D</sup> Dave shows amusement. They all learned the hard way at Andi from sparing with me.

The Warrior gets up, hand signals something to the guard, who goes rushing inside. I look at the others who came out with her, challenging them with my looks. They decide inside is a good idea too. That leaves the Warrior and us. I help her up. Another disgrace of course. I am a third of her weight at best. Surprisingly she does not take this opportunity to try and take me down using her advantage.

<sup>D</sup>We had to be sure. We can't afford the weak any more. We have a Cat problem which you obviously know about.<sup>D</sup> She turns, but motions us to follow at least. The large Cat paw did not give you a clue? Stupid Warrior.

Now the fun part. Our mission is a lot more challenging than this simple entrance show would suggest. Much more.

# Edwin Land

<sup>th</sup>Why do you keep moving this ‘thant stronghold?’<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>The ones who need to know, know the pattern.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Thirteen dimensional should be enough.<sup>th</sup>

Edwin does not need to answer.

Finally he says, <sup>th</sup>Unfortunately the clowns have figured it out.<sup>th</sup>

A ‘thant laughing is not a funny sound or sight, but I can’t help it.

Edwin pops out and leaves me on the surface with Owl. I know the feeling Edwin, I know the feeling.

Owl coms, <sup>th</sup>I heard there is a very nice patch of foliose lichens about three clicks south-west of here. We could mosey on over for a snack.<sup>th</sup>

He thinks we are in the old west for some reason. Does this out fit look like we came from there? Being ‘thant is even less fun than being Bug.

Thinking out loud I com, <sup>th</sup>Too many sen know what a ‘thant is. Almost none know the Bugs.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>That could be to our advantage<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>th</sup>Precisely.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>And our team already knows the form.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Yes sir ee.<sup>th</sup> Now he gives me the dirty look.

We both morph to Bug form and take off running. I didn’t think many forms were faster than a determined ‘thant, but this is certainly one of them. Too bad they don’t eat lichens. Not much else out here.

We are having fun running from the sun till we notice a line of ‘thants watching us from the top of a small hill. For ‘thant to wonder what we are says something, but Bug Eden is not on any star chart or atlas. Edwin is likely the only ‘thant that knows this form.

\*Let Edwin explain then.\* I take off ahead of Owl. He runs to catch up, but not pass. We run for arns, just for the sheer pleasure of running.

# Di Eden

*It would be extremely embarrassing if Ro knew we were here.*

*She needs to learn that being high TK is NOT easy and NONE of us does it alone. There is no shame in asking for help.*

*Actually worse not to ask for help.* Ron affirms.

We came in outside of town and are walking towards the agreed meeting place. Di has had its own problems of course. Some sen gets greedy for wealth or power or both and this sets off a cascade that ends up destroying a lot. Unfortunately, this last time, their home and garden were in the path. They set up again further outside of town. They never did get a lot of visitors or curious, so this works.

White waves to us when we get close. Three Checkers come out to greet us. They have lots of colors on their scales and feathers. All earth colors and shades of green. This is new. The largest stops in front of us and bows.

!Welcome honored ones. Please follow me.!

!May I ask your call honored one?! I don't think she is used to being called honored by high TKs. She stops and turns to us.

!Collectively, the jungle checkers are called Jeckers to keep it easy. My personal call is Qk.! That is going to be a challenge to learn how to sound. More click than anything else. I cheat and TP it from her to be sure. Ron is showing amusement. While she is still facing us, we morph back to our original forms. No locals about, so it is safe. Raps she has seen or at least heard of, but a tall skinny Martian, probably not. She keeps stretching her neck higher to see him. The other two Jeckers back away awkwardly. Qk does not and stands her ground. Good for her.

!Okay, you two, quit teasing our partners.! White calls out, with Libby beside him showing amusement. Partners, hmmm, going for partners instead of master/slaves this time. Good for them. Not going to repeat the Rap/Checker mistake. I am proud of Ro for figuring this out. So far, the Checkers on Raptor Eden has not requested their own world. Must be working out between them.

We are brought in to a meal already set out. Qk sits next to me and White and Libby serve all of us. The other two Jeckers sit and com on either side of Ron. Curious as all I am sure. We have been partners for so long I no longer think about, except when we visit Mars and I am expected to morph to Martian form. If it were not for the lower gravity I would feel like I am about to fall all the time.

It appears Jeckers are like Checkers and can eat almost anything. Same with Ron. The two beside him are having fun feeding his things and getting his opinion of it. Then he makes some dark chocolate and

gives them some. They go crazy. They will be his for life now. Qk and I both roll our eyes. Young TKs are so funny. She is TK4 and can make chocolate anytime she wants. The younger ones are TK2 and dependent on chocolate as a favor.

Qk chirps and the younger ones get up, bow to all of us and retreat.

!Chores.! She comes as a way of explaining, but stays herself. Good.

Libby comes one word, !Ro.! We affirm. Being the former librarian for the Regional Galactic Center she is the one we wanted to learn from the most. Wonder who they got for the new secret center.

Libby starts, !Very simple actually. She needs to get over trying to be perfect. That no harm will come to anyone under her watch. Sen will suffer, sen will die, sen will make a lot of mistakes. She will make a lot of mistakes.!

White adds, !Checker not so much.! That gets shows of amusement out of everyone including Qk.

Ron comes in with, !And no one could have predicted the Arak invasion.!

Libby, !Specifically the Arak, no, but they were bound to try something. They are not coring worlds yet, but they want us to know they are still around, active and can do the unexpected.!

White adds, !And it will get worse. Much worse. Especially if we retaliate.! Ron and I both affirm.

Qk adds, !We are all worried about what the thirteen have planned. We need to be ready for the backlash. It won't be just the new worlds next time.! We all affirm.

Libby, !From what we have determined. ALL new worlds were hit at the same time. The Arak eggs all hatched at the same time and on all the worlds hit. That took some planning.! Biology is messy. A lot of variation in habitats, environmental conditions, hiding places even.

!Rooi is raising the young she got in a safe place on New Ceph Eden.!

!Good choice,! Libby comes.

Qk, !But if it is not Arak next time will it matter?! Agreed.

Ron, !I don't get it. Surely they know this is not the last incarnation. All of this will be tried again. They have nothing to lose by waiting and learning. Why do it? Hu are admittedly very stupid about ego and revenge. I would have expected better of the others though.!

Libby, !They core our new worlds, we silence their high 'thn and take away their meeting place. They show they are still out there. What we do will determine the direction of this play.! Indeed.

!It was the silencing of the Ta'aha that hurt them the most.! Ron.

# New Regional Galactic Center

We are thirty-nine plus the three Buddies. It will progress more rapidly now. The thing about exponential growth, even in base six, it starts slow and then bang. Soon we will be ready at our end. Sam and Tia are progressing. We have done services so many times now it is second nature. Gotta love the Cult of Perfection. For so many it is simply addictive. There is so much randomness in existence anything that promises certainty, even if painful, is chosen. We offer certainty and lots of pain. Oh, lots of pain. No one is perfect and it is our task to let everyone know.

We taught the thirty six and they will each teach six more. Those taught later will be layered further from the altar. There is some reward for joining up first. We have already petitioned for a larger space. This likely will not be a problem. We offer a return to the pre-thirteen interference times. Nostalgia. Unfounded of course. We are not here for their benefit.

As we add members we are getting closer to who set off the Arak attack. None of their worlds were affected, but everyone seems to have heard about it. They are openly in favor of attacks after what they did to 'us', meaning the Ta'aha. In reality, the Ta'aha was already on the way out and we had very little to do with it. But, everyone likes to blame someone else for their problems. Universal it would appear.

It is important for us to separate the 'go alongs' from the hard core cult members. The former can be persuaded to go another direction, the later will die with their footwear on. When we identify the former, we limit their access and suggest they are not ready for serious study yet. Take care of their own first. Actually none of us should be messing with other sen worlds, OM, 'thn, greenman, etc.

As much as I have enjoyed interacting with many of the Earth Froth sen, and this was done during a critical period, it might not have been entirely wise. Yes, we are part of the thirteen, three of us here. We are trying to limit all this to damage already done rather than start a multiverse war with half the galaxy involved. At least the fluidic part anyway. Admittedly coring a world does mess up the magnotics and others as well, especially if part of that cored world ends up crashing into another world not ready for or expecting something like that to happen.

Decisions and actions have consequences. "There is always a side effect' with what Owl and Turtle com endlessly. Very true.

Tia reminds me it is time for service. I center myself and slowly and mindfully make my way to the altar.

# New Ceph Eden

I have taken on the Arak project as it is easier for me to be away from the sea. Technically Rooi can assume any form, but does not really like anything but Ceph. No ceramics here either. Gives me my own space to try out ideas and help everyone, so I don't mind. The Luss have gotten a very bad reputation because of a few selfish individuals. I don't intend to be one of those. She still checks in, as she will today.

Many of the TKs thought that the Arak were some kind of Terror derivative. I am not convinced. The young have gotten past their initial 'eat everything in sight' stage and have started to self organize. Language has developed. They are building structures and burrows to shelter and hide in.

There is even a primitive attempt to herd prey to make it more accessible when needed. And that means protecting the resources the prey need to feed on as well. Well thought out actually. I doubt any other sen could do as well under these same conditions. Hu infants being among the worst. Totally helpless and fully dependent on adults to care for them for many years.

There was a large die-off as the very young learned, most often the hard way, how to do everything. Roughly one percent of the initial numbers remain. More surprising is they appear to have two kinds of reproduction. When their surroundings appear to be stable, they only reproduce in replacement numbers. Not this wild thousand fold bump someone took advantage of to 'infect' our world with.

I am not Arak, nor do I follow the usual Luss model of pretending to be. I needed to understand how they reacted to sen different from themselves, but not a threat. Being of similar size to their young adults, they do not see me as prey. This is strange as the hatchlings saw everything as prey. If it moved, bite it. Whomever did this, had to time it exactly right to get the stupid young generation. Clearly intentional with the aim of causing the most damage and get our attention.

Rooi pops in. She reads all my day notes of course. They have learned to ignore her as well. We have been trying to introduce low level tech on a trial basis. That, they are very interested in. We started with weaving the native grasses and bushes. Soon every home had multiple baskets to store materials in. They even worked out you could make bigger or smaller ones as needed.

Rooi had bought minimal materials to begin lessons with clay. Of course. It is her strength. A local stream has great terracotta. It can be fired with a hot wood fire. This should be fun. They are watching us.

# Raptor Eden

<sup>R</sup>You need to leave this alone. Do you believe me now? The last report from Ceph Eden shows we misjudged the Arak. We are TK, high TK. We need to be better.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>What part of they killed everyone in town, including the clueless worthless TKs present did you not get?<sup>R</sup> Clearly has an opinion of them. Though I happen to agree with her assessment of the TKs. Not one survived. What if it had been Di or worse? Actual Terrors?

<sup>R</sup>We need to be better. We live in a time of turmoil. Guano will happen. Bad things will happen. Now we know more. Next time capture and isolate. Killing another sen, even a juvenile one does not help us.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Fine, you deal with them then. I know you wanted another project. You have been so bored lately.<sup>R</sup> Raijin pops her entire Arak collection to me. She sent one to the high TKs to examine, but kept the rest we found alive and put them in stasis. That is what she has handed to me now. I knew they were hidden, but did not question her.

Then she warns me, <sup>R</sup>Isolate them on a remote island. I don't want these escaping and killing again.<sup>R</sup> I affirm. I know just the place and pop out with them.

Those dimwits were not the only TKs on Raptor Eden fortunately. Just the local ones. Plenty more north of Raigin in the main Rap settlements. Not that any want to come here to help. They will let the high TKs, us, to sort it first. They do they have any clue what TKs purpose is? Not sure they are much better than the one we lost. Raijin and Squeak turned out fine once they became TK. A lot of the Raps where clones of Raijin as well. What happened?

I am in a clearing with lots of insect life and small rodents. I make a 'thn metal bubble around myself. A TK shield should be enough. But . . . I release them from stasis and they immediately attack anything that moves. Very hungry when first hatched. According to the Ceph report they will self organize, but this will take some time. Fortunately being an island surrounded by seawater, they will not escape. I put detectors around the island just in case anyway. Most will not survive this initial learning curve.

Back to Raijin. She gets into trouble so quickly. Sigh . . .

Strange. Not here. No one is in town of course. The Pirate Cove Raps are still afraid of the place, even though they have seen Raijin and I go back and forth many times. They still have room in the cove. Once more come from immigration or hatchlings, they will figure it out. The weakest first with nothing to loose, then finally the cowards hoping to gain. Hope they don't go stupid Hu on us and declare this place haunted and danger-

ous.

I do a deep scan. Ah, Ro is finally moving. North of here, with the other TKs. Good. Raijin/Ro will be TK8 soon, far above the other Rap TKs. It is about time they saw her as their leader instead of just useful. Once she mates with a 'thn it will be set. She is a great leader. What she accomplished on Madscar while still mortal was impressive. Most TK leaders could not have done as well. Not by force or gifts either. Few have this ability to lead by personality. Some who do lead others off a cliff for their own egos. Ron and Squeak saw Ronin as she was.

Many wonder why I spend so much time with Ro instead of with other Checkers on Madscar. I am at least a thousand years older, but still have much to learn from her. Checkers are different. They do not seem to need as much direction to work together. I can leave them alone for quite some time without worrying they will get into trouble. Only a DS trip away if I need to get back in a hurry.

I DS closer. Not hard to figure it out. She is on board a ship. Seems to have been her favorite work since she learned to swim. Still docked. I go up to the gang plank.

<sup>R</sup>Permission to come aboard.<sup>R</sup> I wait. A moment later someone behind me taps me on the shoulder. Not many can sneak up on a TK. I turn to see Squeak! She walks me up to the ship's deck where Ro is already hard at work with the others. I see Ron up in the rigging helping sort a sail with several others. Must be a family thing.

<sup>R</sup>Glad you could make it Checker. Everyone on board is TK from this area. Ro is acting Captain and owner of the ship.<sup>R</sup> I did not see that coming.

<sup>R</sup>When, I only left her alone for a short time. Was I gone with the Arak that long?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You were gone nearly a lunar.<sup>R</sup> I am surprised. Really? Squeak shows amusement.

<sup>R</sup>What's the assignment? Where is the ship going?<sup>R</sup>

Ro comes up and bows, <sup>R</sup>Admiral Squeak, welcome aboard.<sup>R</sup>

She turns to me, <sup>R</sup>Our first passenger. Welcome aboard.<sup>R</sup> She then turns and goes back to her duties. That was strange.

*You are to be undercover. She needs eyes she can trust to see what is really going on. The crew will not suspect a small defenseless Checker. And poor. No possessions other than your personal pouch.*

*Got it. Something fun. Wrangling Arak was getting to be boring. A lot of potential with them though.*

*They are settled on Madscar alright? I affirm.*

<sup>R</sup>You will be staying in my cabin as a sort of assistant to pay for your passage. Hope you don't mind.<sup>R</sup>

*Of course not.*

*I have a question. Why does Ro keep coming back to ships? She messed up with the 'pirates' twice, on board and on shore.*

*A ship is relatively simple compared to admin on land. Far fewer sen, limited space, easy to define needs, well ordered line of command.*

*Ah, Checkers do not have this problem. Our nature is to cooperate fully, not hoard, not judge each other, work as a team or alone.*

*And that is why Ro will be paired with a 'thn to make a new one. Only those who know difficulties are paired with a 'thn.*

*In the end you hope this will make her less judgmental and a better leader.*

*See, that was not so hard to understand.*

We go up on deck as the ship leaves the port. Ro is the Captain this time and is on a higher deck supervising. I do a quick scan. TK made ship. Cut corners by duping many parts, even the wood is not 'real' with knot patterns repeating, and so on. It floats and keeps the water out. Good enough I guess. No guns or weapons of any kind. No cargo either, at least not yet.

I stand beside Ro looking confused I guess.

<sup>R</sup>Everyone one here is TK. These Raps were all trained to be Watchers. To observe and record, but not interfere. That can be a liability. They need to learn when it is okay to go beyond the mandate. They should have known the 'pirates' were not bad Raps. They should have told me instead of listening to a few disgruntled Raps who thought others were invading their territory.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We have no territory.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Exactly.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>The Arak are on their own on an isolated island. I have Checker TKs keeping them under surveillance. I am especially curious to see if they follow the same pattern as Ceph Eden.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Any possibility that as young adults they are civilized? Able to be with other sen in a meaningful way?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That is the crux of this experiment. This thousand egg event was rare and only done when they feel they are under an existential threat. Normal clutch sizes are two to three. Much more manageable and the adults take care of them without the need to kill everything they see.

<sup>R</sup>This actually makes sense. The thousand egg, with most destroyed by an enemy, is also likely to destroy that enemy. A good strategy when you think about it.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Scary, but I agree. We were just unlucky.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am on a ship again. Not so unlucky for us, just for those that died.<sup>R</sup> Death happens, even to us eventually.

# Cat Eden

I have to be fair to my team.

<sup>D</sup>Hua, the Warrior at the entrance was a setup. You did great, but he was not actually a Warrior, but one of us, a TK, with the call of Fek. There is another, a true Warrior, but also TK with the call of Talks. He talked too much as a young one.<sup>D</sup>

She is upset, <sup>D</sup>Anything else I should know?<sup>D</sup> The others are watching too.

<sup>D</sup>It was important that you thought it was real. As you have all noticed, we are being watched. Being evaluated. That part was and is real. Over half the Drag who came here are dead. Cats, mainly.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Not to mention we are all smiggles by their definition.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>There is that.<sup>D</sup> I show amusement. Not a smiggle anymore.

<sup>D</sup>Do they recognize you, us?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>I doubt it.<sup>D</sup> Not exactly the same form anymore. Gained weight and strength, not to mention even norm abilities. And I am not alone any more either. I look straight at them. We are never alone as TKs. Very easy to bully someone alone in a room with record books and pens.<sup>D</sup>

Dave comments, <sup>D</sup>Explains why we are taught so many norm skills in many forms. I thought it was just because we are Watchers, not leaders.<sup>D</sup>

Weight wise, Jsyg is the largest of us. I am second, Dave a distant third and poor Hua the lightest, but she is by far the quickest. Having brains in your limbs does indeed help, especially when fighting. She looks Drag, but underneath, definitely not. Even I do not pick a fight with her. Fortunately she is unlikely to be dissected by a norm Drag. They would just eat her.

I look to Jsyg, <sup>D</sup>You have our orders? We have reached the colony it appears.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Ceph and Rap Edens have both been successful in safely isolating Arak and watching them self organize into viable sen colonies. It would appear that the 'Terror' stage, though not related to the Terror in anyway, is a survival strategy.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>When the going gets tough, get nasty.<sup>D</sup> Dave of course, but I like the analogy.

<sup>D</sup>More than that. As young 'nasties' they can consume other life that would normally not be available or acceptable, such as when entering a new territory or unanticipated hardships.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Like us. Great. Question, what got the Arak mother to do this in the first place. What happened on Arak to set it off.<sup>D</sup> Good question Dave.

<sup>D</sup>Add that to the list of questions we need to try and help answer. Right here, right now seems to be different. The Cats have come to an ac-

commodation with the Arak young. They don't bother the Drag, our scales and hide is really too tough to bite through.<sup>D</sup> Except when molting.

<sup>D</sup>Not like the soft squishy Hu or Ceph.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Cats are soft, when you give them a nice massage anyway, so why are they immune?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>They aren't immune. They die, same as the Hu.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>So, there are no Cats left and we can call this Drag Eden now?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Plenty of Cats left. This is the puzzle we need to look into.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Wait, then why didn't we come in as Cats?<sup>D</sup> Dave acts like a Cat.

<sup>D</sup>Cats can die from an Arak bite, even TK Cats, same as Hu.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>Oh yeah, right. Good point. I like being Drag.<sup>D</sup> I really have to wonder about Dave. He out smiggles me even when I was pre-TK.

Fek leads us into the cave. We are shown to a 'test' area for new comers. I would do the same, so not unexpected. Hua shows amusement of course. We have already done a Drag orientation and training. Their job now will be to intimidate us. No one wants to loose their place in the hierarchy.

A very viscous looking warrior comes in, clearly upset with having to do such a menial duty. Lots of battle scars, a couple of Cat claw trophies around her neck. I yawn as though bored. Dave shows amusement. Good way to get swatted Dave. Jsyg weighs in nearly the same as the Warrior. Of course she narrows in on Hua.

<sup>D</sup>I have been warned about you. Don't look like much. Easy to fight outside.<sup>D</sup> She looks around to make her point, <sup>D</sup>Inside is a different level.<sup>D</sup> She grins large like this is going to be easy. The other three of us show amusement. They never learn. We back up to give them room. I will give the warrior some credit. She is being careful. Normally a bully would pretend it will be easy and not care. Big mistake for an unknown adversary. Easy to pick on a smiggle everyone knows already.

<sup>D</sup>If you really want to fight, any of us could take you easy. However, we are trying to learn as much about the Arak as possible. We don't want anyone's place in the cave. Happy to go back outside once we have the information we want.<sup>D</sup> We even brought our own food.<sup>D</sup> She pulls out some Cat meat from her pouch. Good one Hua. She chews on its private parts while looking at her. <sup>D</sup>A bit tough, but it is the challenge that is important.<sup>D</sup>

Another Drag comes in looks at us and the Warrior, <sup>D</sup>Are you really that stupid Ranger? One, they could have you for a snack. Two, they are here to help. Three, they want nothing but information. Call them smiggles if it helps, but they could each still make a meal out of you. Now get lost. He then turns to us, <sup>D</sup>Sorry about that. My call is Walker. I have the information you wanted.<sup>D</sup> He hands us a pouch with a notebook inside and some supplies. Nice gesture. Certainly friendlier.

<sup>D</sup>Better to just see what we have done so far.<sup>D</sup> He leads us further into the cave system. I sense no TK abilities on him. This is all just norms. Granted, Fek and Talks are Watchers and told not to interfere, but they must know of this though? Why didn't they just file the report? Why did we have to come here?

<sup>D</sup>A lot has happened since the rest of us went through the portal the 'thants set up. We have been given a second chance and don't intend to fail this time. This place, and the Cats of course, all forced us to change or die. I have to ask how things are back on our former grounds?<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>My call is Midj. We are the last of the Drag to be gathered and forced through I believe. Any other strangers you encounter should be locals. We are alive. Has not been easy. Should be better from here. The 'thants gave us the task of gathering as much information as possible on the Arak to share with other Drag systems. We already know they have given the Cats some needed play time.<sup>D</sup> Walker shows amusement. He knows.

<sup>D</sup>We have not suffered a single death from the Arak. Quite the opposite. They have been immensely helpful.<sup>D</sup> Helpful. No other sen has called them helpful.

There is light ahead. It is an opening to a large caldera complex exposed to the sky. Smart. Hidden from direct view. Cat don't fly. Lazy, some are TK, but no fliers. Likely only Owa and Sylvy would even care.

Once we enter the clearing we are stopped. Amazing!

*How is this possible?* Hua coms. We all line up to get a good view. Walker to the far right.

Drag and Arak, large Arak, no small ones, are working together. There are stores. Farming, prey herds. Even the beginning of a tech infrastructure.

<sup>D</sup>They grow up fast and are only dangerous when small.<sup>D</sup>

<sup>D</sup>True of most species actually. Young, hungry and stupid.<sup>D</sup> Dave coms. We all show amusement. Certainly applied to each of us.

<sup>D</sup>We keep the newly hatched in an enclosed pen till they grow up enough to join the rest of us. Their knowledge is internal. They do not need to learn most of it. They can adapt, but most is just part of who and what they are. We are having no problems working together either. An ideal pairing. We get the advanced tech we have sought. They get a new safe place to live.<sup>D</sup>

I comment, <sup>D</sup>If you had listened to your smiggles, you could have done the same.<sup>D</sup> He turns to me.

<sup>D</sup>I thought I recognized you Midj. I am so glad to see you made it. Yes, we need our smiggles, as you say. They are the ones who figured out how to work with the Arak. Stupid Warriors are relegated to guard duty and Cat hunting now. Never in here with the rest of us.<sup>D</sup> Amusement.

# Ba Eden

Another term begins. I have First Branch this year. The young ones are so entertaining. Imaginative, creative, lots of energy. By the time they reach Cliff School they are set in their ways, career decided, romances starting. Not to mention cynical and confrontational. Always trying to catch you in a mistake or simply argue with you. No fun any more.

Normally, being Head Mistress, I would be excused, but I like getting into the classroom again. Keeps me feeling alive. Once a new teacher is selected I will have to give them up, but till then, they are all mine! All fifteen of them.

Some are already test gliding off small ladders that are not so high they will break something if they land wrong, but high enough to give them a few meters of glide path. They are so excited running back to the ladder each time to try again.

Others are behind. There are still some nests that over protect their young until we force them to give them up for school. Keeping the parents out is the most difficult aspect of our work. They will catch up fast once they realize they truly are free to learn.

First Branch is on a wide lower branch of a nice Hikop tree. There are nets on either side in case of accidents, usually from lack of attention while teasing each other. Everyone is chirping excitedly. I start them out gently, with a story. The young ones are fascinated by Guardian stories for some reason. It is not until later they learn none of the stories are real, but they learn a lot from the lessons of the experiences of the sen involved. Helps with the prejudice about different kinds of sen life. We cannot afford to return to the bent ears vs straight ears war. Nearly destroyed us. Everyone is a valuable and needed part of our world.

My assistant brings in my new group and settles them down before taking a place at the back of the branch near the trunk himself. I am closer to the tip of the branch and rise to bring the attention to myself.

^I am your teacher for this year. My call is Alessa, like the hero of the Guardian stories, but without all her extra abilities unfortunately.^ That gets some giggles as expected. I then act mysterious and do a magic trick in front of them to get them to question if what I said was true or not. Just a simple slight of hand revealing a few butterflies rising and flying away. I have their attention, which was my intention of course.

Our library has several complete sets of the Guardian series, abridged for different age groups. Too much violence and reproductive issues for the younger ones. Only the university students will see the original set. First Branch will be only light stories with happy endings. They believe every word I com. At least till the third or forth branch at least.

All believe them to be ancient texts of mythology, stories. The younger see tales of adventure and the older see tales of caution that relate to their own lives in our real world. No one knows who wrote them. No one has ever met one of the other sen mentioned. Were they here in times past? No evidence has ever been found, though fossils of creatures that could have been our ancestors and distant relatives have been found.

I like teaching the young ones who are still fascinated and excited. Academics is all fine and good, but gets very dry. I start them with tales of the first Ba Guardians and how they came to be. Much easier for them to relate to than tales of 'thn, 'thants, and the worst, the Cats.

The First Branch are only here for a half day. They tire of class work easily and need to get moving to build up their muscles and coordination. I need to get back to my admin duties as well. Running a school is a full time job. I hope we find a suitable candidate soon to teach the First Branch.

^Time to go Alessa. Can't stay all night. Go out and have some fun for a change.^ I sigh and look sad. He knows I never have 'fun', but of course has no idea what I really do during the night hours. He signs good night, I return the gesture.

Once everyone else is gone and I have put on a good show of sorting leaves around I pop out to a secure location.

The true Guardians have gone underground. Ba are not found of being underground. Add in shielding, confusing maze like paths and DS only ports that only TKs can use. No norm has ever gotten past our cave entrance. Which is fake of course. Throws them off and gives the adventurous types something to brag about.

Everyone comes to attention, ^Commander on Deck!^

^At ease.^ Everyone relaxes and my second, also my assistant at the school comes up to me with the latest CatBox. Keyed to me, I am the only one who can open it. Others gather around as I read the contents. Curiosity is part of our makeup, TK or not.

^This is a surprise, it seems the Drag are further along than anyone else in integrating the Arak. They are working together and making huge advances in tech. The Arak are pretty much hardwired. They do not have schools. Once they reach a certain age, if they survive, they know how to do things.^

^How about adapting to changes? Nothing works for long if you can't adapt.^

^This is where the Drag come in. They work with the Arak, who have calls by the way, to do the adaptations needed. They have already reached tech three and are advancing quickly.^

^Poor kitties!^ Everyone shows amusement. A Cat would gladly chase and eat any Ba they could.

^We are not bringing them here are we?^

^Definitely not! They are where they are because of whomever sent them, sent them to these locations. Not our call. We are pretty sure it was the new regional galactic center forming, but can't be sure. Of course the Thirteen upset a lot of sen who liked things the way they were, with them in control and all enemies under tight control or eliminated.^

^I concur. Too early. This could still all go wrong. We simply do not know enough about the Arak to welcome them in with no restrictions.^

^Drags and kitties are expendable then?^

^No one is expendable. The Thirteen will intervene if necessary.^

^We still have Raptor Eden and New Ceph Eden to watch as well. They have both isolated the Arak and are not directly interacting with them. The Arak in these two locations are adapting quickly to two very different environments, a hot humid one and a dry cold one, respectively. In both cases the Arak are self assembling a tech culture.^

^If I remember from an earlier report, the Arak fem responsible for the spawning, did not send them and wanted her offspring returned if possible.^

^Some have been returned. When explained how many worlds were impacted, she was as clueless as we are as to why or who. Their experience with outside sen was non-existent. They seem open however, especially if we can prevent any further abductions of young.^

^I have a question. Is it true they eat their mates after coitus?^

I sigh, ^They willingly sacrifice themselves. It is considered to be a great honor to be chosen. Not all fem reproduce either. Most mal lead normal productive lives. They are not Ba and should not be judged by our standards.^

^We have certainly made enough mistakes ourselves to never judge another successful sen culture.^ A lot of affirmations.

^This, as well as any other questions and problems, will not be answered any time soon. Get back to your normal duties. I have lessons to prepare until a new First Branch teacher arrives. Unless of course there are any volunteers among those gathered here?^ I wait a respectful moment. Most are looking away hoping not to be drafted.

^What are you going to teach them next?^ Young TK fem Greenleaf of course. She would be a good instructor actually. Always happy and positive.

^We can go over it together if you want to get a taste. I thought I would start with some ancient history and tell them the stories about Lessa and Pok.^

^I loved those two when I was growing up. Please include me!^ Got you!

# New Regional Galactic Center

*We are approaching the singularity point. Time to call in the Buddy replacements and make this actually happen.*

*They are ready to go. Three of the Ku helpers and Pilot with the package will arrive when we need them. They are in high dimension space out of sight, waiting for our signal.*

*The three Ku can come in now for orientation. This has to be flawless to be believable. They will need training.*

*They have continued their studies while on CoTo Farout. They are all now TK7s.*

*That will help. If they were still threes it would take too long.*

*Where are we?*

*6^5 currently. Once more level and we are done. The initiates are being trained and are nearing readiness.*

*That is a lot of sen. How many will be left who are not part of this endeavor?*

*That would be none. Some even called in others from their home worlds to help out. Even the help have been drafted. They see it as an honor to finally be part of something other than cleanup.*

*And the 'thn?*

*They are so absorbed with their own advancement that they have been ignoring the fluidics at the center.*

*And history is repeating itself.*

*We are good at that trick too. Best not to get overconfident.*

*True. I need to get in my robes for today's ceremony. See to the Ku please.*

*Affirmative. I pause. They have just arrived in our quarters. Rand and Drup, in Tafa form, came with them and will help them get ready. They will also be our watchers from the outside.*

*Ha, no one suspects those two.*

*I show amusement too. The lesson is to never overlook anyone.*

*Everyone here is so absorbed in trying to be the perfect Ta'aha. An ideal that can never be realized of course. Too much chaos inherent in the fluidic makeup. A crystal breaks when pressure is applied, as we say.*

# New Crust Eden

<sup>th</sup>We may not be on Magenta, but you could have fooled me Drup.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>How did they even find this place Rand? Literally in the middle of nowhere.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>To be fair, it is not the Magenta color I was expecting though. Too much orange to be that. How did it end up orange? Edwin is going to want to know about this place.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Look, it even has Arak!<sup>th</sup> All different sizes are running about building things and generally making a mess.

*It was not me! True, I did not like being used so much to supply the new worlds with Crust lifeforms to fill in their ecologies, but I told no one and the annoying Arak you say? Those are not my doing either.*

<sup>th</sup>Snap! It is your old buddies, Rand and Drup. We are happy to find you and see you again!<sup>th</sup> We go up to him and slap his carapace.

*I know it is you. No way you two could ever hide from me remember. A thousand years on boring Magenta together was enough.*

<sup>th</sup>The good old days. When we had no responsibilities. No one asked us for anything. We just lay in the sun and drank pink Mai Ti's<sup>th</sup>

Snap shows amusement, not easy for a Crust.

*What are you doing in 'thant form? Joined the exo side?*

I sigh, but Drup answers, <sup>th</sup>We were drafted by Edwin after we, ah, messed up a couple of assignments.<sup>th</sup>

Snap shows amusement. Good to see him laugh.

<sup>th</sup>We have finally found our calling though. Very happy as 'thants. Have hardly messed up anything since. Well, just a little bit, especially at the beginning. I see you got some Arak to play with.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You received the CatBox about them? We know where they came from, but not who sent them or why.<sup>th</sup>

*They only got sent to new made worlds. All at once, in their most dangerous form. Very similar to the Terror at that stage. What the Tafa turned into when annoyed. You know who sent them. Now go get them! And leave me alone.* He pops out a few hundred kilometers away to a nice sunny shallow pool at the edge of the sea. Lots of little ones rush to surround him. Family. Gotta love it.

<sup>th</sup>One more item to check off our list Drup. Time to go. I am sure they have found some more dirty work to do.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Only so we stay out of trouble Rand.<sup>th</sup> A pause. <sup>th</sup>They do it with love!<sup>th</sup>

I hit him on top of his head and we pop out.

# Ku Eden

So much has changed. Has it been that long? I was trained as a Watcher before my tour of duty on the Enterprise. Those skills serve me now as I try to blend into the background on my home world. Here I appear as a poor old birdie who has sampled too much fermented seed paste. Both would cause me to stagger a bit. I extend out my wings and legs to help steady myself at intervals.

+Come with me honored one and I will lead you to a warm perch and a good meal.+ I turn to see a Birdie of Mercy missionary. I am not in the best part of this settlement and it should not be a surprise they are here of course. I acknowledge and follow him. I am led a circuitous route through an abundance of poorly maintained clutches and businesses. I don't believe this route is intended to hide where we are going so much as the most efficient path though the mess. Pilot would be aghast at the lack of discipline and order. Very different on board a starship. I am home!

Inside the mission there are a scattering of others present. I am instructed to sit on a perch and food is immediately brought to me. Not too bad. The cooks tried on the Enterprise, but except when it was the Ku rotation they never got it quite right. Hard to believe I would miss such simple food so much. Don't get me squawking about the 'food' on CoTu. Very bland. Might have been nutritious, but very boring. Mostly just used TK to maintain my form. Whoa! They included hot peppers! I miss those so much! The burn makes you feel alive!

+Can't say I have seen anyone enjoy our meager offerings so much.+

+I have been traveling. Finally home.+

+Not that much variation anywhere near here. You must have traveled some distance.+ I affirm as I finish my bowl.

That done I am expected to rest, but TKs don't need to. Instead I inquire, +Would it be possible to meet with Flor, at her convenience of course.+ Did I break my server? He is frozen in place.

Finally, +You are very good. Had me totally fooled. Yes, I will inform her you are here. What is your call may I ask?+

+It has been some time. I doubt she will remember me. Just tell her I am one of four who was tasked with informing her about the others. She will know what that means.+ Still not sure, he bows and leaves. I pretend to sleep on this nice wood perch. Feels so good against my feet. With my eyes closed I follow the assistant's progress and soon learn where Flor is currently. I make a disturbance on the other side of the room, which everyone instinctively turns to look at, and pop out.

I enter the receiving area for Flor's office complex. Appears to be a

sort of TK central, for this region of Ba Eden at least. There are some leaves to read to pass the time. I helper comes in and offers water and a bowl of roasted grubs. They know I am here. Not a surprise. But having come in unannounced from across the multiverse I can't expect immediate attention either. The dark side to admin is constant meetings. I will admit that CoTu had that down perfectly. With them you never actually left a meeting. Continuous.

I had not seen Flor in a long time. Not since I was a young chick just beginning my training here. When she enters to get me I am taken back by her looks. She has really aged! She must have noticed my concern and immediately becomes younger.

+I purposely age myself so as not to upset the norm regulars. We will move the entire complex soon enough and start over in another location on Ku.+

She looks me over, +Not that you look young either. Watcher training I assume.+ I affirm. She shows amusement.

+You are not here because of the Watchers though.+ I affirm again. Is this going to be a guessing game? We both pop out to a more remote and private location. Not even her own high TKs would be able to find us quickly now. Two froths over and half a world. Remote island even. She is being careful. What no new bodies?

She looks concerned at that thought. She is TK13. Nothing gets past her.

+The others are okay?+ I affirm.

+They are in place.+ Not a question. No mention of where either. Being careful herself.

+Are you ready for your next assignment.+ I affirm.

+This is more a courtesy stop. Scratching off the scabs as it were.+ She affirms and shows amusement.

+Best be on with it then.+ She pops out and leaves me here.

I will not like this next part, but was chosen from the four to be the best candidate. Better than being CoTu any longer I guess.

I pop to high orbit. There is a starship waiting. What a piece of junk! I show amusement. Perfect. Absolutely perfect. I pop on board where Pilot greets me in CoTu form. I morph to my new form for this assignment. I am in an open cargo bay and go through exercises to get used to the new form before adding the accessories I will be needing. Pilot offers advice and encouragement, testing me on protocols and procedures.

# Raptor Eden

<sup>R</sup>There have been no deaths on any of the other new worlds affected by the Arak infestation.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>See, you are still doing it. It is not an infestation, it is an opportunity.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That killed the entire TK center I was supposed to be overseeing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I think it was more their fault than yours. Who trained them to be so clueless to their surroundings? That was totally embarrassing to all TKs everywhere.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am not at all convinced that Watchers was a good direction.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Seems to have been a reaction or over reaction to those who hated us for being different than the traditional TK/'thn pairing.

<sup>R</sup>It worked for billions of years, froths and incarnations. Why mess with a good thing right?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Never mind The Question. Oh yeah, the point of all this. Unimportant really. NOT!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Starting to sound like a Hu there Ro. We are here. Try not to kill any locals, especially the Arak please.<sup>R</sup> Ro does not look happy about that, but that was the reason for this discussion, to try and get her mind off revenge and seeing the Arak as the enemy.

We walk the rest of the way to the settlement. Checkers and Arak are fully integrated here. After the reports came in about how the Ceph and Drag had been working with the Arak instead of isolating and exterminating them, we decided to follow their lead and see what happens here.

It went really well. I told the Checkers, most of whom are not TK, to play along and see where it leads. The Arak are hardwired with a lot of abilities, but are also amazingly flexible about adapting to local life forms and learning new ideas. Almost the ideal sen when you think about it. Born educated, no long years of training and mistakes. But, as is usually the case with this type of sen, not very imaginative or creative. That is where the Checkers came in. They are highly imaginative and creative. Together there is nothing preventing them from success.

<sup>R</sup>Put your tongue back in your mouth Ro. You are embarrassing me.<sup>R</sup> Teasing her of course, but not far off. I am impressed too.

<sup>R</sup>How soon can they integrate with Raptor Eden proper? We know they can reproduce quickly if necessary.<sup>R</sup> Gets it in one. Good for you Ro!

<sup>R</sup>Not the best way. Slow and careful works better for them as well. The 'plague' form is only used under severe stress conditions when the survival of the sen is at stake. Which makes one wonder what set them off to start this entire story.<sup>R</sup> She read the reports. What is going on?

# New Ceph Eden

We are sitting on a small rise overlooking the Arak settlement. They have done quite well for themselves. We did not interfere. They don't like seawater and we don't like the dry land environments they seem to prefer. Win-win as the Hu com.

Their buildings are strange, even by standards of all the sen I have visited. Arak was a good name. They build tall structures, then hand lines back and forth among them, with their ball like 'homes' dangling from these lines. A long way down if it falls, but like the Arak themselves, their homes are lightweight and likely would bounce to a soft landing. Ceph do not bounce. At all.

They also build mud huts on the ground itself. These they use to store supplies, and their 'factories' for metal and ceramic working. The heavy stuff or dangerous stuff they would not want in a home. Quite industrious. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is made that cannot be recycled or reused. Mud is really the wrong term. They start with a sort of mud and saliva construct, but it hardens like brick after sitting in the sun. We could learn a few things from them.

As they are born with knowledge, they only need practice to finish the task of hardening the skills they use. Other sen worlds have noticed the Arak can learn new skills, especially if interacting with the resident sen. We are not sure yet if they retain these skills and knowledge to the next gen if removed from the new sen stimulus.

~You win Liss, let's get in there and teach them some ceramic skills. Weaving would be good too, though I suspect that will be very easy for them and they are likely to teach us much in that regards. Those cables they made look very strong.~ She affirms happily and we put on our shoes to descend into their area.

The weird thing is they pay no attention to two strange creatures moving among them. Most sen would freak out and panic. I am sure it would be a different story if we harmed anything or anyone. I am beginning to like them more and more.

What is their story though? Where did they come from? Who brought them to this state? Just their own OM and natural events?

There is no mistaking their similarity to the Tafa and others of that line. That scares me. Are the anal perfectionists as well? Are we on the path to be sent to Farout? Is that why our world was targeted?

# Arak

The Arak themselves are just beginning to explore space flight. We arrive in a vessel they have never seen before. On any of the Earth Froth worlds this would have set off panic. Here, they look us over, adapt a port to fit ours and we are in in less than an arm. Impressive. No paperwork, no meetings, no arguments, they just do it.

What they did not expect was me. In Arak form, fancy robes and jewelry, a staff of course and the book of Ta'aha, written in Tafa, a language they do not know and will not be able to read. Pilot remains with the ship and they do not see him, for the moment at least. The Arak may not be that curious, but the ship is far beyond any of their tech. Sooner or later, someone will try to get in, take something off of it, or even drill into it.

In the mean time, I am here to spread the Holy Gospel of the Ta'aha. Doing my small part as an unworthy servant to bring perfection to the Arak. I grab low ranking Arak at random and order them to follow me. quickly I have my core seven and can begin services. What is universal is the effect of my special effects on the locals when I make our temple. We have sensed no outward TK abilities. The temple arises as I pass my staff over the chosen location and mutter meaningless Arak sounds that have absolutely nothing to do with what is happening. Almost too easy. Would likely have worked on my home world as well unfortunately.

I quickly get my recruits trained on the minimum necessary to make a service look believable. They even manage the meaningless sounds after a few attempts, with subtle whacks on their thoraxes for failures. The rest of the day we gather and distribute free food and other necessities. There is only a minimum hierarchy, but it still exists. If you are not useful then you are afforded lower quality food and lodgings. We can offer the best, with the only condition being they attend services, which they cannot understand. I implant subliminal directives using TP that they are not even aware of.

Yes, what I am doing with the Arak scares the feathers off me. Good thing Arak do not have feathers.

I have to wonder if the real reason I was the one chosen of the four of us was because I was willing to assume this task. I am just here to light the fuse. Others will take this game to the end point.

# Cat Eden

*The Drag waste a lot of time playing with the spiders. Just swat them a few times, crunch, game over. Even the kits figure that one out.*

*Besides, the stupid monkeys went the tech route and look where it got them. Nearly gone extinct. They would be if we were still on Earth. Our home world. Should still be ours. This place is boring.*

*I will miss the Drag, they taste good at least. Better than monkeys anyway.*

*And they offer some fight. Monkeys were too easy. No challenge even for the kits. Glad we came here.*

*Arak are fun to chase though. We need to pop a few back from their hidden compound the Drag think we know nothing about.*

*We could start farming them I suppose.*

*Sylvy looks at me like I have gone mad.*

*Yeah, too much work. Time for a nap.*

*You have two kits coming for lunch Owa.*

*Happy to serve. Have to wean them soon though. Don't like spoiled Cats. Owa yawns and lays down for the kits to feed. She is asleep in a moment. I lay back too. My kits are weaned, but that does not stop Owa's from trying to get milk from me. A gentle swat convinces them that was not a good choice.*

*Life is hard. So much thinking to do. Have to be careful we do not start to act like the stupid monkeys.*

# Arak

The Arak are very curious about the ship, but it is being well guarded by Pilot. There have been several attempts of course. 'thn metal is hard to get through if you are not TK or a 'thant. Technically 'thants have TK, but you know what I mean. I never visit the ship by using the portal and Pilot never leaves via the portal. We meet in various places, more to be seen to incite curiosity and wonder. Not sure the Arak are capable of wonder, but we try. They did like the temple building trick, but like most sen, they just want to be able to do it themselves.

My first seven are now TK2 and can do small things. I have informed them it takes a very long time to advance, but this is the taste to keep them interested. Not so low on the cast scale anymore either.

We are gathering many others, but these we put to work with the food giveaways and minor teachings. The teachings are the usual 'path to perfection' songs of the Ta'aha. Seems to be a weakness for most sen, but especially for any sen where curiosity and imagination are already low in worth. Easy to punish anyone who asks why.

I am due to meet Pilot and rush to hide from the others before popping out. The fact that I can disappear at will only adds to the mystery. No one has actually seen this happen.

We met on a mountain top. Lots of snow and ice. Arak go into a torpor if it gets too cold and would never willingly come up here. I do a scan anyway to insure we are alone. Pilot pops in.

I inform him, *We are nearly ready.*

*Take your time. No rush yet. I have been studying their history. Not much is written, but studying their ancestors through careful sequence analysis has proven useful.*

*They are related to the other Tafa lines.*

*Yep. Very clear, no doubt.*

*That is a relief in a way. I was not really deceiving them then.*

*Nope. How they got away from it is interesting too.*

*You mean the Cult of Perfection is actually a dead end?* I show amusement.

*Got it in one. They nearly all died and their culture stopped dead. What we see now are a remnant that are making a slow comeback. They will not be so stupid this time. They will drop it as soon as it starts to work against them. In that you are right, we need to leave with the core seven plus you before this happens.*

*They kept to the good parts though. They are not destroying their ecology and world. That part of the cult was good, is good.* Pilot affirms.

# New Edwin Land

They did try and send Arak here as well. Rand and Drup, on assignment to get them away for a bit, found them. Surrounded by seawater, nothing to eat and very hot unless you are underground. Surprisingly none appeared in any of our tunnels. They might have survived a few arms if they had. Can't eat lichens and can't bite a 'thn metal exo though. Bottom line, they were all dead upon hatching. Nothing even to send back to Arak as per our agreement.

I make my way to the surface. Not necessary, but it is nice to see the sun once in awhile. I am early, so I find some nice lichens to munch on. Mostly to distract me from this assignment. Definitely afraid of what I might find. But, I have to know. I have to find out.

Cat, Puu and Myra appear in Meep form. Not getting out of it now. I think of my early days in the high desert in my van, hunting new species of lichens. Peace and quiet I have never experienced since. Funny how so many Hu fantasized about being the 'boss' and now that I am, it sucks. If I was not high TK, I would never have survived. Of course I would never have lived this long either, even as a Pear, as the early TKs called us. If the other professors could see me now.

*I am ready.* They are driving because where we are going is hellishly difficult to get to. For good reason, but I would not want to find it on my own, even with all the permissions I needed to get. You would think being one of the thirteen would be enough, but even 'thants try and hide things from us.

Meep space is still confusing for me. I do not spend enough time in it to get used to it. Thirteen dimensions are needed to find the archive and I only trust these three to find it.

We 'land' in an open space outside the underground complex. Cat, Puu and Myra change to 'thant form. As I said, they don't trust higher sen forms and Meeps would definitely scare them into shutting down. All three look like worker 'thants here to assist me. Nothing threatening at all.

*Still a few clicks out from the actual entrance. Shall we run to get the kinks out?* Cat of course.

<sup>th</sup>Speak 'thant Cat, they will get suspicious otherwise.<sup>th</sup> Puu.

<sup>th</sup>There are dialects of 'thant, which one do you want to us?<sup>th</sup> Myra of course.

The gang is back together. Feels good to see all of them again.

*We would not be here if we were not high TK as well. Relax. The worst they can do it send us to Control.*

*I still don't like the pain part of that plan.* Cat

*We run!* Cat is right, it does feel good. I spend too much time underground.

All of this goes into the 'thant journals as well as my own. Why am I here? Because as more reports come in about the Arak being put on all our 'new' worlds cannot be a coincidence. I am hoping the archives will offer some clues.

The reports coming in from our sen at the New Regional Galactic Center seem to indicate an extreme susceptibility to our once past conflicts with the Cults of Perfection. The cults that sent some of our member to Farout locations and condemned entire sen cultures to a barbaric existence on other Farout worlds. Then of course coring worlds was a more direct blow to our Federation. We did not retaliate by coring any of their worlds, though it would have been easy. We did not fit their TKs with limiters. We prevented them temporarily from meeting in large groups at the Regional Galactic Center. We knew this would be temporary, a cooling off period. We did reduce their super 'thn to a more limited role. We did not kill them or anyone else.

Lastly we went into a sort of Watcher mode to assess our own place in the froth multiverse. To decide if we were also partly to blame for inciting this response from them. It is unfortunately common for victims to blame themselves for what a bully does to them. I believe this was the case here. Yes, we were curious and sought out new worlds to learn from and share with if they wished. We never set out to control or attack any other sen world or people. Mistakes, of course, we are sen. Sen make mistakes, but our intentions were good.

As soon as we started teaching our new TKs to be Watchers and retrained many of our higher TKs to follow this path as well as try to set up their sen again on new worlds, we were attacked. The Arak had the potential of doing great harm. Deadly and breed fast in their killer mode. Though only Raptor Eden suffered any measurable casualties, if they had not all been taught to be Watchers, this would not have happened. Watcher ethic, while good intention-ed, left us vulnerable. Poor Raijin was so confused she did not know what to do and in her shame now called herself Ro and spends more time on sailing ships than on land (Arak cannot transverse seawater). This is a waste of a great up and coming TK. It was not her fault. The rest of us have to take our share of the blame for this catastrophe.

<sup>th</sup>Wake up Edwin. They need your com to let us in. <sup>th</sup> Huh? Ah, we are here. I am thousands of years old now. Maybe it is time to retire and let someone else take on these impossible tasks.

I relay the code I was given after receiving permission to come here. They open the 'thn doors and let the four of us in. Largely ceremonial, as a simple DS jump could have gotten us in, and likely set off a shit storm

as Owl would say.

<sup>th</sup>We have set up a study and housing area for you to use while here.<sup>th</sup>  
We follow the worker. Strange accent. Not unexpected. Not the simple silver gray color of the rest of my colony and the four of us either. Are all the librarians patterned this way? Makes sense to help ID each other. Ah, we are field ‘thants. We work on the front lines so to com. We need to be able to blend into our surroundings and remain hidden to do our work. Not so here. Everyone here is a ‘thant, at least outwardly.

<sup>th</sup>Please wait here.<sup>th</sup> The worker leaves us in an open space, enough to hold a hundred worker ‘thants. Feels very empty to me. Is this our workspace?

Another worker of higher rank enters. Looks us over.

<sup>th</sup>Not what I expected. Please present your credentials.<sup>th</sup> The ladies show amusement. I hand over my quantum chip signifying who we are, where we are from, an a vague outline of purpose.

<sup>th</sup>This section was not filled in properly. You will have to return to your colony until this is done.<sup>th</sup> He turns to leave. I prevent him. He struggles. He then turns to face me again. <sup>th</sup>Retraining me is a capital offense. I will call the guards.<sup>th</sup> He taps some sort of device. I have blocked it and made it non-functional. I pop all of use to very high orbit. He will live, but decidedly uncomfortable.

*Apparently the request was not made clear. We are on a priority one mission with the highest possible clearance. We are not here to play games of power. With a thought, this entire world could be cored and destroyed. Our patience is running out. I don't normally get this angry over functionaries. But I was factual about our level of clearance.*

*We had to be certain. The information you requested is unusual and well, embarrassing to the ‘thants as well.* That is a big clue right there. I bring us back to the room we were in. He looks at me of course and then looks at the other three.

<sup>th</sup>They are not what they appear to be either. Only assumed this inferior form out of respect. They would be most happen to assume their true form if this offends you.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Ah, what is their true form?<sup>th</sup> I can barely hear him. More TP than actual speech.

*MEEPS* they all TP at once. He faints.

<sup>th</sup>Never seen a ‘thant do that before.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Thank you. Made my day as the Hu com.<sup>th</sup> They show amusement.

Others come rushing in, not to coral us, but to help. Soon they are running down tunnels in every direction to retrieve the information. ‘thant records are always physical, written on thin ‘thn metal sheets at the atomic level. Would take a supernova to destroy them. Which is the idea. Even coring this world would just scatter them, not likely destroy all of

them. Granted, it would have taken thousands of solars to retrieve and sort them.

<sup>th</sup>That is certainly better,<sup>th</sup> Myra comments. I affirm.

<sup>th</sup>I don't know, the quality of lichen snacks is not that great.<sup>th</sup> Everyone stops suddenly and stares at Puu. <sup>th</sup>Just kidding. Relax, no one gets cored today.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>They did not hear that part Puu.<sup>th</sup>

*Sorry.* I show amusement though. Everyone is awake and cooperating. I am even more fearful of the answers I hope to learn. The Big Question, is, is it really the truth, or as many, many sen leaders have done, their version of the truth that makes them look good and puts the blame on someone else.

Three 'thants come in carrying a large box. They carefully open it and remove a succession of smaller boxes. There is one box left. They leave and we are the only ones remaining. All the doors to the room seal shut and the air is replaced with argon. We can hold our breaths indefinitely. If we couldn't it would only be proof we should not have been allowed access. Makes sense you would not allow low TKs access to this material.

<sup>th</sup>Shit Edwin, they have evacuated this entire section of the library.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I noticed.<sup>th</sup> I slowly bring the box up to our table and open it. There is a single small sheet of 'thn metal paper inside. I pick it up and place it on the table, removing the box.

We all read it carefully several times so there is no misunderstanding.

I expel air, which of course sounds diferent in argon. Glad it was not helium.

Myra comments, <sup>th</sup>That explains a lot.<sup>th</sup>

Puu, <sup>th</sup>Doesn't it though.<sup>th</sup>

Cat, <sup>th</sup>Can't say I saw that one coming.<sup>th</sup>

I sigh, <sup>th</sup>Unfortunately, it was what I was expecting. It all makes sense now. And very upsetting. Has my entire time thus far been a mistake?<sup>th</sup>

Myra, <sup>th</sup>No other 'thant would have even thought to question their existence. You are the first in a very long time. That sheet of paper has likely existed since Control itself was built.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Yeah, I got that too.<sup>th</sup>

*We need to hold a meeting to figure out what to do now.*

*The fifteen at least.* I affirm. It changes everything. I hope.

What a mess and it is starting to make sense.

# New Regional Galactic Center

The last Ta'aha service was wonderful. The entire Center is now joined in. I feel we are getting closer and closer to perfection, to one harmonious whole. There have been no fights, no dark com, everything is peaceful. Granted, this is the reason we restarted the Center, but I never thought it could get this far so quickly. It must have been meant to be.

***ATTENTION! UNAUTHORIZED VESSEL APPROACHING!***

Two others come up to me and we go together to our stations. How the freep did they every find us? We are not even in normal space. How can a ship even navigate here? DS is the usual means. The docking ports are a leftover from the old design and we were moving too quickly to adjust. They should not even be available.

A 'thn is already outside the suspect ship. It will not get away. What a wreck! It has to be thousand of cycles old. Looks like it will fall apart even before it can dock. We run to meet it anyway. Who are they? I thought we did a very thorough job of accounting for all sen who were in agreement with our purpose. Did we miss one?

*No armament noted.* It can barely move, much less attack us. They will likely need our help. Certainly not a threat. I motion for Veks to accompany me to the portal they will come through once docking is complete. If they can even dock.

*Only two lifeforms accounted for.*

Does not rule out stasis or solidics. The Enemy was good at making those. Evil things. No offense to the 'thn. They are different.

*Here we go, the portal is opening.*

*And we are the expendables.* Veks notes. I affirm grimly.

*Only one life form inside the dock. It is huge.* Going to have a hard time traversing our poor little station.

*Guano, an ARAK! How the imperfect did that thing get here? They could barely throw something into orbit the last brief I saw. Going trans-dimensional is WAY beyond them.*

*Thanking us for all the new worlds we found for them?* Veks guesses. I show amusement. That was a good idea.

*Veks, it is in full Priest regalia.* I immediately show respect by dropping to the floor and assuming the position. The Arak gives me a gentle tap to affirm I did well. Veks sees this and drops too. The Arak gives Veks a harder blow to punish for Veks' tardiness.

Seven smaller Arak detach from the underside of the Priest. Scanners did not see those. They assume the perfect array. Why eight, we only do arrays of six?

*Move aside for the High Priest of the RGC!* We jump up and move to

the edge of the room, then get back down on the floor. High Priest Tewk comes in with five attendants. A six array. Most here are high TK, so it is not a surprise our High Priest would be watching.

The two priest greet each other formally, no blows exchanged, then turn to us. They know each other?

I motion to Veks we need to leave. We bow again and back out of the room.

*That was very strange. I affirm.*

I did not know there were Arak priests? There are no Arak here. That means they do not have a 'thn in alignment with our mission.

*Need to know only. How is this going to change our own mission?*

*The last report I saw com'd that the Arak experiment was a failure. The evil ones have taken them in and are integrating them into their cultures.*

*How can that be? They did send the correct Arak eggs didn't they?*

*As far as I know they did. Nasty things. I shake an appendage.*

I did not know there were any Priests of Perfection among the Arak either. We are on the bottom level and I should just accept that we would not be told everything. Still, the whole idea of the Perfection is there are no longer secrets because we are all in Perfect Agreement.

Veks is smart and signals that quarters be prepared for the Arak Oct. I should have thought of it. At least it has been done. We wait outside in case they need us. Ready to serve.

*Please welcome the Arak Oct to our humble abode. They will be joining us for services. The Arak Perfection were thought to have been lost, but now they are found! Let us all rejoice that one of the original Perfections has survived the cleansing.*

Veks and I both raise an appendage and affirm our support. No Perfections had survived on my home world. I felt so alone. I only reluctantly agreed to come to the NRG in hopes to meet others like me. When High Priest Tewk arrived and offered to start training again, my soul soured to the highest level with excitement and joy.

With the arrival of the Arak Priest it feels like we really are going to make it. From the remnants a new stronger Perfection will arise. Stronger, wiser, more Perfect. This time we will not fail and imperfection will finally be purged from the multiverse!

I go to my quiet space and offer life sap in thanks for such a momentous sign of Perfection!

# Bug Eden

\*Halt! Identify yourselves!\*

\*He wants to see our IDs dear.\*

\*Badges, we don't need not stinken badges!\*

\*You have waited a long time to use that phrase.\*

\*Yes, and it felt so good.\*

\*You have confused our guard. They don't use badges.\*

We pop out rather than deal with it any further. I am sure that confused the guard even more.

Difficult to find an area that is not populated. Their 'day' is nearly the same now as Earth Froth. Not much tilt, so no seasons to speak of. Different variants have separated on latitude and landscape. Some like it near water, others high up on a mountain, though those are not very high on Bug yet. Some old fashioned ones still live underground in long tunnels, only coming out to harvest crops. These tend to run north-south to maximize variety in what they can grow.

Edwin pops in, facing the wrong direction, and still in 'thant form.

\*This can't be good.\* I com.

\*You sort of stand out in 'thant form Edwin.\*

<sup>th</sup>There are no Bugs within hundreds of clicks. Relax. This won't take long. I got into the 'thant Archive. The Deep Archive. The Meeps in 'thant form were with me.<sup>th</sup> He means, Cat, Puu and Myra I assume.

After he leaves we com.

\*That explains a lot. We kept looking for a connection between all the Cult of Perfection groups. Edwin's research says there is not one till after their end in this incarnation. Did we really set it up this way?\*

\*Means we can relax a bit. If there are more Cult members, it means more are needed later.\*

\*So it would seem. Care to run?\*

\*Of course, always.\*

\*The Cult of Perfection is not a species, or a contagion as such. It is an idea. An idea that The Question uses to its advantage. Interesting.\*

\*Think of it as recycling. Now move it Bug Butt!\*

Feels good to be running again.

# Raptor Eden

<sup>R</sup>The spiders are good workers, hard workers, but they really do not like change. You have to explain it all to them in minute detail. They need to buy in to the change, hold meetings about the change, sleep on the change, before anything can change. The whole world could come to an end before they change.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You are just sore because once they do come in, they improve it, do it better, faster, longer lasting.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Humph, yeah, you're right. Just not the way it used to be.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Now who is being stubborn. Rather work with them than be running from them.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>True. And together we are better. Our homes are better, our working conditions are better, everyone is equal and gets their share. Beginning to feel like paradise to me.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Wonder what they taste like?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That's crazy talk. You can get kicked out a paradise too you know.<sup>R</sup>

I like to listen in to the small talk of the other Raps. It takes time to accept change. At least for Raps. Now us Checkers caught on very quickly that working together with another sen was better than doing everything yourself. We each have strengths and weaknesses. Together we can do great things. Someday, we may even reach the stars.

I know, I grew up on those silly tales of Ron and Squeak and all the others. Still it would be wonderful to see what's out there.

<sup>R</sup>Checker Debt, you are wanted in the main office.<sup>R</sup> Guano, what did I do now? I get my pouch together, finish my meal, and hustle the three blocks up to the town hall. It is at the top of a small hill, but I like running uphill for some reason. At the top I pause to overlook the harbor. There must be hundreds of ships, of all sizes, shapes and kinds. If I can't reach the stars, maybe I could get a position on a large ship, see the world.

The hall entrance is open. I go inside. Much cooler inside of course. The Arak are good at designing buildings that self cool. I check in at the entrance desk, give my name and ask where I am supposed to go.

☺;You are Checker Debt?;☺The attractive receptionist asks. Bet he gets a lot of offers from the Arak fem. I will never attract a Checker fem I am afraid. Mind is always somewhere else. Oh, I get my work done, and done well, but I get distracted too easily. Head in the clouds syndrome I am afraid. I am given a piece of wood with the room number on it. I will turn it in afterwards so I can be reused.

☺;Good luck Checker Debt;☺Huh? Why would I need luck? I am sure I am being 'talked' to again for messing something up. I affirm and leave the desk.

I consult the layout diagram. That is a strange place to have an office. I memorize the map and proceed. Still takes a bit of time to find the door. Not even sure what the door is made of. Looks very interesting though. I pull out a small mag and take a closer look, when of course it opens. I am caught with mag in claw and an open mouth.

<sup>R</sup>Sorry. Just curious. What is this door made from please?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You are the first one to ever ask. There are no other doors like this and you are the only one. Interesting. Please come in. Be comfortable. There are snacks and water on the table there.<sup>R</sup>

The snacks look way better than anything I have ever seen, much less eaten, but the room itself is far too interesting. I ignore the snacks. There are images on the walls of famous Checkers and Raps. Of course most are drawings. We only recently developed a means of recording images on plates. I am curious about how to do that as well.

<sup>R</sup>Wait, where was this image made?<sup>R</sup> I look at it more closely.

<sup>R</sup>That is impossible.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Why is it impossible Checker Debt?<sup>R</sup> I do not even react. The image still has me enthralled.

They are patient, but I finally answer, <sup>R</sup>The angle is all wrong. The only way this image could have been recorded was from a height we are not capable of. What was used? A hot air balloon with a timed auto recorder? Or, an experimental flying machine maybe?<sup>R</sup>

Unawares to me, another Checker has entered the room.

One coms the other, <sup>R</sup>This interview is over, you may proceed.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Wait? What interview? Why am I here? I'm sorry, but I get distracted easily by anything new. Could you teach me how to make images like this one?<sup>R</sup> I am pointing at the aerial view. It could only have been made from a flying device of some kind.

<sup>R</sup>Congratulation or condolences, depending on your point of view. You have been accepted to a very special school. Do you need anything from your residence?<sup>R</sup> I nod negative and point to my pouch. <sup>R</sup>I follow the ideal of Ronin, travel light and be prepared.<sup>R</sup> No sword of course. Not allowed.

<sup>R</sup>Will we get swords like Ronin?<sup>R</sup> I can always hope.

<sup>R</sup>Will not be needed, believe us.<sup>R</sup> They both show amusement.

<sup>R</sup>Got it in one. Normally takes days to vet a new one. A real find.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Question Checker Debt, are there any more like you?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You mean strange, distracted, curious, that kind of thing?<sup>R</sup> I am thinking of an Arak friend that sort of fits.

<sup>R</sup>Excellent. Bring the Arak in as well. This is a great day.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Two for one.<sup>R</sup>

My Arak friend is suddenly in the room with us. She sees me and comes up to me, obviously scared too. I shrug. We stay close. Very close.

☺Where are we? Who are they? Why are we here?;

☺Hope they don't split us up? I don't even know if we are in trouble or this is an opportunity.;

<sup>R</sup>Wait, you com Arak too?<sup>R</sup>

I affirm: I am with them all day, it would be rude not to.;

☺Indeed. This keeps getting better. I want them on the fast track.;

Both Arak \*#& and I respond at the same time: To where? That is one very happy Checker.

It is obvious they also com Arak. Never seen another Checker do so.

I always thought it was laziness. Not that bad once you get past the insanely complex grammar. Most Checkers just use a hand com that is so crude it would be better to just point and yell. Some of them do that too.

\*#& and I look at each other: Has to be better than where we were right?;

We are given an address to get to. We drop off the room stick at reception.

<sup>R</sup>Excuse me, when did the Arak get here?<sup>R</sup> The receptionist asks.

<sup>R</sup>What Arak,<sup>R</sup> I com as we leave the building.

☺You enjoyed that.;

☺Yes, I did. Guess we are partners now, where ever we are going.;

☺An adventure! Indeed.

Wait, this address is not even in our town.

\*#& looks at it: An adventure indeed. Maybe they will know how to get there at the harbor.;

: I thought you were afraid of the harbor, seawater and all.;

: I suspect we are still being tested. Another puzzle to figure out.;

: I knew I was right to include you, though I did not know I was doing so at the time. You can leave if you want. I am sure they will understand.;

\*#& looks at the address block: Look, at this symbol. I am guessing it will match the location we are to go to.;

: Makes sense: We will be outside the Arak area. Hope she will be safe.

# CoTu Farout

::Are they gone?::

::It would appear so. We learned much. We will miss them greatly::

::We are better for having known them::

::What they taught us will allow us to expand greatly in knowledge and strength::

::Maybe sometime in the future, we will meet them and return the favor. As is our way::

::Most assuredly::

::Till them::

::We dance!::

# New Regional Galactic Center

⌘What the seven skaggers is a ‘thant doing here!⌘

⌘That is strange, should not have happened, and didn’t we ban them?

Who even told them where this is?⌘

⌘Everyone, please com in Aaaha. We are one, time to be one.⌘

We both point to the ‘thant.

⌘Not allowed! Not allowed!⌘ The Aaaha want-a-be goes hassy. Most fun I have had the entire visit. Almost worth the whole . . . not even sure how to com all this. Wish our ‘thn was here. Where are they even?

ATTENTION! REQUIRED MEETING IN THE ASSEMBLY SPACE.

Wish they would not shout everything. Hurts my brain organ.

The ‘thant comes up to me. Big one too.

*Where is this assembly space? I need to be there.*

*Please allow me to escort you. I should be there also. I motion for my friend to come with us. S/he is hesitant. Don’t worry, the Center is a safe place. No eating each other allowed. A joke.*

⌘We should com in Aaaha. The pain sticks are real and do hurt.⌘

⌘I agree. Still have scars from one appendage slightly out of place during a many, many arn ceremony.⌘

*Relief is coming.* Why would a ‘thant know anything? Who is this ‘thant?

Two more ‘thants come up to us. They appear to know each other. Do all ‘thants know each other? There must be an impossible number of them in the multiverse. And three just happen to show up here.

⌘What are they doing?⌘ The three ‘thants have started to jump around and seem to be following a pattern, though I am not sure of it. I watch carefully. Is this some kind of ‘thant thing? Nothing I have seen before. We know there is a ‘thant colony on our home world. Usually is. They stay out of our way and we stay out of theirs.

My friend tugs an appendage, ⌘What are those?⌘

I turn to look, what the? Three large multicolored, ever moving, hard to focus on objects have appeared. The ‘thants stop moving and approach them, it? Its?

ATTENTION! REQUIRED MEETING IN THE ASSEMBLY SPACE.

⌘We are going to be late!⌘ I pull the artifacts out of my pouch and get ready as we move faster. Others are already there. We find our places and get ready. The lead of our group gives us a LOOK. That usually means punishment afterwards. Imperfect! How do I explain the ‘thants and what ever those other things were.

Everyone is pointing image sensors forward to an area cleared out in the middle. I turn to do so as well, nudging my friend. S/he looks confused, but does so. We wait.

The 'thants and the three light things make their way through us to wait in the center. More appear directly in the center. I thought we were shielded from direct DS. Two of the 'thants back away and join a set of six. They have been here the entire time? Ah, they morph back into Aaaha. Many here have assumed that form. Not my idea of a fun time. All leggy and such. Since it was optional, I opted out. Fine the way I am.

There are a total of thirteen. I am not superstitious, but here, in this place, strangers have arrived, yeah, not fond of the number thirteen. If it is them, how did they find us? How did they get here. I am TK9 and even I could not retrace how I arrived, or how to get home. Only the new sector 'thn could get here I was com'd.

The thirteen remain motionless. I am nudged from my right side. They are passing around Ta'aha bread. I take one. We will all consume it at the same time. Tastes very bland. Not going to replace any chow I ever had at home.

The ones in the center do not have any. They will not participating? I am whacked. We have begun. I catch up to avoid another one.

These things take arns to get through. I turn off my thinking and concentrate. Does not make it go faster, just feels like it. Might prevent a whack or two as well.

At the end we sit in silence to reflect on our mistakes. Our imperfections.

ωThis is the end of training and our meeting. Everyone, find your 'thn and return to your worlds. There you will instruct others in the Path to Perfection. Soon we will all be one. We will be Ta'aha!ω

I look up and there is no one in the center. No 'thants, not glowing things. No space even. It has all been filled in by the groups of six. Were they ever there? Did I imagine them?

ωWE WILL BE TA'AHA,ω we all chant in unison. Feels wonderful. All are one, or because it is finally over and we can go home.

My'thn appears.

⌘Let's go home. I want to go home.⌘

We DS out. This is true happiness, going home.

# New Ceph Eden

~This looks really good Liss. I thought we had everything we needed with the Ceph alone. If I had not seen what has happened here on Ceph Eden, I would not have believed the reports.~

~The Arak are different, very obsessive about doing things one way and in a certain order, but once they experience a better way they do adapt and that becomes THE way they need to do it. We benefit because often, over what must be tens of thousands of solars, they have worked out the best way of doing certain tasks.~

~Fortunately, both our sen want to live simple lives with minimal impact of the ecology. The Tafa were not totally wrong in that regard.~

~Just could not let go of needing everything to be perfect. Nothing is perfect. Everything is a compromise. Life is change. Adapt or die.~

~On the other arm, change, just because it is change is pointless and wasteful too.~ Liss affirms. The Luss culture she was in for so long had a lot of similarities to the Tafa. I have to remember, they were sent to Farout because they were not good enough though.

It is clear the Arak are not the answer to everything. Nor are we.

It will be new working with them. It is interesting. Just have to wait and see what happens. Keep notes, report back to the others.

~We can't send them back if this does not work.~ I affirm.

~Not ready to just kill them either. For better or worse, they are our responsibility now.~

~Worst case, isolate and move on.~

~Raptor Eden kept them on an island off Madscar till they were ready. We kept ours here till we decided to try as well. Lots of islands.~ I affirm.

# New Aaaha

⌘What is going on? It is like everything is turned up-side-down.⌘

ωYou want to get hurt? Stop using the old com.ω

ωSorry. I am so confused. Nothing makes sense. There are no rich and they say no poor, yet I am poor. Tech, at least the tech they say hurts the ecology, what ever that is, is no longer allowed. There goes my job. But, hey, how do I eat? How do I take care of my family? I am doomed.ω

ωJoin the rest of us. The work is easy. Not the best food, but it fills you up. It is quiet. That is the best thing. It is so quiet.ω

We are the New Aaaha. Part of our training is we learn the history of the Aaaha and how they were saviors of all sen, at least till the evil ones came and nearly destroyed everything. A core group survived and grew. They taught others, including our leaders, who taught others on our world and eventually they taught me. Now we are strong. We will fill the universe with the truth, the Truth of Perfection. No more suffering, no more corrupt leaders misleading everyone. No more pollution destroying the life around us. We become one with our OM, instead of trying to destroy our very life essence, destroying ourselves.

I carry my Aaaha sack and regularly plant Aaaha seeds. Seeds that were brought back from on high to nourish us, sustain us, enlighten us. Soon everyone will know the happiness I experience every moment. Until I was given my own sack to spread, I had never seen these seeds before. A strange yellow color. The shape is different too. I have learned not to question. Questions mean pain. Imperfection means pain. To avoid pain, be perfect. That is our truth. Our only truth. Simple and beautiful. I plant another seed. It should grow well here. Soon no one will be separate. We will all be one.

⌘what have we here? Looks like a gossier to me.⌘

I sigh. Those these encounters are less frequent, they still happen.

ωEmbrace the Truth of Perfection and be saved.ω I offer them a cookie. They bat it away like it is poison. I retrieve it and they shove me down. I get back up. Pain is instruction. I embrace the pain. They soon get tired of this game. I com in the location and description of their group. They will soon be given a more persuasive opportunity to become perfect. It would have been so much easier for them to have accepted the truth the first time.

Alas, some never accept the truth and so, for the good of all Aaaha, they serve another purpose and help bring life to the soil, so the Aaaha seeds will grow, so there is enough for everyone, who embrace the Truth of Perfection.

# New Regional Galactic Center

We enter through the air lock. Everything is quiet. No sound, not even ventilation systems. Everything appears to have been shut down.

\*Master, I sense no one present.\*

Our Priest of Perfection, their Holiness, Perfection of Cyan, enters the station. We all bow flat to the surface.

\*Then we will make of this location a new center of Perfection, to spread the message of Perfection. For only the Cyan know the true Message of Perfection, as told to us through countless generation of High Priests of Perfection. As told from the Aaaha themselves before we were removed to Cyan for additional instruction.

Now we are pure, we are Perfect, we are ready to offer our Truth to everyone we encounter.\* The Priest does some ritual moves I try not to sense. Only for the other high priests to witness.

We are motioned to rise.

Several of us scatter to see if we can find anyone else present. Surely they would not go to all this trouble for no reason. The place is huge, though I am used to much smaller quarters and a sky to see. We were invited after all. We are here, albeit, a bit late. Cyan are not good with tech, having outlawed it as imperfect many gen past. It was deemed a small sacrifice in our purity for the chance to instruct other sen in need of Perfection. We flagged down an old star ship and they agreed to bring us here. Of course, it was imperfect, as all tech is, and it needed to be repaired several times along the path to our calling. Hence we are late.

\*Righel, over there!\* One of the others coms. I look and see it. A ‘thant! One of the most evil of all, a demon, a devil, an abomination! We all present our arms in Perfection stance to ward off the evil one. Yet, it keeps coming toward us. We do not have weapons other than pain sticks to administer correction to others. They offer pain, not protection. That would be sacrilegious.

It approaches. It chitters something I do not understand. A second ‘thant comes forward from another area. We are huddled together, surrounding our Priest. We will sacrifice ourselves if necessary. They meet each other and then turn to face us.

We hear a huge rumbling sound and turn back to the passage way we entered from. Out of the portals we see the star ship leaving us! We turn back to the ‘thants.

\*Howdy! Let’s dance!\* I must have fainted. Did it com dance? I shutter and shake all over. Only heathens dance. Clearly the work of the devil.

We leave the dancing ‘thants and find quarters suitable to our high status and purpose. The High Priest makes whatever food and other supplies

and tools will be needed for our work and purpose.

More rumbling. Not sure what direction it is coming from. We are six assistants and one High Priest, a perfect seven. Two remain to attend the High Priest and the rest of us fan out to see what is happening.

\*Check the docking area first.\* I affirm.

As I reach the area we came in from, a portal opens and creatures emerge. Very ugly. Must not judge. Not every sen was a fortunate as we were to be hatched Cyan. They have eight legs? How do they even manage with such a wrong even number of appendages?

\*They are Arak!\* How did they get here? Our trip was very arduous. No way their primitive tech or access to resources would allow them to reach us. I count a total of eight. One more than us.

\*One is a High Priest!\* How can that be? The Arak never embraced the Path to Perfection. All the necessary emblems of rank are present though. Not sure what to do, I signal the others and we all bow.

Their High Priest stares at us. Is it going to eat us? Arak are notorious for eat first ask questions after.

\*Bring your High Priest to me NOW!\* It coms Cyan? Where? How? Arak is an ugly com. Hard to believe they can even be sentient, but this High Priest coms perfect Cyan. Two of us scramble to tell our High Priest. No one tells the High Priest what to do of course. We inform and obey.

Everyone waits, not sure what to do.

One returns, not the High Priest of course. They really do not like to be told what to do. An affront to their magnificence. We are now four staring at the eight of them. Nothing is com'd, nothing is done. We sit.

Finally the one who came back from the High Priest coms, \*The High Priest coms that if you wish to com with our Holiness, you must come to them.\* This is com'd while shaking the entire time and face planted on the surface of the station floor. As is true of the rest of us.

The High Priest is before us, between the four of us and the Arak, facing us though. They have special abilities, so this is not a surprise. The High Priest slowly turns to face the Arak.

\*You had no right! This is a supreme insult. You will be punished for your transgression!\* The two assistants scurry to catch up with the rest of us. They have no idea what happened, but face the floor as well.

The two 'thants are now behind us, facing the Arak.

Our High Priest is stripped of any and all marks of rank.

\*You do not belong here. Go home!\* The Arak proclaims. How?

In a blink we are on Cyan again. How? Who were they?

I reach into my pouch. There some yellow cookies? I am exhausted and hungry. I taste one. I see the others eating theirs as well.

# Cat Eden

*We just received a Catbox everyone!* Midj opens it as we gather.

*Do we get to go home now?* We are all exhausted and disgusted with the Drag behavior. Not what we signed up for. Not that any of us know exactly what that was. We TP so the Drag do not hear us. Bad enough that we are all together. I would not be surprised to learn they are suspicious of us. We do not fit in well. Our morals are different from theirs.

Fek retrieves the message, *News from the thirteen apparently. The New Regional Galactic Center is no more.* He then comments, *They will try again is my guess.* We all affirm. No one who is a true believer gives up easily.

*We are to send in our final reports on the Drag and Arak. We are going home everyone!* That gets a roar out of all of us. Mouse, Fek and Talks have been here the longest and even they are happy.

We each work on our own reports. They will all go together, but as each of us has a different perspective, they will all be valuable.

Being Drag now for years has been difficult in and of itself. My native form, Rajk, was no free ride, but the near constant fighting over position among the Drag is not helpful for anything other than bragging rights. A huge waste of energy and sens, who end up damaged or killed.

If I thought they treated each other bad, how they treat the Arak is much worse. To the Drag, the Arak are the ultimate smiggles. The Arak cannot bite them or hurt the Drag in anyway, unless exceedingly lucky. Which of course gets the other Drag to kill them instantly. Even a minor scratch is a death sentence.

What the Arak are good for is tech. The Drag do not want to dirty their paws with 'smiggle work' and leave the iron forging, food growing, cleaning, building to the Arak and lower Drag. Basically the Drag sit around fighting each other, getting high on 'medicinal plants' and bullying anyone they can. As far as I can determine, the Drag are a total waste of sentience. Almost as bad as the Cats, a natural enemy of the Rajk.

The Drag can count and they are not stupid. ALL metals must be accounted for. Their greatest fear is of an Arak uprising. Keep them scared, malnourished and weak. I affirm that all sen cultures have tried this at one time or another. I probably should not be so hard on the Drag. Does not help that I know Sauron played a part in their coming into being.

Though I am large, I am seen as a smiggle because I am not willing to fight for position. I spend most of my time hauling heavy loads around, from Arak supplies they can't carry, to farming needs. I am fine with this. The workers see more than the leaders. We are going home!

# Raptor Eden

## Madscar

This is our destination, but I did not realize it would take so long to get here. We are facing a magnificent three masted wind mover, surrounded by seawater of course. This should make me very worried about \*#&'s safety, but after the lunars of training we have been through, I am good with it. So is \*#& who immediately jumps on board and scales the nearest mast and is hanging by her web swinging to the next mast over. One happy Arak.

I follow protocol and announce my presence at the base of the wood walkway to the deck of the ship, <sup>R</sup>TK Checker Debt requesting permission to come aboard.<sup>R</sup>

*DO NOT ANNOUNCE YOUR TK STATUS, THIS IS A NORM SHIP.*

<sup>R</sup>Sorry. Won't happen again.<sup>R</sup> Whoever that was.

<sup>R</sup>You may come aboard.<sup>R</sup> A Checker stands on the deck of the ship looking important.

Once I am on deck I see that the Checker has a uniform of sorts. I am not sure what to do, so I do a bow. When in doubt, show respect.

<sup>R</sup>Ah, Checker Debt reporting for duty Ma'am.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That is Captain Tiqa to you sailor. You will always address me as such and nothing else. Is that clear?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yes, ah Captain Tiqa!<sup>R</sup>

\*#& swings down and does a bow to our Captain as well.

<sup>R</sup>I can see you two are going to be a lot of trouble. Dismissed!<sup>R</sup> She turns and goes into a door on the deck. We are left clueless as usual.

A less fancy sailor comes up to us, <sup>R</sup>Follow me. I will give you the tour and show you where you two bed down. And yes, I can com Arak as well, but this is a Checker ship and we will com Rap unless otherwise told. All sen on board can com Arak, but that is our secret and used only when someone is really stupid and tries to board us or worse.<sup>R</sup> There is worse?

He looks at \*#&. <sup>R</sup>We will need a Rap call for you. Any suggestions?<sup>R</sup> Then looks at both of us. I really never thought of the need. Even among other sen we never needed one. Granted others had a hard time calling her name, but got close enough.

☺ Save We all think about it. Makes sense. I was called Debt because I was a hardship to my pack and why I was on my own so early. Save has always been a plus.

<sup>R</sup>Save it is. Now follow me.<sup>R</sup> He really does know Arak, not a common call in their com. Did not just guess.

By the time the tour is over , we know where we will sleep and the

ship is already moving. Quiet.

<sup>R</sup>Save, up in the tree. Learn how it is done and what your part will be. Very happy to see you on board. Most are afraid of heights.<sup>R</sup> She then turns to me, <sup>R</sup>We are all full of Checkers, this being a Checker ship. What else can you do?<sup>R</sup>

I think carefully, trying to frame it in a way that it will be useful for them, <sup>R</sup>I was in construction. Worked extensively with the Arak and learned their methods, You need it built or fixed, I can do it. Heights don't bother me, rocking ship does not bother me. I am used to lousy food and taking orders, sir.<sup>R</sup> He shows amusement, <sup>R</sup>You are on grunt detail till further notice. Com is cheap, you need to show us.<sup>R</sup> I expected that.

Arak do not have hands, claws, or anything making it easy to grab things. How are they so good at tech? One call, web stuff. I don't understand it, but they control whether or not it sticks, how strong, whatever. Universal tool. I com this because at some point, someone in the rigging, what they call all the ropes above us, drops a knife. Coming down fast it could cause a lot of hurt. Save shoots out a web and nabs it before it can reach us on the decks. Brings it back up and sends it to the owner.

Now what can I do? I am looking at everything I work with, carefully. Can this be done better? Does not take long before I have an entire list of ideas. Downside, I have ever been on a ship before. There may be very good reasons things are the way they are. Be careful! I com to myself. I continue to watch. If I learned anything at TK school, it was to be patient and watch twice before acting. That is good advice no matter where you are.

Someone taps my shoulder, <sup>R</sup>Chow time.<sup>R</sup> I wait to watch what others do. Nothing. Ah, the chow comes to us. Nice. I am handed a cup and a bowl. Not much, not as good as town worksite chow, but better than I had growing up. Have to make some allowances for being isolated on a ship I guess. Fills me up is all that really matters. Save will like the broth. I show amusement. Will take awhile for them to cue into what she needs. And don't think I have not noticed her grabbing things out of the air as they pass. Near any island, there is always lots of food about.

This could work. I do wonder how many on board are TK, but I was told in no uncertain terms, NOT to express that side. Why do we have it then? Might save \*#& at some point if she was about to splash down in the sea or shield herself from a splash. Though she is remarkably good with the web stuff. Not likely to be needed. Why then?

## Northern Reaches

*It is time you two.* Guano. Tiqa is next to me. Glad she is now open about her call. We knew it was coming once their attention was removed from the whole perfection problem. Is that really over? I am suspicious. Is it even possible for the search for perfection to ever not tug at all sen?

*What I don't understand is why you didn't have to do this long, long ago? Certainly qualified, more so than I will ever be.*

*Ro, everyone knew we would be here together. Not me of course, I was just doing the best I could for as long as I could. But, when I first met you, there was a spark of recognition. They say it too. My task was to bring you to this point in time and then we go through it together.*

*Besides, it is not like we are bonding with each other.*

*Too late for that. Could you imagine what the hatchlings would look like?* I shudder. I like Checker, or rather Tiqa. Nice call, why did she hide it for so long? She com'd it was because she never wanted to be special, just do a good job and move on.

We are in the northern reaches, cold as ice for a norm. No one will see us here.

*Why aren't we at the RGC or something?*

*The old one was destroyed and the new one is gone now as well. Everyone had left before. Likely don't even realize it yet. Don't you ever read the bulletins?*

*Not if I can help it. Enough problems here to worry about.* I will never be one of the Thirteen. No interest at all. I like solving problems at the local level, where I know everyone, know their lives, their spirits.

Br'thn and Pr'thn arrive together. Do they have a say in which one for which one of us? Br'thn comes up to me. Guess so. Guano, I am too old to be a parent again.

Then Qr'thn arrives along with seven other 'thn I don't know. I read the journals, it takes eight to make this official. Do we go one after another? Who goes first? Is it even safe on the surface of a world?

Br'thn bumps me and I pet her. She purrs. I am sure the Cats taught her that.

Ron, Squeak, White, and Libby arrive, followed shortly thereafter by Owl and Turtle. Now I am embarrassed and even more nervous. I turn to Piqa.

*We certainly com'd about this enough.* She affirms. We are together. I signal her to go ahead.

*Qr'thn is our true mother, but Br'thn has been here for us along the way. Our choice in no way is meant to say other 'thn are not good enough or that we are good enough for them.* Surprised Sauron was not invited. Tiqa gives a dirty look. Right, stay on task.

*Ro and I have been together for a very long time, ever since we met at Libby and White's home. We think alike and never make decisions without consulting the other: We are different, very different, but make better decisions together than individually. It is the same now. We have come to a decision about this 'mating' as you call it.*

Turtle coms, *A good way for all sen to think and work, go on.*

I come in, *We live on a manufactured world, with a brand new OM. There is nothing normal about our being here, being TK, or even being invited to help hatch a new 'thn. We are not at a regional galactic center surrounded by thousands of other sen TKs and their 'thn partners.*

Tiqa, *We claim to support and encourage the diversity imperative. Do we really?*

We remain silent till this is absorbed.

Owl gets it first and starts hooting. His form of laughter. Looks like he just had the best mouse of all time. Turtle looks at him and shakes her head. She must do that a lot around him.

Edwin pops in! Surprised to see him. 'thants are not normal at these things. He coms, *The Clowns approve a thousand percent.* We did not com anything yet, yet he seems to have gotten it already.

Squeak is getting nervous, as is White. Ron and Libby are relaxed. They trust us at least.

Br'thn comes forward and rests in the air between us. We both touch her together. Now they get it. Finally. I thought it was obvious. Of course we have Br'thn's permission. Everyone else backs away. Piqa and I nod to each other and begin.

We are merged into one mind, one thought, one purpose. Incredibly beautiful. Time passes without meaning, it just is. No care, no worries, just a deep love and affection for the three of us. The one of us.

When I am aware of our surroundings again I open my eyes to a bright new shiny baby 'thn between the three of us. Together we announce to everyone, *Her call is Our 'thn.*

Emotions of love and joy coming from everyone flood our thoughts.

Squeaks notes, *An extra letter in her call. Fits. Name fits too. Good job everyone. Potty training comes next. 'thn poo is the worst!* Everyone shows amusement, but I am not sure they are kidding. 'thants poo, why not baby 'thn? Been awhile since we had a hatchling around us. By the time I was hatched, they were all at least teenagers or older.

Qr'thn come up to the three of us. All of us come into contact with her. No other 'thn, except for those touched by the thirteen make physical contact. Maybe if they did there would be less ideological arguments, like the Cult of Perfection and the Techs. I am just happy Our'thn is here with us now. Why did we wait so long! Tiqa gives me a funny look. Oh, me.

# Ku Eden

I am home. Even wearing an old tattered blue bandanna. Everything has changed, yet remains the same. The food tastes great, simple, nutritious, but great. I see steam coming from the bath area. That is new. After being an Arak for so long and going through countless Path of Perfection rituals, just seeing dust on things and dirt on the ground is wonderful. I home I never have to do that again.

I don't need to sleep of course, but find a perch and settle in just for the pleasure of thinking. I am caught up, my journals turned in. I am here for a bit of rest before being reassigned. Hope it is a long rest.

When I come back to the main coop, everyone is running around like they have lost their heads. My look attracted attention and a bird stops long enough to squawk at me, +The top White Cloak is coming!+ She runs off. Flor was the top White Cloak when I left to join the Enterprise. Is she still around? Guess I will find out. In the meantime I join a work crew and help clean up. Not Perfection clean, but better than it usually looks. Good enough for me. Wonderful.

There is a commotion at the entrance. Suddenly everyone drops to the floor in a bow. I do the same. Don't be the one who stands out.

Three White Cloaks come in and head straight my way. Guano, what did I do now? I just got back, no time to cause any trouble yet. A fourth, behind the others also enters. Four? In our little coop? I purposely chose one far from the major cities and I was hoping quieter.

They all stop in front of me. Why?

The one who came in last comes forward and squawks at me, +Ku Arak, rise!+ I have not com'd my call to anyone here. How did they know. One of the three grabs my blue bandanna and rips it off. Hey. I finally look up. Guano, Flor is still in charge. She comes forward and fits me with a White Cloak.

+I am unworthy Mother Hen Flor.+ That gets a lot of hoots from the others in the room. They all know who I am?

Flor coms, +Did you destroy our enemies Ku Arak?+

I am confused, +No Mother Hen Flor. They are fine.+

+What did you do then?+ I am even more confused.

+I helped them achieve their goal. I helped them on the Path to Perfection.+ This is a sudden influx of air. We were all taught about our previous encounters with the COP.

+You killed no one? No battles, no wars, no over throwing anyone?+

+No. We helped them. Ask the other three with you. They were there. Everyone left the New Regional Galactic Center of their own free will.+

They were excited to leave actually. Should I have com'd that? How

many even know what I com about? Is everyone here TK?

+Let me understand this. The COP were the ones who cored several of our worlds, took out millions of sen and sent many others to Farout, and you HELPED them?+

+Of course, that is our way. We are not them, nor would I ever want to be like them. They wanted to be Perfect using the COP methods. I and the other three with you were trained to help and thus we helped them achieve that goal.+

+And the special cookies you distributed? That caused no harm?+  
I show amusement. That was devious.

+Hurts no one and helps them achieve their goal.+

She looks at me like I am her next special lizard meal, +Really. What exactly are these special cookies then?+ This is a show. She already knows. She must have read the reports.

I play along now that I know what is going on.

+The cookies, right. They, are, ah, a special life form that the four of us, Pilot from the Enterprise, the Yellow Farout sen and the CoTu on their Farout world worked out. Rather ingenious actually.+

+Go on please, for the benefit of everyone else present.+ The White Cloak itches, but I dare not scratch.

+We, meaning the Yellow, Plantimals, CoTu, Pilot and the four of us, all, well, sort of merged together temporarily.+

+You did not mention the Plantimals.+

+Sorry, but nervous. The Path of Perfection used corporal punishment for any errors. Trying very hard not to make a mistake here.

+I went to Arak Eden and learned how to be an Arak Perfection Priest.

+

+They have COP priests there?+

+Well, no, not at the time, but I recruited seven locals and together we went to the New Regional Galactic Center in an old beat up star ship commanded by Pilot. Long story. When we got there the other three Ku, next to you, were already there in Tafa High Priest forms.+ She looks at them now.

+We heard of the Arak. They caused a lot of problems on our new worlds.+

+Only at first. The Arak are really nice sen, except when in the more aggressive end of the world spawning ah, behavior. They are doing fine now on all of our new worlds as you call them. Integrated with the other sen and a true asset.+

+So their attempt to hurt us failed and did the opposite and you returned the favor by giving them what they wanted, Perfection.+

+Well, that is most of it, the part they are likely to see, for the moment. There is more.+

She gives me the stink eye again.

+They ah, yellow cookies, we made, when passed through the digestive tract of a sen, any sen, remarkable adaptable, sprout when put onto the ground. Where most waste ends up naturally.+ Many here acknowledge this fact. Certainly cleaned enough sewer lines and waste pits while a Blue Bandanna.

+And these sprouts do what exactly?+

I show amusement, +They make more of the plants that we harvest the seeds from to make the cookies from. The CoTu believe in sharing in the fullest meaning of the term. The seeds are a combination of all of us actually. Once they have gone to seed, as it were, they move.+

+What?+

+They are part plantimal, so they get up and move, trying to find good ground to grow in. Oh, and everyone gets a sort of yellow color to their outer surface eventually. Especially the ones who participate in the Rituals of Perfection.+

+No harm.+

+Nope, actually makes them healthier. The COP do not believe in tech above about level two, even level one is good for them. They do not farm, so the plants need to do this part themselves. As I said, we helped them by giving them what they wanted. A way to be Perfect on their own worlds.+

+And all the other sen present at the New Regional Galactic Center?+

+They all left with Path of Perfection training, which they willingly signed up for, no one forced, and of course lots of cookies for the ritual.+

+And their 'thns? Were they not suspicious?+

+That is the weird thing. We did not see a one. They must have been the ones who set up the new center, it is hidden in a 3D space of a 6D matrix. Quite ingenious really. My own guess is they knew this was dangerous and did not want to be caught there. Once the center was gone, they dared not show themselves anywhere we might find them.+

+Well done.+ Everyone clucks praise on the four of us.

+We had lots of help.+

+Of course, that is the way it is supposed to work, together we are stronger than alone.+ Straight from the Blue Bandannas handbook.

*And you are all TK8s now as well. Thank you for your exceptional service.*

+Does anyone want to see what an Arak Priest looks like? The others were Ta'aha Priests, six legs to the Arak's eight.+

*Maybe later when the TKs are all alone.*

*Right.* Not everyone here is TK, but they clearly know about us.

# Enterprise

Everything is quiet. Some would say too quiet, but quiet is good. Not everything is a crisis about to happen. I am catching up on the endless records required. I did sign up for the task. No one to blame but myself. Did Pilot really do all of this before I was raised to the rank of Captain? Ceph have a lot of advantages over Hu in the brains and multitasking departments. How did he manage?

We are in orbit around a newly found Farout world. Apparently, the new COP did not waste any time banishing some of its own sen to worlds out here. Our mission is still to find the lost sen and resettle them if we can. As we saw with the Yellow and a few others, not all are safe to return to norm space. The COP were not always wrong in their assessment. I only care about the sen of their own species and not so much other worlds they found as they tried to spread the cult framework.

^Ship approaching. Unknown design. Captain requested on the bridge. Science has been alerted.^ I like it when they take initiative and make things run smoothly.

I DS to the bridge. Captain's prerogative. No one else is allowed to do this and everyone else DSs to an antechamber to avoid possibly collisions. My space on the bridge is always clear for this reason.

~What the crab is that thing?~ I exclaim. Never seen a ship like it.

My science officer notes, =Looks like a giant insect from Hu Eden. I believe they called it a bumblebee.= Not exclusively Hu space, but it does look like one. Who would design a ship so inefficiently?

=Not resisting our scans. Appears to have a full crew complement and a very varied sen makeup.= We are not the only ones who finally saw the virtue of having as many different sen as possible to increase the likelihood of success.

*Captain Tal, this is Pilot, requesting permission to come aboard.*

Permission granted. Come into the antechamber. It is empty.

Hu Pilot comes out of the antechamber. "Hi everyone. Miss me?"

He looks around, "Did I break your crew?"

~They never expected to see you again. What about the four Ku we lent you?~

"They are fine. They are on board the Bumblebee if you want to meet them. Along with a few others as you know already. You should be getting a Catbox soon about the whole experience."

~The Catbox arrived at 0800 ship time. Apparently I chose the right crew members to assist you.~

"Most definitely. Nobodies try harder and are willing to take chances. There were perfect, better than perfect, not to confuse with the COP idea

of perfect.”

~I understand. I have been doing some reordering of personnel on board the Enterprise as well. No longer will talent be overlooked because they started in a low position.~

“Everyone aboard the Bumblebee is TK8, even the four you sent me. Not a bad advancement for humble abused TK3s.”

I show amusement, ~I will certain spread the word, especially to those who have a problem with rank as power and prestige.~

“They would love to meet a few of their old supervisors, ah, in full COP Arak regalia of course.”

~The cargo bay is yours. I will send them in, what a few arn enough time?~

“That works for use. They are already in the cargo bay and are getting ready, so whatever works for your schedule.”

~In the mean time, why the strange ship and what are you here for?~

“As you may have noticed, Farout is a big space. We are a second ship looking for COP refugees. We will keep you up to date where we are and what we have found. If you could make a copy of your ship logs so we do not duplicate efforts, that would help.”

~FINALLY, someone is doing something. I suspect this is more to do with you than with Command.~ He affirms.

~Could use an oct more like you. Farout is indeed a large space.~

~Ba Upps, you have the bridge. I will be in the cargo hold.~

^Understood Captain. Have fun.^ Everyone on the bridge wished they could be there to watch as well. It will be recorded for instructional purposes of course.

In the cargo hold we go transparent and hide in the framework. They are already here. Impressive. In a COP array, chanting, arms waving. In-cense even, The door opens and in walk the former supervisors, now lowly janitors. They have been instructed to clean up the mess in the hold. They are joking and back talking when they see what is here.

The high priest turns to face them;HOW DARE YOU INTERRUPT THE HOLY OFFICE OF THE PATH OF PERFECTION. ON YOUR FACE PARTS IMMEDIATELY OR FACE OUR WRATH!;

That was good. The ‘janitors’ will not know this com as they no longer have TP to understand it, but the intent is very clear. They are flat on the surface faster than I thought them capable.

*A few days learning how to behave should be sufficient.*

*Too bad I could not send you a few more I have in mind.*

*I will leave our address. You can send them our way anytime. Most of the crew prefers the Arak form now for a variety of reasons. No one messes with them for one.* I show amusement. I would imagine not.

# Cet Eden

\_\_ Funny how Barb keeps thinking she can hide from us.\_\_  
\_\_ Just leave her alone dear. She means well. Remember the diversity rule.\_\_ I blow a few bubbles in response. Actually I just I like blowing bubbles.

\_\_ The COP never had a chance.\_\_  
\_\_ No, but it was fun watching them try. We owed them that much.\_\_  
\_\_ We learned a lot we had forgotten too.\_\_  
\_\_ Like where the ‘thants came from. That was amusing. If they only knew.\_\_

\_\_ The Arak were interesting. We need to be sure they don’t end up slaves on our worlds. The temptation is great.\_\_

\_\_ The Checker/Arak pair is a good start. Once they see the value of a coupling, others will follow.\_\_

\_\_ Similar to the Rap/Checker pair. That worked well too to help the Checkers escape from servitude.\_\_ And the Rap from serving the Di.

\_\_ They will try again once they forget and build up their courage enough.\_\_

\_\_ Of course, that is to be expected. There is always a tension between rigid and flexible. The balance is where life happens, but the desire to be ‘on the winning side,’ to be ‘free from conflict and worry,’ ‘to be certain’ will always tempt some. No sen is immune.\_\_

\_\_ The COP sure had a bad case of obsessive compulsive disorder.\_\_  
\_\_ Says the one who preens his feathers constantly.\_\_

\_\_ It is what owls do. I have to fit in.\_\_ Not sure even I believe that.

\_\_ We need all types of thinking. Rigid and flexible have their strengths and weaknesses. Knowing when each is the answer is not easy.\_\_

\_\_ Tech is not the answer to all prayers either. It draws sen in with the promise of an easier life.\_\_

\_\_ But the cost, many gen later, really bites.\_\_

\_\_ There is a time and place for it, like a star ship, or helping a world in distress.\_\_

\_\_ Just not an end in itself. No ideology is.\_\_

\_\_ Time to go before Barb finds us. \_\_ I blow some more bubbles. I am going to miss that part of being a whale.

# Ba Eden

^Gather the classes. Today is Wizards.^ Their favorite, the one that always gets them excited. No one misses these classes. Everyone remembers the 'slight of hand' tricks I use to illustrate the powers that the wizards of old are purported to have had. Only works on the young and this is what makes the young the most fun.

The older students keep me awake. They try so hard to trip me up. Almost succeed sometimes. Scary. All sen have their heroes and villains. Wizards is easier than TKs on the norm minds.

So of course, I get the older ones.

There are eight of them. Perfect. We are going to do a class on the COP and these seven will be our altar workers. I will be the High Priest and the last our victim. Our imperfect one. We will rotate through the positions once everyone gets it. Not exactly what they were expecting, but the TKs were there, this is their story. And they have not heard or better, experienced, it yet.

If you are reading this, you already know the story. To say the least, it was exciting. The 'victim' hated it and sought revenge when it was their turn to be a 'priest'. Classic transference. An ideal topic for our class. They young will soon be the 'movers and shakers' as the Hu put it so nicely. I am hoping this class really sticks in their minds for the rest of their lives. I hope they, if tempted, back away from doing this to another sen, another Ba. Or even a favorite pet. Or any creature they happen to meet in their lives.

This will need to be reinforced of course. Such is the life of a teacher.

What then is the role of a TK or even a high TK? Are we Watchers as some would have us be? The Watchers on Raptor Eden died because they were afraid to act, to go past their Watcher mandate. The 'thants are primarily Watchers too. Yes, I got the Catbox that said that 'thants are reincarnated COP followers. 'thants are OCD, not doubt. They seek perfection in sen so as to help the OMs succeed in their role.

Or, do we do as the courageous band of misfit TKs, and save the multiverse from us all becoming COP or dead because we were imperfect. If I get anything through to my students I want them to get that no one is perfect, no matter how hard they try, no matter how high a position in their group or their culture. And, this one is harder to grasp and accept, no one is imperfect. They are exactly the way they are supposed to be. They are necessary to help themselves and others answer The Question for themselves and for everyone.

# Outside Hotevilla, Earth One

The Elders just smile whenever I show up. It is my thinking place. The place I am always accepted. I gather my supplies in a knapsack and head down the trail from the mesa. It is getting dry again and the ecology has changed to adapt. Perfect lichen country now. When wetter there will be many more mosses and more foliose lichens. Now the crustose ones are ascending again. Back and forth, the cycle of life.

My assistants, Little Bear and Squirrel see me and come running to join me. I used to enjoy being alone most of the time. Guess being in a 'thant colony for so long has gotten me over that need. These two, though young now, will grow up with a complete knowledge of lichens and will pass this knowledge onto others. By my next visit there will be new young ones excited to tag along.

I like the Hopi, mostly because all life is respected and accepted. No life form is better or worse than another. All are needed for Mother Nature to be alive and function for the benefit of all. I try to keep this spirit alive in me when I lead the 'thants in their daily tasks on many worlds.

To go from a lone professor in the field to having visited countless worlds and interacted with countless sen is beyond any possible dream I could have had for myself.

The Question. I smile whenever I think about this. The Answer to the Question is to seek the Answer to the Question. To Live! Some ask, if we know, then why doesn't it end. I tell them they are not listening very well. This is why the thirteen participate. This is their Answer as well. To live!

Others argue that there cannot possibly be enough diversity with just the thirteen to cause all this to come into existence. I look at them and laugh. There is more than enough when you mix and match different thoughts, traits, dimensions, time, histories, more than enough. Think seeds, not the finished forest, evolved over billions of years, over countless incarnation, froths, worlds and so on.

<sup>H</sup>Look everyone, see how the reproductive structures are different on this lichen compared to this one. Can anyone give me a possible explanation for this?<sup>H</sup> And so it goes. Another day. It's wonderful being alive.