

THE GATE OF HEAVEN



*They have taken up gods.
We have taken up weapons.
The oldest mistakes.
'Life always eats itself.'*

PLAYER GUIDE

THE GATE OF HEAVEN

PHENOMENON 2013★TRIPTYCH

JOHN & PHILIPPA HUGHES



*Images of broken light which dance before me like a million eyes
They call me on and on across the universe.*

— The Beatles.

We can never stay the same without changing. As individuals.
As cultures. As humans.

Nothing's gonna change my world.

The colony: imperilled, at war with itself.

Nothing's gonna change my world.

The Redoubt: forbidden repository of technology and power.

Nothing, nothing.

The refugees: orbiting, denied planetfall, increasingly
desperate.

Nothing, nothing.

The nebula: a deadly jewel in the night sky.

Nothing's gonna change my world.

Five women of an ancient and powerful settler family. Keepers
of the Redoubt. Mothers, daughters, sisters: united by blood
but divided by civil war.

Five women, younger than the dawn, older than starlight.

Five women. Hoping for life. Waiting for death.

As the stars burn red.

And the mountains too.

A systemless science fiction meditation by John and Philippa
Hughes. Our themes are family and power, secrets, war,
loneliness, love; and the terrors of ecstasy.

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

The probability of separate worlds meeting is very small. The lure of it is immense. We send starships. We fall in love.

— Jeanette Winterson

*I dream of giving birth to a child who will ask,
"Mother, what was war?"*

— Eve Merriam

The search is ancient. The question that drives it is basic and profound.

Are we unique? Do we share the universe with minds unlike our own, life that has evolved around other stars? Could we communicate, share, perhaps understand each other?

Or in the cold, in the eternal dark, do we live and die alone?

It was two thousand years ago that humankind first came to the nebula, an angry cauldron of stars and incandescent gas they called the Gate of Heaven.

Theirs was the Long Search. They were looking for life: intelligent, alien life that had shaped worlds and journeyed between the stars. The subtle chain of evidence they followed led across thousands of light years and millennia of time: subtle positronic traces, hints of elaborate dark matter constructions, eddies in the quantum foam. It was a trail that pointed to the Gate of Heaven.

The searchers did not find the answers they sought. The trail ended. Instead, they found the place, a tiny cloud-cloaked planet-jewel, blessed with life.

Humans had already journeyed far. They had settled on many planets. They were patient, and wise in their way, and they saw what this tiny oasis might become.



The Seeding

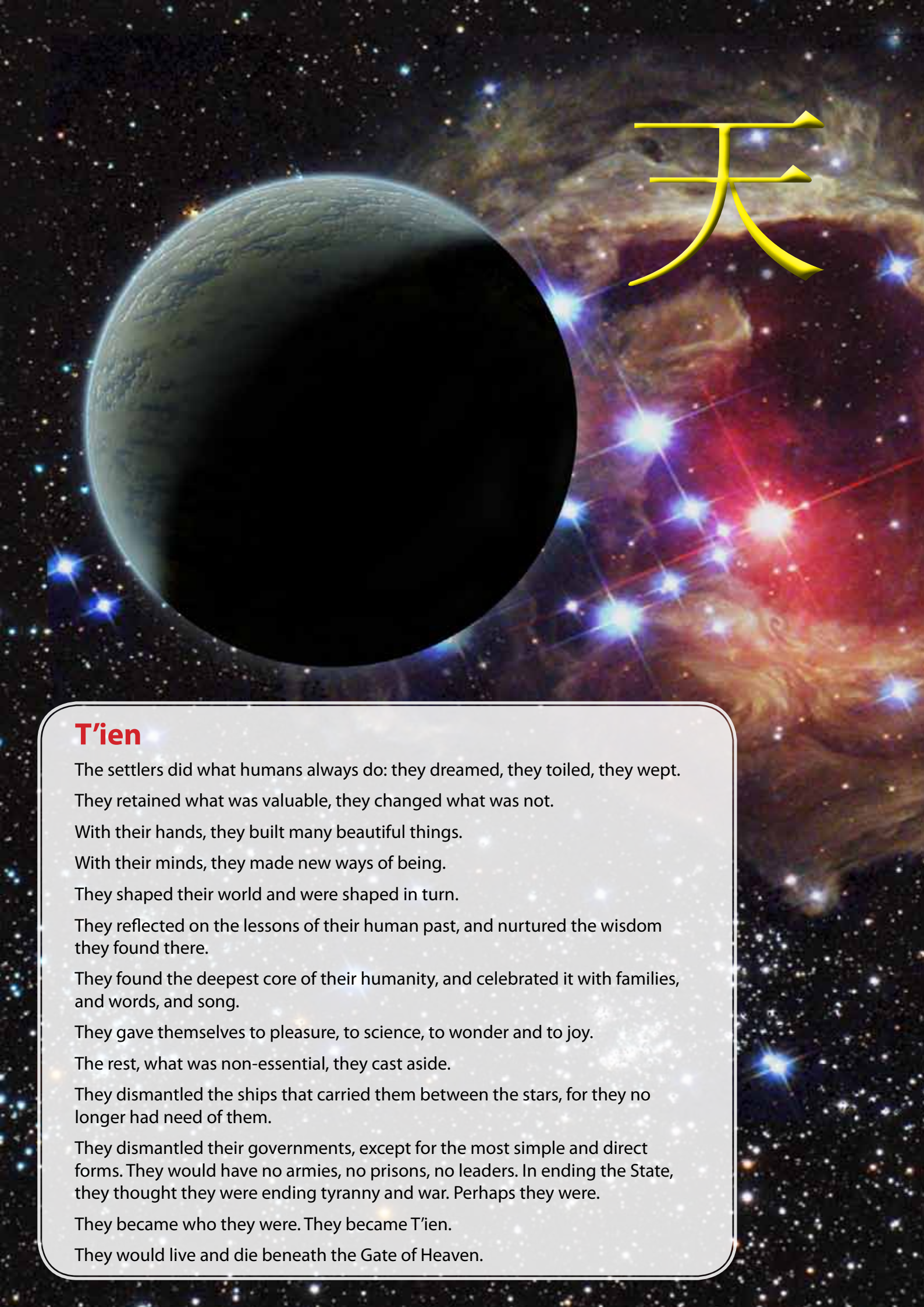
Sixteen hundred years ago, terraforming probes began the planet's slow transformation. The life it contained would be nurtured and preserved. But the world would also be made a place fit for humanity, with terran ecologies nurtured within three vast habitable zones.

Eight hundred years ago, the settlers awoke from their Redoubt to begin colonisation of the new homeland.

They named their new world 'T'ien'. It was ancient word in the tongue of their ancestors, a word meaning 'heaven'.

Leaving the Redoubt of the Mountain, they entered into their new world.

In the skies above they saw the Gate of Heaven.



天

T'ien

The settlers did what humans always do: they dreamed, they toiled, they wept.

They retained what was valuable, they changed what was not.

With their hands, they built many beautiful things.

With their minds, they made new ways of being.

They shaped their world and were shaped in turn.

They reflected on the lessons of their human past, and nurtured the wisdom they found there.

They found the deepest core of their humanity, and celebrated it with families, and words, and song.

They gave themselves to pleasure, to science, to wonder and to joy.

The rest, what was non-essential, they cast aside.

They dismantled the ships that carried them between the stars, for they no longer had need of them.

They dismantled their governments, except for the most simple and direct forms. They would have no armies, no prisons, no leaders. In ending the State, they thought they were ending tyranny and war. Perhaps they were.

They became who they were. They became T'ien.

They would live and die beneath the Gate of Heaven.

Becoming

By the settlers' command, the City and the scattered settlements of the Islands came to be. By their hand, many beautiful and noble things arose in diamond and carbon and steel.

Theirs was the harvest of all human history. Disease had been defeated, aging controlled, material want long vanquished. All stood equal and free. Gender and sexuality and identity itself were fluid and subject to change. Laws were few save the Great Imperative: serve life and all lifekind.

Conception, sex, pleasure and companionship were all discrete, separate realms, with notions of marriage and partnership long transformed into new forms. What endured, what was central, was Firstbond, the bond between mother and child. The bond of shaping, of freeing. The bond of family. Society coalesced around this simple enduring unit.

The colony's population stabilised at some forty thousand souls, divided according to long-term human norms: thirty three thousand women, six thousand men, one thousand melds.

Artificial Minds directed the nanotech and biotech technologies that sustained the colony within its three habitable rings. A series of towers housed the great machines that nurtured life and provided all the settlers' needs: energy, terraforming control, manufacturing, nanotech, health and revitalisation.

Over long centuries, the colonists let many of their machines fall silent: even the Slow Speakers, the Artificial Minds that communicated with humans. Some Minds devolved themselves, or went to sleep (for a millennia, for an epoch?), or simply cast off their physical substrates. Minds could do anything but reproduce: they had little in common with their biological creators, little to share, nothing to compete for. When their work was complete, they simply went away.

Few noticed. Fewer cared. The world seemed complete.

***"They would
live and die
beneath
the Gate of
Heaven"***

The T'ien did not miss the Mind's learning, for humans had hard-learned as a species that answers given all at once were not answers at all.

Sometimes ships visited the new world: searcher ships, wanderships, empire ships. A few were Slow Speakers, and they came to speak to the humans. More often they came to speak to the Minds. The ships bought news, and sometimes new machines. The news was old, and not very interesting: rise and fall, endless variations on an ancient theme.

Then, no more ships came.

Few noticed. Fewer cared. The world was enough.

And filling the night sky: the Gate Of Heaven.



Sundering

Over slow generations, one people became two.

The people of the City lived amongst towers of glass, seldom venturing beyond. For them life was an act of beauty, of immersion in the pleasures of physical and virtual existence, of exploring the possible.

The folk of the Islands lived more simply, in small communities. For them life was an act of honest work, of immersion in the real, of finding and expressing their deepest humanity. The Islands could be dangerous, but they bred a people both independent and strong.

One family, the Keepers, were tasked with the sacred duty of watching and remembering for all the colony. Theirs was the Redoubt, skeletal shell of the first ship, grounded high in the sacred soil of the Mountains of Hope, repository of technology and power. The Keepers were called to speak to City and to Island, to remember the Long Search and to kindle the hope of its finding.

When the first slow signs of ecological upheaval were made known, few in the City cared. The great machines would right these things over generations. Then the red storms began, damaging outlying Island settlements, and hard decisions had to be made. The City's bulwarks were strengthened at the expense of terraforming in the outer rings.

When the great towers in the outer rings faltered and failed, resources and options became much more limited. The City's needs could not be compromised.

Angry voices were heard in the City, demagogues and leaders arose. Politics was reborn.

The Islands struggled with fewer resources. Prophets arose to unite the scattered settlements. A secretive and defiant religious cult, the Union, came to dominate the village assemblies. Its doctrines were peaceful, but its rites hidden and jealously guarded.

The Islanders retreated more and more into secrecy, resisting inspection or intervention. Demands were made, demands were rebuffed. As tensions rose, travel between

City and islands was forbidden. Provocations began— sabotage and theft of machinery, border skirmishes. Long-forgotten technologies were resurrected, and viral Lesser Minds were released into the control stream with malignant intent.

Now the City has blockaded the harbour of the Islander's main resource tower. It seems they plan to bring it under direct control. There have been weapons exchanges, violence, and death.

Events are rapidly escalating, beyond the power of any individual to control. A jewel bright dream twists into nightmare.

They have taken up gods.

We have taken up weapons.

The oldest mistakes.

'Life always eats itself.'



Four women make pilgrimage to the Redoubt, summoned by the Keeper. Summoned by their mother, their grandmother. In the sky above, a new star shines, bright and sharp as pain.

But still a lesser light before the Gate of Heaven.

Mothers and Daughters



Nuwa
The Keeper

The Redoubt

Mountain: Stillness, Calm,
Cautious late Winter



Rong
Speaker

The City

Thunder: Arousing, Shock,
Movement, Spring



Jia

Ambassador

The Islands

Water: Infinitude, Emotion,
Mystery, mid-Winter



Chen
Visionary

The City

Fire: Illuminating, Intelligence,
Clarity, mid-Summer



Ling
Worldmaker

The Islands

Wind: Penetrating, Gentle,
Simple, early Summer

NUWA

GUARDIAN



'The mountain seldom moves. When the mountain moves, the whole earth trembles.'

NUWA is T'ien's Guardian and Historian, the Keeper of the Redoubt and of the colony's oldest traditions. She is eccentric, solitary and wilful. Her daughters are Rong and Jia. Growing old, Nuwa meditates on the experiences of a lifetime. She has summoned her shattered family to the Redoubt as crisis threatens the entire colony.



RONG SPEAKER

'What you risk reveals what you value. Terrible decisions require terrible purpose.'

RONG is a Speaker of the City, daughter to Nuwa and mother to Chen. An accomplished politician and demagogue, she has risen to be the effective leader of the City. The role of her sister Jia in Island leadership makes the present crisis a very personal one.

The background of the entire page is a digital illustration of a woman, JIA, standing on a ship's deck. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. She has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a blue and white quilted jacket with a red scarf. The ship's railing and some mechanical parts are visible in the foreground. In the background, there is a vast, icy landscape under a pale sky.

JIA

AMBASSADOR

'There is always the chance of a new beginning, a different end. We must leave inessentials behind. We must transform ourselves. Life always eats itself.'

JIA is an Ambassador for the Islands in their increasingly deadly struggle with the City. The daughter of Nuwa and mother of Ling, quiet and unassuming, she has long been overshadowed by her sister Rong. Her role within the secretive cult of Union has transformed her personality and brought her to a position of leadership and influence.



CHEN

VISIONARY

'I try not to burn up my world with rage. Maybe it's a daughter's job to piss her mother off.'

CHEN is the daughter of Rong, and is expected to succeed her grandmother as the next Keeper of the Redoubt. She is prominent within the City as a visionary activist who sees the possibility of change, though she struggles against her mother's dominance and the heavy burden that duty to her family entails.

LING

WORLDMAKER



'Sometimes you have to live in the hard places, the wrong places. Sometimes the safe place won't help you.'

LING is a worldmaker, a planetary ecologist and terraformer, battling to maintain the colony's fragile ecosystem. An Islander, the daughter of Jia, she is inward, solitary and strong-willed. Returning from years of virtual exile in the far zones, she has found her Islands and her mother transformed by a religious fervour she finds difficult to accept.

THE GATE OF HEAVEN



Opening, closing, the gate of heaven
Can you be like a bird with her nestlings?
Piercing bright through the cosmos,
Can you know by not knowing?

To give birth, to nourish,
To bear and not to own,
To act and not lay claim,
To lead and not to rule,
This is mysterious power.

- Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*
(translated by Ursula K. Le Guin).

