

The Human Family

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Hilcyon — Sdert 10, 1201

Mrin crawled backwards through the narrow conduit, dust falling off of the roof as his back scraped it. He tried to avoid getting any of it in his face. It had been many years since anyone had been through here, and he imagined many years would pass before anyone else bothered. This was the tenth conduit he had been exploring in as many weeks. These were old conduits, long bereft of water, and this particular water pumping system was not salvageable: the fusion reactor was dead, and the components were completely fried.

The last conduit he had explored had been a successful fix, after several complete failures. He'd gotten the melt-pump system back up and running, and there was now a little bit more water going down into the North-central viaduct as there had been before. It was, in the big scheme of things, a minor victory, and his chief was taking full advantage of it.

He got out of the conduit, dusted himself off as much as he could, shouldered his equipment pack, and started his long hike back to the maintenance building. His chief would not be happy today. He doubted that any of the other water engineers had had luck, either. He was always the most successful—if there was something that could be fixed, Mrin could fix it. He went to the locker room and put on a clean uniform, and knocked quietly on his chief's office door.

“Come in.” His chief had lost weight lately, as they all had. For some reason he looked particularly haggard, today. He had stubble on his head—that was a bad sign.

“Chief Jlen, bad news today.”

“More bad news?”

“The melt-pump system in conduit 34j is completely unfixable. All of the units are redlined, and the fusion reactor is dead. Most of the units need a new silicon triple liquid processor. The rest need some other parts. None of which we have any more of.”

“There was no way to...”

“Not with this one. With conduit 31p, there were only 3 bad units and the reactor was still doing well. I could use parts to make two of them work again, putting the whole system in that conduit back online. But here...”

“Alright. Thank you. How many more conduits are in your survey?”

“Just six more sir.”

“Six. And we got only one to work so far?”

“That’s correct. I hope that others have had...”

“No. None of the others have had any success. In fact, I need you to go check out conduit 21a when you are finished with this batch. I suspect you might be able to resurrect it. Hrol could not.”

“Sir...?”

“Yes.”

“What is going to happen now? If we can’t get more water to the North-central growing region...”

“People will starve.”

“There must be another way, sir. What about contacting...”

“Supreme Chief Klef will never contact the Breft. Ever. He would rather us all starve.”

“Sir...”

“Never mind. Take a day off tomorrow, you deserve it.”

“Um, thank you, sir.”

He left the maintenance building, and got on the tram back to his hamlet. As he looked absently on the reddish-brown terrain, he was glad he wasn't in his chief's position—but somehow, something had to change. They were in deep trouble, and Mrin didn't want it to get worse than it already was. But it would, inevitably, get worse, as more and more of the advanced units that had been provided by the Breft failed. Although Mrin was only responsible for one fraction of the conduits in one part of the planet, he knew that they all were sharing the same fate.

He arrived home, the home he still shared with his parents and sister. He had not chosen a wife yet, and his sister had so far refused to marry. It was a good thing she spent all of her time helping women give birth. She was the most sought-after midwife in the region. It was also a good thing that their parents were secret reformers. They didn't really care if either of them did what was expected. It did cause them strife with his grandparents, who were all outraged at his and his sister's delay in creating families. But who would want to create families now?

As he walked in, he could smell the breadmufs baking in the oven. His father was sitting on a bench, reading.

“Hi, Da.”

“Well, hello son. How was your day? Any success?”

“Nope, not today. It's bad out there.”

“Hundreds have starved this year.”

“More will starve next year. Just our section has had six unfixable conduit failures. I might manage to scrounge the parts to fix one of them, but...”

His father sighed. “Our movement is too fragile now for us to step in. I heard that in some towns, they are starting to require loyalty oaths in order to get food. People are too scared.”

“I know Da. I’m doing what I can.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Dinner is ready,” his mother called from the kitchen.

“Where’s Dlen?”

His mother said, “She’s off delivering a baby. All the way over in Brun. She won’t be back for a few days. I think she must have timed this perfectly, to miss my parents visit tomorrow.”

Mrin groaned. He’d forgotten all about it. His grandparents, particularly on his mother’s side, were conservative and took every chance to berate his parents about the lack of marriage of both of their children. Mrin knew that Dlen just simply didn’t want to be tied down. She liked her autonomy. Mrin didn’t really have a good reason—he just hadn’t found the right woman, he guessed.

“Well, I do have the day off tomorrow. I can help get things ready. I know it’s always a big deal for you, Ma.”

“Mrin, such a sweetheart!”

They sat down to eat. Mrin couldn’t help but notice how meager the meal was.

“Are we getting our proper ration?”

His father sighed. “Let’s not discuss this now, please?”

“Da! What’s going on?”

“When I went to get our ration today, the board had only two rations for our family.

When I asked why, they explained we were being punished for having an unmarried male in the

house. When you marry, and bring your wife into the house, they will raise the ration to five. But not before. Apparently, this is the new policy.”

Mrin didn't realize that his personal reticence to marry would have such a negative impact on the family. He realized that he now had no choice in the matter; he certainly was not going to let his parents and sister starve.

Independent Christian State, New Earth, November 27, 2103

Paul sat in the back of the church, fidgeting. This was, by far, his least favorite time of year. Starting with Thanksgiving week, which was full of fasting, and praying, and a service every single day, then on to Advent and Christmas, his family was basically in church every day for more than a month. He hated it.

Everyone rose, and he followed suit.

The pastor intoned, “We have sinned against God, and have been banished from Heaven.”

The congregation answered, “Forgive us, oh Father.”

The pastor said, “It is only by being pure, that we can return.”

“Help us, oh Father, to be pure.”

“When we die, pure and sinless, we will return to Earth.”

“Help us, oh Father, to remain pure until death...”

He knew the prayer. It was said in every service, and at every occasion, such as funerals and weddings. The expectation was that if you lived your life in purity, when you died, you would get to go back to Earth. He stopped repeating the words years ago.

When he was young, Paul had been very interested in theology until he ran into a wall once, talking to his father, when he was about ten.

“I’m confused about something.”

“What is it, son?”

“Why is it that we believe that people get to go to Earth after they die?”

“Because that is where God is.”

“But I thought God was in heaven.”

“Earth became heaven, son. God is there.”

“When we were on Earth, where was heaven? Why don’t we still go there?”

His father looked at him sternly. “Son, Earth is heaven, and we sinned, and were banished here.”

“But Dad...”

“Stop asking me stupid questions and listen to the pastor, alright?”

After that conversation, Paul lost whatever little faith he’d had that what he’d been taught resembled the truth. It wasn’t even logical. And every time he listened to this prayer being intoned just made that more clear.

Finally, the service was over. He got up, and left the church building, making his way home. As he was walking, he heard steps behind him. He turned to see his older brother Matthew looking at him.

Paul said, “What?”

“Why don’t you sit up front with the family anymore?”

“I like sitting in the back.” Paul slowed his steps to walk alongside his brother.

“I worry about your soul, brother.”

“Go ahead, worry away. I’m not.”

Matthew shook his head, and went back to walk with the other family members.

When he arrived back at the house, just ahead of the rest of the family, he saw the stout frame and dark brown hair of his mother’s cousin Re’liro. He was talking to Ke’lir, his daughter, who was a few years older than Paul.

“Re’liro!” Paul said with a smile. He was happy to see him. They hugged.

“Paul, you certainly have grown since I saw you a few years ago! You remember my daughter, Ke’lir?”

“Hi, yes I do.” They hugged as well.

“Re’liro! *What* are you doing here?” Paul turned upon hearing his mother’s angry voice.

Re’liro said calmly, “hello, Julia.”

“I asked you, what are you doing here? You don’t belong in the ICS. I tolerate your presence when you travel with grandmother, but now…”

Paul could see his mother’s hands balled up in fists.

Re’liro said, “It is grandmother I am here about.”

“What happened?” His mother seemed even more taut, if that were possible.

“She died yesterday. It was not unexpected. She was old, you know.”

Julia said, “So why bother to come all the way here?”

“Ke’lir and I are on our way to New Orleans, to meet Zrel, Joan and their family, and Kira and Khalid and their kids. We’ll all travel together. We wanted to tell you in person, and

also welcome you and your whole family to come with us to the funeral. I've even arranged for all of your tickets to Casiti."

"You already know that I would not set foot on that evil planet!"

"Julia, you were born there."

"That doesn't matter. We're not going."

"Julia, the whole family is gathering. I mean absolutely everyone. Beatrice was the last of her generation, and we need to honor that. Isn't it time you mended..."

"There is nothing to mend nor honor! Please go on your way."

Re'liro shrugged. "OK, as you wish. You and your family will be missed." Re'liro and Ke'lir got up.

Paul got an impulsive thought. "Wait!" Paul yelled a bit louder than he wanted to.

Julia looked at him sharply. "Paul, go in the house with your brother and sister and start preparations for the break of our fast, please."

Paul said, "I want to represent our family at the funeral."

Paul's father's face hardened into a mask, and Julia said sternly, "You will do no such thing."

"Mother, I turned 16 three months ago. According to the Church, I am an adult. Re'liro, can I come with you?"

"Of cou..."

His mother shouted, "No! I will in no way support this."

Paul turned to his mother, "It's my decision. My choice. I want to go."

Paul's father gripped his upper arm, and said quietly, "If you leave this house with those heathen, you will never be welcome in it again."

It didn't take Paul long to make the decision. He shook off his father.

"Re'líro, please wait a few minutes while I gather some things."

"Of course, Paul."

As he walked to his room, he could feel his father following him. When they arrived, his father closed the door.

"Son, you are making a huge mistake. It could cost you your soul."

Paul turned toward his father as he said, "You and Matthew seem to be so worried about my soul. Don't bother."

"We have insulated you from the wretched evil of the Casitians. You can't stand on your own in the face of it."

Paul could feel his anger growing. "Dad, I've heard enough about it from you and everyone. It's time for me to see for myself, and make my own decisions. I know that you and Mom don't respect our family, and its legacy, but I do. I loved great-grandmother Beatrice—I want to be at the funeral."

"What kind of legacy is it if it caused us this destiny? It is the great sin of your family."

"Dad, enough! I'm going. Let me just go, please?"

"I will mourn you as lost." He turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Paul gathered a few personal belongings that he wanted to keep. He figured that he'd never set foot in this house again. There was no sadness, nor regret. He had been working up to this for a very long time.

Hilcyon — Sdert 10, 1201

Klef looked again at the careful script in the journal he had inherited from his mentor, Jlrel. The original writing was of the great chief Willm, chief more than 60 years ago. Willem finally conquered all of the stray regions, and brought all Kinder to heel. He was the best leader Hilcyon had seen in a very long time, and he was the leader Klef wanted to be. Willm took a solemn vow to never contact the Breft no matter what happened. Each Supreme Chief since Willm had taken the same vow. And even if Klef were held at sword point, he would never contact the Breft.

A chime sounded.

He looked up and said, “Enter.”

Klef saw Ylorp’s tall, somewhat stooped presence enter his office. He sighed, remembering patience. Ylorp was Willm’s only grandson, and hadn’t been the pariah his father was, but Ylorp had struggled to reach the rather modest Third Chief status that he had just been appointed to. But Ylorp had still yet to win a fight. He could not rise further without it.

Ylorp stood at attention in front of Klef’s desk.

“Sir. You summoned me.”

“Yes, Third Chief. I wish to congratulate you on your new position.”

Ylorp nodded slightly. “Thank you sir.”

“I know you want to honor your grandfather’s legacy.”

“Yes sir.” Ylorp looked a little frightened. Well, not a surprise given how his father had behaved.

“I have an assignment for you.”

“Sir?”

“There is a group of Second and Third Chiefs whose role is to discover dissent, wherever it is. With these new rationing policies, we have been able to quash most of it. But there are still people who meet and plan in secret. I want to make sure they are found out, and punished.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Report to First Chief Msrotl—he’s the main liaison. He’ll assign you to a group, and give you tasks.”

“Thank you for your confidence, sir!”

“Don’t thank me, son, thank your grandfather. If it weren’t for him, you wouldn’t be a Chief at all.”

Ylorp gulped, and nodded.

“Dismissed.” He watched Ylorp leave his office. He didn’t really think Ylorp would make much of himself, after all. Klef knew Willm’s legacy was dead.

Another chime rang; this was a busy day. Klef remembered it was time to meet with one of his least favorite chiefs. Klef looked up to see First Chief Zrok enter. Zrok was shorter than most Kinder men, which left him open to ridicule, and Klef thought it was well deserved, height notwithstanding. Zrok handed him a report. It looked like water output and reservoir levels. He didn’t care.

“Why are you showing me this?”

Zrok bowed. Klef could see the fear in his face. Weakness.

“Sir, our water situation gets more desperate by the year.”

“So? I don’t care.”

“But sir...”

“Have the new rationing policies been implemented across the board?”

“Almost, sir.”

“Almost?”

“Some hamlets have resisted adding the loyalty oath, sir. Otherwise, the other policies, such as limiting rations for families with unmarried adult men have been implemented everywhere.”

“And the chiefs of those hamlets resisting loyalty oaths? Why have they not been removed?”

“Sir...”

“Why have they not been removed?”

Zrok stopped, and took a breath. Klef didn’t actually want to hear the answer.

“Let me make myself completely clear, Zrok. Your job, as my Food and Water First Chief, is to make sure that the only people who are getting food and water are the ones that deserve it. And anything, I mean ***anything***, that gets in your way, you need to crush to the ground. Are we clear?”

Zrok looked up, and Klef saw something in his eyes that he’d never seen before. A kind of steel. He smiled. Perhaps Zrok was salvageable after all.

“Yes sir. You make yourself completely clear.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Zrok turned without another word, and left.

Fifteen days later, Klef understood the new steel in Zrok’s eyes, as he faced him in the ring. Zrok had challenged him to battle for Supreme Chief, and Zrok would die because of it. It

was the fourth round, and Zrok had done ably, but he looked exhausted and bled from several wounds. It was time to end it. Klef swung his circle blade around, feinted twice, and when Zrok was busy looking for the next swipe to the left, Klef swung his blade strongly and quickly from the right, taking off Zrok's head with a strong tug. It rolled to rest next to his foot, with Zrok's dead eyes staring up at him.

Brun, Hilcyon — Sdert 10, 1201

“Push!” Dlen was kneeling between Prun's legs. She could see the head of the baby crown. “You're almost there, Prun.”

“Ahhhhhh...”

“Again, push!”

The baby finally came out, into Dlen's hands. She examined the babe. It was a boy, and in fine shape. She tied off the umbilical cord, then wrapped the baby in a blanket, and gave it to the mother.

“You have a healthy son, Prun.”

Prun started to cry, with the baby in her arms.

“What is his name?”

“His name is Ylen, after my great-great grandfather.”

“The Supreme Chief?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful name.”

“Yes. Our family always cherished his memory.”

Dlen nodded. There were many families like Prun’s. Families like hers. Descendants of the reformers that failed, keeping hope alive of new reforms, a new revolution. Tonight, Dlen was staying with an old friend and her husband, also reformers, who she hadn’t seen in a long while. She was exhausted, but she was looking forward to spending time with Hrihl tonight.

On her way out, Prun’s husband pressed into her hand a small number of coins.

“I’m sorry it can’t be more.”

“It’s alright. I understand.”

“Our standard ration costs more and more these days. Anyway, thank you so much for coming all the way to Brun.”

“You are welcome. I wish you and your family the best.”

Dlen left, and walked the two stats to her friends’ house. It was late, and there weren’t many people in the streets. These days, most people stayed home when they weren’t at work. Doing anything else took energy, and with the food shortages, people didn’t have much in the way of spare energy.

She arrived at her friend’s door. There looked to be no one home, which seemed strange. She knocked and knocked, but there was no answer.

A question came from her left, “Looking for Trin and Hrihl?” She turned, and she could see a man standing in the shadow of his doorway.

“Yes.”

“They are gone.”

“Gone? Where?”

“Dead. Trin died three days ago, and Hrihl died yesterday.”

“Died?”

“The traitors refused the loyalty oath, and couldn’t find food anywhere. They starved.”

Dlen felt the tears flowing down her cheeks before she realized she was crying. She didn’t know what to say. And she didn’t know where to go. The trams had already closed down, and inns didn’t take in single women. She would have to go back to Prun’s. As she walked she remembered Hrihl. They had grown up together, until her father moved to Brun for a special job position. They had played together, and Dlen had a place always in her heart for Hrihl. She saw Hrihl only occasionally, but it was always joyous and comfortable. Hrihl and Trin were much like Dlen and her family, wanting change, wanting something new. It was sad beyond her ability to bear that they both were gone.

She arrived at Prun’s, and was gracefully taken in. She stayed there until morning, refusing their offers of food, and went to the tram to go home. The sadness, she imagined, would be there a very long time.

Hilcyon — Sdert 11, 1201

He always cried when he heard the chanting. Ylorp’s love was the priesthood, and being in the service, and hearing the chanting reminded him each time of what he had lost.

Some might think he would avoid the temple, but he didn’t. Ylorp needed to hear the chanting, needed to be close to the Exalted King. Ylorp believed the Exalted King knew his heart.

He thought briefly of his father, disgraced, and finally executed for treason. He felt committed to make sure he would never make that mistake. Everyone looked to him to rehabilitate his family name. He was the grandson of the great Chief Willm, and he was going to make something of himself.

Sometimes he wished he'd been born a better fighter. That way, it might be easier to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. But he wasn't strong, and was ungainly, and uncoordinated. Even though he trained and trained, it seemed that he'd never be ready to win a challenge.

But in his heart, he didn't want to win a challenge. He didn't want to kill. He wanted to be here, in the temple, chanting. He reflected on his last conversation with Priest Hgrun.

The priest had said, "son, you are distraught."

"I hate what I do, Priest Hgrun. You know I wanted nothing but the priesthood."

"Your family needed you. The Kinder need you, Ylorp."

"How?"

"Be patient. The Exalted King is with you."

"I want to believe that, but..."

"What makes you doubt?"

"I don't know; my life just seems to have no meaning."

"Ah, my son, your life has deep meaning, whether or not you are a priest. You have much to offer."

"But I can't fight!"

"You don't need to fight."

"I don't understand."

"Trust the Exalted King."

Ylorp tried to trust. He tried to find in his heart that place that knew that everything was happening like it should. The chanting slowly took his despair away, and he was left with a feeling of calm determination. Yes, he would make his life mean something. He just didn't know how, yet.

New Orleans, New Earth, November 27, 2098

Glor was caught up in the story he was reading. It was yet another fictionalization of early history, this time from the Kinder point of view. He thought this one was well done, far better than the more famous history, written by that Terran, and published before he was born. Glor didn't care much for Terrans, except those in his family. Even though his father tried to tell him differently, from Glor's point of view, the Terrans were worse than the Casitians.

But here he was, sitting at the New Orleans spaceport, waiting for his mixed family, so they could all travel to Casiti together to the funeral of his great-grandmother Beatrice. He always loved his great-grandmother. She had spent time on Hilcyon, Kinder Home. Glor wished he'd known his great-grandfather Ngellin, or any of the true Kinder who had been born on Hilcyon, but all of them had died by the time Glor was born. He now spent all of his time in the Kinder region, mostly in Zweek, the capital. He liked it there, and had found his place. He was being groomed for leadership, like most of those in this generation of his rather famous clan.

“Hi, Glor!”

He looked up to see Ke'lir, who sat down next to him.

“Hey, Ke'lir. Where is everyone?”

“Dad and Paul went to change the travel arrangements since most of Paul’s family isn’t coming. I guess the rest haven’t made it here yet. We still have a couple of hours before the transport leaves. Why are you here so early?”

“I had a meeting here in New Orleans yesterday.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I just got a spot as a NEA Kinder Liaison.”

“Congrats, Glor!”

“Thanks. It’s a pretty low-level appointment. But I like it - it’s fun work. I can do most of it from home in Zweg, but I do need to be here now and again.”

“I managed to make it onto the New Earth Agency Technology Committee, the NEA definitely has been reticent to include many Casitians, even though plenty of us live on New Earth, too.”

Glor for a minute found it oddly interesting that both he and Ke’lir, though cousins in the same family, considered themselves in different human cultures, and neither thought of themselves as Terran.

“I’m surprised that Paul is coming. I didn’t actually expect any of cousin Julia’s family to show up.”

Ke’lir said, “dad was definitely overly optimistic. I didn’t even want to go to the ICS personally, but I’m glad we did. Otherwise, I doubt Paul would have gotten a chance to come with us.”

“What do you think about Paul? I haven’t met him yet.”

“He’s a quiet one. He hasn’t actually said as much, but I don’t think he believes all that his family does. And from what happened when we showed up—I don’t think he’s going back.”

“Really?”

“His father basically said that he can’t go back now.”

“Wow. Well, there’s plenty of family he can stay with for the time being.”

“The trip from the ICS was an eye-opener for him.”

“He’d never been out of that backwater?”

“No. Never. He had no idea what the rest of the world looks like. He’s going to be blown away by Casiti.”

“I can’t quite imagine what it would be like to see the world from that perspective. I mean I’ve never been to the ICS, but I’ve seen enough pictures and documentaries...”

“Well, I’ve been there several times already, and it is always shocking. The only reason we are ever allowed in is because we’re related to Julia.”

Glor could see Re’liro and Paul walking toward them. He stood up.

“Hi cousin Re’liro.” They hugged.

“Glor, I’d like you to meet Paul. Paul, this is Glor. He’s...”

“Pkygy’s grandson. Hi Glor. Nice to meet you.” They shook hands.

Re’liro said, “You know the family tree?”

“When great-grandma Beatrice visited last, we got to spend some time alone together. She left the family tree she’d been working on with me. I learned all of it. I liked learning about the family, even though my parents didn’t really want me to.”

“Re’liro!” A shout from several yards away made them all turn toward it.

Glor saw a bunch of people who he recognized as the rest of the family that was going to travel with them.

“Khalid!” Re’liro said, and rushed toward the tall man with dark hair and a rather large nose. Khalid was his father’s age. Khalid’s wife Kira was great-aunt Leticia’s daughter. Glor had met their kids Cassie and Amadu. He and Amadu saw each other pretty regularly. He went to greet him.

Amadu said, “How was the meeting here in New Orleans, Glor?”

“It was fine, I guess. I feel a little new at it, and the role is pretty low-key.”

Glor liked Amadu, and especially liked his sister Cassie. He wished they weren’t related. If they hadn’t been... well, no point in going down that road. They were, and that certainly wasn’t going to change.

Glor said, “Hey, Amadu, let me introduce you to Paul. He’s Julia’s son.”

“Julia’s son? They came?”

“Only he came. Apparently, it was a *thing*. He’s not welcome back, now.”

“Wow. That part of the family is crazy, eh?”

“I think there’s enough crazy to go around in this family.” He smiled.

They walked over to Paul, who by then had sat down next to Ke’lir, watching the family.

“Paul, I want you to meet Amadu.”

Paul stood up. “Hi Amadu.”

“Good to meet you.” They shook hands.

As everyone caught up with the other’s recent activities, Glor realized that he actually liked his family. He didn’t quite know how to square his burgeoning loyalty to Kinder, and his loyalty to his family. But he knew it would eventually figure itself out. He surprised himself in thinking that he was looking forward to visiting Casiti again. He certainly was looking forward to seeing his father and grandfather again.

Hol'venif, Rel'toro, Casiti, 55 Musb, 803

Ro'mer was sitting at his desk in the morning, furiously making arrangements with his AI. Great-grandmother Beatrice's funeral was tomorrow, and they were about to be inundated with family from New Earth. At this point, most of their illustrious clan lived there. His grandmother's generation, including great-aunt Marianne, his grandmother Tivyl, and his great-uncle Pkygy, lived on Casiti. His mother Sa'lira, and her cousin Hrelr, also still lived here, as did his more distant cousin Thomas and his daughter Tricia. The rest of the clan lived on New Earth, and most of them were going to make it back here for the funeral.

There was a lot to get done. He'd found places for all of the family to stay. Paul, the unexpected guest, would be staying here, in his family's house. Ro'mer shook his head at the thought. For some reason, his uncle Re'liro had been incredibly optimistic that Aunt Julia would come with all of her family. Ro'mer knew better. Having spent a lot of time with great-aunt Marianne, he knew that Julia would never set foot back on Casiti. He was surprised and a little concerned about Paul; he was young, and an unknown quantity. Ro'mer had been told that not only had he never been to Casiti—he'd never been out of that backwater called the Independent Christian State.

Because it was winter, all of the activities were going to be indoors. And it was somewhat of a disruption in the lifestyle of the season. Most people didn't travel much during Musb. Ro'mer's pregnant co-parent Mi'nali had been a trooper. She, along with several members of their family group were handling all of the food for the celebration after the funeral. They were going to have to gather up food from a lot of people in order to make it work. But Beatrice was well-loved on Casiti, so it wasn't going to be a struggle.

In fact, on his plate was the seating arrangements for the funeral. Beatrice had wanted to have a more traditional Terran funeral, which included a time when people all sat and heard music and people speaking about Beatrice's life. And Ro'mer knew that although most Casitians wouldn't care where they were seated, and who they were seated with, the Kinder and Terrans would. Great-grandmother Beatrice's children were easy. They and their spouses or current companions would sit together in the front row of the circle, on one side. On the other side would be Casitian, Terran, and Kinder leadership. There were several family members in that group, including his cousin Zrel, a Terran representative and the current leader of the council, himself, a Casitian member of the council, and his cousin Hrelr, a Kinder member of the council.

Hrelr was the first of the Michaelson clan to represent the Kinder on the council. Ro'mer's mother, Sa'lira, had been the first of the clan to represent Casitians. In each case, there was some degree of opposition to those appointments, but the family had enough influence in all three communities that it had worked out just fine. Ro'mer's appointment, as the second in the family to represent Casitians, had faced no opposition at all.

It was both the great blessing and the great curse of his family. Because of their history, and particularly, the history of his great-great-aunt Marianne and her long-time Casitian partner Ja'el, and his great-grandparents Beatrice and Ngellin, his family was a mixture of all three communities—all three cultures. At times they were somehow a cohesive whole, and at other times, fractured by their differences. It seemed that somehow, his family kept trying to be the example for the unity all of humanity, except that they often failed at it.

The worst example, of course, was his cousin Julia, who lived in that backwards cultish enclave, that proclaimed that the sin of humanity had been to listen to the Casitians. They claim that if that sin had never happened, humanity would never have been evicted from Earth. Ro'mer

also heard weird stuff like they believed that when someone died, they got to go back to Earth. He didn't really understand any of it, and certainly didn't understand how Julia got involved there. She'd grown up on Casiti.

Ro'mer tore himself away from those thoughts, and got back down to work on the seating arrangements.

After some time, Ro'mer heard a soft chime at the door. He got up and left his room to find that Yel'osi, one of his family group, had opened the door. Ro'mer felt the blast of frigid air that preceded two people, one of whom he recognized as his mother's long-time companion, Je'lin. They had been companions long enough that she'd become part of the clan.

He took over the door from Yel'osi, who went back to whatever it was she had been doing.

Ro'mer said in Casitian, "Je'lin, come in."

She spoke in English, "I bring you Paul, from New Earth. They have now all arrived."

Ro'mer smiled, as Paul started to unwind his heavy scarf from around his head and face.

Paul said, "It's really cold!"

"It's winter, Paul. And winter on Casiti is way colder than anything on New Earth."

He shivered. "Well, at least it's warm inside."

Je'lin switched back to Casitian, as English was not her first language, "Sorry, Ro'mer, I can't stay. Your mother is beside herself at the moment because your grandmother is inconsolable."

"I understand. Thanks for bringing Paul."

"Will you be alright with him? Everyone says..."

“No worries, Je’lin. It will be fine.” Ro’mer switched back to English. “I’ll see you at the funeral.”

Je’lin nodded, and walked out the door. Ro’mer closed it behind her.

“So, Paul, I want you to make yourself at home. This is a pretty large house, but it’s hard to get lost in. Let me show you around.”

“OK.”

“This is the gathering space, where we spend time together as a family group. Over there,” Ro’mer pointed toward the kitchen, “is the kitchen, and beyond that, our greenhouse. Over here is what you would call the bathroom.”

They walked in, and Ro’mer could feel the confusion coming from Paul.

“It’s…”

“It’s communal. Expect to find other people here when you come in.”

The bath was standard for family groups. It had a very large, deep circular tub, always full of circulating hot water in the center, with benches and such around for people to sit on. There was a large sauna in the corner, a row of sinks, and some toilets connected to the reclamation system.

They left the bathroom. “Over here is the guest room. You’re the only guest this week, so it’s all yours—pick any bed you please. Please feel free to put your stuff wherever. On that side of the house, and up the stairs are all of the rooms for the family group.”

“Um, are all Casitian houses like this?”

“No. Actually, not. We’re in a family house. Most Casitian houses are much, much smaller, as they generally house only one or two people. There are ten of us living here, but within a year there will be several infants as well. I’ll let you settle in. Are you hungry?”

Paul nodded.

“OK, meet me in the kitchen when you are done putting your stuff in the guest room.”

Paul went into the guest room, and Ro’mer went into the kitchen, to find if there was something vaguely Terran to cook. Luckily, one of his family group loved sandwiches, so Ro’mer did his best to make a sandwich that Paul might deem edible.

After a brief while, Paul entered the kitchen. He was dressed somewhat strangely. Ro’mer guessed it was the dress of his region on New Earth, but he’d certainly never seen anyone dress this way. He had on a dark-colored heavy shirt kind of thing, and then a lighter shirt underneath with wide triangular collars. A strange strip of cloth went from around his neck down the front of his shirt. His pants were a little more familiar to Ro’mer, although they were tighter and made of the same dark fabric as the heavy shirt—a fabric he hadn’t ever seen. Paul didn’t look especially comfortable in those clothes.

“Paul, would you like something more comfortable to wear?”

Paul looked down at his clothes as if he’d just noticed what he was wearing.

“Um, sure. These are my... church clothes. I didn’t have a chance to change them before the trip—I left in kind of a hurry. And I didn’t get to take a whole lot of other clothes with me because...”

“Don’t worry. You are about the same size as I am. Here, sit and eat this sandwich, and I’ll get you some other clothes.”

“OK, thanks. I didn’t know you had sandwiches on Casiti.”

Ro’mer smiled. “One of my family group happens to love Terran food, so there is a lot of it around. I hope you like the sandwich. It has cheese.”

“Thanks!” Paul smiled.

Ro'mer picked out clothes that he thought Paul could handle—nothing too Casitian. He chose the clothes he generally traveled with when he went to New Earth, which was less and less often these days. He picked a comfortable pair of pants made of thicker material, so that Paul could stay a bit warmer, and a short tunic and vest to go over it. He left the clothes on the bed that had Paul's bag. When he arrived back in the kitchen, the sandwich was already gone.

“Well, you made light work of that, son.”

“I guess I was hungrier than I thought. I didn't think Casitians had cheese.”

“About twenty Casitian years ago, some farmers imported goats and sheep, so there has been Casitian cheese for a long while now. Anyway, third meal will be in just a little while, but I can make you another sandwich...”

“No, no, it's OK. I can wait for di... third meal. I think actually I want to take a little nap—I'm completely fried.”

“Yes, it will take you a while to get used to the new time, and the different day length.”

“So short.”

“Yes, compared to New Earth, it is short.”

Ro'mer watched Paul leave, and go to the guest room. He worried, a little about what life on Casiti would be like for him.

Hol'venif, Rel'toro, Casiti, 55 Musb, 803

Ke'lir said, “Thanks, Ra'el. I really appreciate you letting me stay here.”

“Ke'lir, it's nothing.”

“Well, this whole thing interrupted your Musb...”

Ra'el smiled, and waved her hand in the air. "It's alright. The interruption will be over soon enough. Winter is a whole of your years long, remember?"

Ke'lir laughed. "Right. I keep forgetting. We don't even have winter."

"Indeed you don't. Before we decided to be companions this winter, Ve'ril threatened to move to New Earth because he was tired of Casitian winters. But I love them."

As if on cue, Ve'ril came into the room, bearing a steaming platter of vegetables.

"I might yet move to New Earth, Ra'el."

"Yes, yes, I know Ve'ril. I know."

"Some of New Earth is not so great, but where I live, up in the North Circumpolar IZ, is really nice. Not so crowded, and has weather you might find suitable. Most people find it too cold."

They sat around the table and ate, discussing the news of the community and family. Ke'lir always loved being on Casiti to visit, but she couldn't imagine living here full time. Winters that were a year long? Not for her. Besides, she'd miss Lake Superior. She'd heard that Loc'deher was beautiful, but it was pretty overrun by Terrans, and none of her family lived there at the moment. And, for her, family was what mattered.

After dinner, she retired to the guest room to record in her journal. Her experience traveling to Casiti with the family had had its very interesting moments, especially the conversation she, Paul, and Glor had had on the transport to Casiti. It had started out with an innocent question of Paul's.

"Ke'lir, why do most people in our family have weird names, even though everyone is Terran?"

Glor said, "Everyone is *not* Terran! How dare you..."

Ke'lr put her hand on Glor's arm. "Glor, let's take this one step at a time, shall we. Paul, what do you mean by weird?"

"Well, in my town, everybody has names like Mary, and Paul, and Jonathon, and... you know, *regular* names."

Ke'lr said, "Yes, those are all Terran names. Further, they are all names that come from one particular culture on Terra—the United States."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What do you mean what do I mean? I don't understand what you are asking."

Paul looked down. "Never mind."

"No, Paul, look I want to be able to explain it to you, but in order to do that, I need to get a sense for what you know."

"Obviously, I know nothing. I'm beginning to understand that I really don't know what's true anymore."

Glor said, "You live in a little backwater that no one pays attention to anymore. That's what's true."

"Glor, that's not fair. Give Paul a break. It wasn't his choice."

"It was his mother's. His mother, daughter of the great Marianne's namesake. Her choice to live in that pit."

"Yes, OK, it was her choice. But that doesn't mean that we can't help Paul figure things out."

Glor got up. "He can figure things out on someone else's dime."

Ke'lr felt some degree of responsibility to Paul. A responsibility she couldn't explain, but was unwilling to part with. There was time after the funeral. She wasn't planning to go back

to New Earth for a while. She'd spend some time with Paul, and orient him as best as she could. She knew he was going to have a rough time of it.

She, on the other hand, was going to love being on Casiti. She hadn't been around for a couple of years, and she always had a fun time. She felt herself a part of the Casitian culture, even though she grew up and lived on New Earth. Her co-parents had done everything to make sure she had a true Casitian childhood. She did, however, know full well that she had more than half-Terran ancestry. Ancestry that she took very seriously. Sometimes, the mix was hard to keep together in her head, but other times, it seemed to all make perfect sense—her Casitian culture, and her Michaelson family.

Hol'venif, Rel'toro, Casiti, 56 Musb, 803

It was dark in the guest room, but Paul could hear sounds from the common space. People seemed to be up and about, and moving around. He, on the other hand, had no interest in getting out of bed. First, it was cold. He had lots of blankets, but he could feel the cool air on his head. He was dog-tired from the trip, and time changes. He didn't even know what time it was. Casiti had a day that was just over half of the length of the day he was used to. Casitians only slept during one period of the day, which seemed weird to him. No mid-day nap, no night-time work period.

What really made him want to stay under the covers was he was completely overwhelmed. At the time, leaving the ICS felt like the best decision, but now, he wasn't so sure. Everything was different than he expected and nothing was familiar. The trip from his house to New Orleans had been completely surreal. He had no idea that a couple of hours away was an

entirely different world. Clean, tree-lined, and well-kept streets. Buildings that were taller than any he'd ever seen, silent vehicles zipping to and fro, people dressed in all different ways. He felt like an infant, seeing the world for the first time.

And he had to urinate, but the last thing in the world he wanted to do was use the large communal bathing room. When he'd used it last night, there were several other people there, lounging around in the tub. He was embarrassed. Everyone here seemed to take nudity in stride, but where he was from, one only showed nudity with a spouse. This casual nudity was very difficult for him.

Everyone had been very sweet, friendly and helpful, which somehow made the whole thing worse. He could handle the perversion of their semi-public nudity, but to combine that with the reality of his experience in their presence was disconcerting. He found everyone to be more open, honest, and loving than anyone he'd ever met before, and he didn't know what to do with that. He expected perversion, but he had been taught that the Casitians were full of duplicity, and there was nothing like that.

Finally, his bladder won. He got up, and opened the door.

"Paul, good morning." He looked up to see Mi'nali, who he'd been introduced to yesterday. Mi'nali was Ro'mer's co-parent. The whole Casitian family thing had totally confused him.

"Good morning, Mi'nali."

"There is breakfast in the kitchen, although most of the family group has eaten. Take your time, there is no hurry. The funeral isn't for another hour."

"Only an hour?"

"A Casitian hour—I think equivalent to about four of your hours."

“Oh, alright, thanks.” Paul went toward the bathing room with his head down. As he walked in, he noticed he would be all alone. He relaxed.

Afterwards, he was sitting in the kitchen, eating the unfamiliar breakfast in front of him. He had to admit that he liked it, even though it wasn't what he'd normally eat. Some sort of grain, with some odd-tasting fruit mixed in. And a strange-tasting hot beverage which was sort of a mix of coffee and fruity tea.

“Like the fuge?” He looked up to see Ro'mer walk into the kitchen.

“Fuge?”

“That's the hot drink you're drinking.”

“It's good. A little unfamiliar. But I like it.”

“It doesn't have the kick of coffee.”

“You've had coffee?”

“Of course. We've had just about every kind of Terran food and drink imported to Casiti. I've had quite a bit of varied things. Coffee was one of the early big hits, back when we still had access to Earth.”

“Ro'mer, can you explain why God banished us from Earth? Everyone says it was the sins of our family.”

Paul could see some struggle in Ro'mer's face, and it made him wonder whether his family was right all along.

“Paul, who you call 'God' didn't banish us from Earth. Basically, we banished ourselves.”

“What? I don't understand.”

Ro'mer got up, and came back with a slim tablet. He spoke into it in a language Paul didn't understand.

"Here. Read this." Ro'mer handed Paul the tablet. "It's a fairly balanced history of what was called the 'Casitian Crisis' on Earth, and its aftermath, which included our leaving Earth. Terrans and Casitians have somewhat different opinions about what happened, although I think a consensus is emerging. But read it—I think it will be educational for you. It will also tell you a lot about your great-great aunt Marianne, your grandmother's namesake."

"Thanks."

"Oh, and also, when you are finished with that, you can ask the unit to bring up a book called 'Spirits Alike' by an author named Ja'lend'a. I think you'll like it."

"OK." Paul was a little puzzled, but he'd remember. It did sound interesting.

"Paul, do you need any clothes to wear at the funeral?"

"Well, I brought my black suit..."

"Black is not considered a proper color at a funeral, Paul. Not on Casiti."

"I see."

"We mostly wear white, or bright colors. Not dull colors or black. Even though Beatrice wanted a traditional Terran funeral, her children decided that since it was going to be on Casiti, it would have some Casitian elements. There are going to be some Terran and Kinder elements too."

"Well, I don't have anything white, or bright."

"I figured as much. I found an outfit for you that I think you'll like."

Later, as Paul sat in the large, circular room, he watched his family, and the many others who had gathered for the funeral. He had only been to one funeral in his life. Three years ago, his father's father died suddenly, and they had the funeral in the church. Paul couldn't even compare that to this. It had been a dour affair, and rather unpleasant. This was nothing like it. His family, wearing bright colors and sitting on pillows mostly in the first two rows of the circle were chatting with each other animatedly, and others in the room seemed almost happy. He couldn't quite understand it.

He was sad. He didn't know his great-grandmother very well, but somehow he knew love for her, and it was hard knowing that he'd never see her again. He realized that each time she visited, she had shown him a tiny little bit of this life—this colorful, happy life. And those visits were at an end. Then, in a rush, he realized that he could have this colorful, happy life, if he wanted it. But did he really want it?

Hol'venif, Rel'toro, Casiti, 56 Musb, 803

Ke'lir was fidgeting. She was tired, and the service had gone on a lot longer than she thought it would. And plus, Paul, who was sitting next to her, would keep whispering questions at her, and she had to finally insist that he stop, and she would explain everything later. She could tell it wasn't satisfying him.

She'd spent some time with great-grandmother Beatrice over the years, but she was always somehow, even alive, this legendary figure, like Beatrice's two older sisters, Marianne and Leticia. And all three of them held statures that felt impossible for Ke'lir to even think about

being like, but yet, she knew that her family, as well as many Casitians and humans from New Earth, expected her generation of Michaelsons to do great things. So far, though, there didn't seem much in her generation to expect. Paul was a total unknown and Glor, although he was given a position in the New Earth government, was combative and sometimes downright sullen. Liam seemed to care more about parties than politics, and Cassie and Amadu, also seemed to not be very serious in their approaches to life. The one exception was Tricia, two years older than Ke'lir, who already had a position as a Terran representative on the Terran-Casitian-Kinder Human Council, now called the Consej.

Ke'lir herself hadn't really figured out her path. She liked technology, and had been assigned to the New Earth Agency Technology Committee. The work was engaging and enjoyable, but she didn't know how that was going to translate into something worthy of her family.

She was roused out of her reverie by a man who looked older than any person Ke'lir had ever seen. He walked into the center of the circle, and stood with a stooped stature. It was still the time of remembrance, which Ke'lir thought, and hoped, was toward the end of the rather long funeral service.

He said, "I remember meeting Beatrice for the first time, when I piloted the ship that brought her home. She had just lost her husband, Pkygy, and she was sad, but she had a strength that surprised me—the strength of character we all got to know. She had learned a lot on Hilcyon, and I know that she effected change on Hilcyon—change we might not see for many years in the future."

Ke'lir remembered that strength of character. That steel in great-grandmother's eyes and manner, and a gentle and compassionate strength. She had never served on the Consej, but her

influence was greatly felt. And it was she that had helped to keep the Kinder and Casitians talking to one another. Ke'lir wondered what would happen without her.

Hilcyon — Sdert 15, 1201

Mrin stood in front of his chief, who had summoned him urgently. He had been in the middle of attempting a repair, but Mrin knew it was hopeless.

“Mrin, I got a message from the Second Chief of water in the Central Valley district. They were digging a new tunnel to the glacier, and they found a huge cache of spare parts buried in a cave. It was probably left over from the uprising. Anyway, they don't have any engineers nearly as talented as you are, and they would like you to look over the cache and give them some tips about what might be there. In return, you'll get to bring back some useful parts for us.”

“That's great, sir. I hope we can find a few triple silicon liquid processors, as well as core memory units. We could really use some of those as well.”

“Go right away. Here's a ticket to the transport to the Central Valley district headquarters. An engineer will meet you there, and take you up to the cache.”

“Thank you, sir.” Mrin grabbed the small paper ticket from his chief.

As he sat in the transport, which was a large vehicle carrying both people and cargo on the road, he watched the hamlets get fewer and further between, until there was nothing. The headquarters of the Central Valley was a five-hour transport ride, so he settled in for the trip. He had brought a book, which to anyone's casual perusal, was a historical account of the military exploits of a first chief 65 years ago, who had tried to invade Nyet Grier Nro. But the book was

actually a collection of the stories of Dbor. The book had been given to him by his parents a few years ago. He treasured the book, and read the stories over and over again, as did his sister. When his father gave him the book, he told the story of his grandmother Krely, who had a role in the uprising, and the mysterious Btric, who diligently gathered up the stories and started the process of having them copied over and over again, and then left to go to the planet of the Grier Nro. He and his parents were proud of that family history, although his own grandparents were ashamed of it. His grandfather, Twor, still a Second Chief, always swore complete fealty to the Kinder way.

Eventually, he decided to try and sleep a little, and he tucked the precious book back in his bag. He was later awoken by the transport stopping as they had arrived at their destination. He walked to the administrative headquarters of the Water Authority, which looked to be in some state of disrepair. A man who sat at a desk in the lobby looked up as Mrin walked in.

“Can I help you? Water requests have been moved to Thirdday. So not until...”

“I’m not here for a request. I’m Mrin, sent from the North Central region.”

“Oh! The engineer. Yes, sorry. Let me take you to Jral. He’s the one who will take care of you.”

“Thanks.” They walked down a series of halls, to a tiny room, with a man working at a workbench full of tools.

“Jral, here is Mrin.”

“Ah! Mrin. Glad you are here. Come in.” The other man left.

“I imagine you might be tired and hungry by now. It’s a long, long drive up to the cave. We can do that tomorrow. You’re staying with me and my family tonight.”

“Thank you.”

After dinner, Jral's wife was pleasant, and very polite in showing him where he would sleep. He was tired from the long trip, as well as the unfamiliar surroundings. He could tell from their dinner conversation that Jral was a traditionalist. His wife didn't even eat with them—she ate in the kitchen with Jral's young daughter. Jral's son, who was about four years younger than Mrin, had already chosen a wife, although the wedding wasn't happening until the first day of Lykl. Jral didn't make anything of the fact that Mrin still hadn't chosen a wife, but Mrin could sense judgment from both Jral and his son.

The next day, during the long drive out to the cave, Jral brought the subject up.

“So Mrin, why is a man as pleasant and good-looking as you still without a wife?”

“I guess I haven't found the right woman yet.” Mrin felt uncomfortable.

“What does that mean? If she's half-way pretty, and can bear you at least one son, what does it matter?”

“I don't know...”

“Mrin, you know that you can't live with your parents anymore without choosing a wife.”

“Yes, I know. I can't let the family suffer because of me.”

“Good boy. Look, there are more women than men, you know—you have plenty of choice. Just make it.”

Mrin nodded. He knew he didn't really have much choice, and it had been on his mind ever since he learned of the ration change. He'd found ways to eat away from home, or at least be away from home during dinner, as much as possible since then. He had considered Gren, and

Tyvl, as well as Tyrin. He liked all three of them, and Tyrin, at least was really smart. He did appreciate smart women like his mother. Well, maybe it would be Tyrin.

“Alright, Mrin, we are here.” Mrin looked out of the small vehicle they were driving, and didn’t see anything remotely resembling a cave.

“Where?”

“Five stats out that way,” Jral pointed. Mrin groaned. Five stats walk would take them at least two time units.

“The ground is too unstable out there for us to drive on. We’ve gotta walk.”

They got out, and Jral pulled a cart out of the back of the vehicle.

“This will make it a little easier to get the parts we need out. What we need most, though, is your identification of the parts. You are the one who knows the most, and has had the most experience with these Breft parts.”

Mrin nodded. He was in an odd situation. Ever since he was little, he was fascinated by Breft technology. He read everything he could find on it, and when he was an apprentice engineer, he cataloged a lot of the parts, and tried to find as much documentation on them as possible. For some reason, other engineers despised working on these parts, and fewer and fewer Kinder wanted to be engineers. He was the youngest engineer by far, so it was strange to him that he was considered the most expert. But it was sadly true.

They walked toward the cave, and alternated dragging the rather cumbersome cart. Mrin dragged it further than Jral because Jral was older and seemed weaker to Mrin. In the distance, Mrin could see a small hillock appear, and then they began to descend somewhat into a gully.

“This way.”

They turned sharply, and rounded a curve in the gully. Mrin could see the cave entrance clearly. They left the cart at the cave entrance, and went inside. Jral put a headlamp on his head, and the light shone brightly. Mrin could see a door, which was locked.

Jral entered in a key code, and the door clicked open. As Mrin and Jral entered the cache, Mrin gasped. This was an amazing cache of equipment.

“Mrin, let’s make this quick. Find the items we need.”

“Well, I can already see a lot of this doesn’t have anything to do with the water conduits.”

“Well, we can ignore those...”

“But other authorities...”

“I am under strict instructions. If there are parts we can use, then we will take them. Otherwise, we leave them here.”

Mrin didn’t really like that, but there really wasn’t much he was going to be able to do about it. He would, however, take mental notes of what was here. He wished he’d managed to notice the key code Jral had entered. They walked through the assorted jumble of equipment, and most of it was completely unfamiliar to Mrin. There were large cubes with complex controls that had words he didn’t even recognize. The word “jretlr” was clearly on one of the controls. Mrin knew that was the word for wormhole. Maybe this wasn’t a cache from the uprising. Maybe this was a stash from a spaceship!

Mrin kept walking around, finding nothing really useful, although it was all interesting to him. Finally, he found a pile of assorted small parts and units in a far corner of the cave, including several triple silicon melt units, a control core, several analysis units, and some pressure valve controllers. All of these would be very useful. He saw a small unit that looked

very unusual, and had words that were not Kinder on it. He looked up, and realized that Jral was on the other side of the cavern, looking around at something. He took the unit, which could almost fit in his open palm, and carefully placed it in his bag. He would examine it at his leisure later, but he somehow knew he didn't want Jral to see it.

“Jral!”

“Coming...” The older man arrived, out of breath.

“I found a lot of useful stuff here. We should put it all on the cart.”

They spent the next time unit loading the whole pile of parts onto the cart, and Mrin did a last look around the cave. No more small mystery units, and certainly no more useful parts for the water authority.

When they arrived back at headquarters, Mrin and Jral equitably divided the parts. Well, almost equitably. Mrin noticed that Jral seemed completely uninterested in the core controllers and analysis units, so he was glad to take them. The analysis units weren't necessary, but it would be nice to have some, to at least have a sense of what was in the water they were pumping. They hadn't had a working analysis unit in all of the time that Mrin had been working on the conduits.

Several days later, after he had paid a visit to Tyrin, and asked her to marry him, he was sitting at dinner with his parents.

His father said, “Mrin, your mother tells me that there will be a new member of this household!”

Mrin blushed. “Yes, da. I've asked Tyrin to marry me, and she agreed.”

“I'm glad you've found someone. I know Tyrin is a smart one.”

“She is. I like that. When do you think we should have the wedding?”

“I think soon would be good. I hear there is another reduction in rations coming.”

“Yes, I know. The water situation is worsening.”

“Did you hear about Zrok?”

“First Chief Zrok? No. I haven’t talked to anyone since I got back—I was busy using the new parts for a conduit I am trying to resurrect.”

“He challenged Supreme Chief Klef.”

“And...?”

“He lost. I heard it was a valiant battle, but the Supreme Chief was just that much better.”

Mrin knew from the grapevine that Zrok didn’t like the Supreme Chief’s attitude. He, like Mrin, wanted to call the Breft, and get help with their water problem. But Zrok losing would mean that someday, possibly soon, their people would starve to extinction.

Later, in his room, he pulled out the small, mysterious part he’d found in the cave. It was basically a large cube with rounded edges, with a black square panel flush on one side of the cube. He had been mistaken in his initial quick assessment that there were no Kinder words on the device. There were some that had been clearly printed well after the manufacture of the device. There were these words: “Do not, under any circumstances activate this communications device. This device is the property of the Supreme Chief, and must be only used by him.”

Mrin knew that must be a device could call the Breft. Now that Zrok was dead, there was no way Mrin would put this device in the hands of his superiors. And maybe, just maybe, he had a way to save them.

Hilcyon — Sdert 17, 1201

Ylorp sat tiredly in the shadows, his eyes darting back at the door, waiting for people to leave. He'd already identified every single one of the guests in that house. He didn't understand why his Second Chief needed him to stay until everyone left.

He yawned. He had appreciated this assignment from the First Chief, but he hadn't realized how completely boring it was going to be. He spent most of his time sitting or crouching in corners, watching certain houses, and identifying people who were enemies of the Kinder way.

He heard a door creak, and looked up to see several people leave, all of whom he knew about already. Then, finally, a tall woman left who he'd not seen enter. He squinted. He didn't recognize her at all—she would stand out anywhere. She must be from another hamlet. He would follow her, and see if he could learn where she was from. He watched her walk down one road, and once he was sure he would not be seen, he slowly followed.

She went to the house of a man he knew all too well, his cousin. His cousin's father, Ylorp's father's brother, had been implicated in the failed plan that had led to the execution of his father. But it was never possible to prove his involvement. Ylorp knew his uncle and cousin's reform inclinations. The rest of his family wasn't speaking terms with either of them. Ylorp still didn't know who the woman was, but he could connect the family he was watching with his cousin's family. Enough to get his cousin arrested. He hesitated. Did he really want to get his cousin in trouble? He realized he didn't really have much choice.

He walked back to his Second Chief's house, and gave his report. He finally went home, and fell into bed, exhausted. His wife didn't stir. They had been trying hard for a child, but he didn't have the heart to wake her. He fell asleep almost at once.

Two days later, he was sitting in a room with his Second Chief, and his cousin. His cousin had been arrested the night before, on suspicion of sedition.

"Dlen was just there to help deliver my son. She's a midwife. I have no idea where she had been before that."

His Chief said, "Her name is Dlen?"

"Yes, Dlen Gnova Jolrs. She's from the capital."

"Did you know she was a traitor?"

"Look, she's known as the best midwife in the region. I wanted the best for my wife and new baby. How did I know what her activities were?"

Ylorp's Chief looked at him. "Do you have anything to add?" Ylorp could see the acid look his cousin gave him, and that made him feel bad.

"Not really sir. There was just the woman."

"Alright. Thank you." He turned to his cousin. "You are free to go. But understand we will be watching you. Your father and uncle's betrayals are remembered well."

Zwek, New Earth, December 24, 2098

Glor had not been himself since the visit to Casiti last month. He always felt weird around his Casitian and Terran family. But somehow this time it was worse. It was great seeing

his father and grandparents, and he heard the updates on the mass move of the entire Kinder population of Rel'toro back to New Earth. But being around the cousins, all of whom considered themselves either Casitian or Terran, was disconcerting, for some reason. And he thought back on his conversations with Paul, and cringed. Glor thought Paul was a backwards jerk. He bristled when he remembered the argument the two of them had toward the end of Glor's visit. The conversation had started out very casually.

Glor asked Paul, "Are you staying here on Casiti for a while?"

"I guess. I don't really have anywhere else to go right now."

"It's nice here. If you get tired of the Casitians, you can go visit Loc'deher. Lots of Terrans there, and the weather is decent. Jul'when is horribly cold in the winter, but it has a lot of Terrans, too."

"Yeah, I might travel around. Are you going to live on New Earth for a long time?"

"I assume so. My dad has wanted all Kinder to live together in the Kinder region on New Earth for a long time, and that is finally coming to fruition. I'm frankly not much of a fan of Casitians."

"The perversions?"

Glor was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, the companion thing."

"Oh, yeah, I don't get why they do that, it is weird. Kinder do life partners."

"Have you found the right woman yet?"

"No. I haven't yet. I am a bit jealous of my best friend Flis, who found wonderful man to be his partner."

Paul was silent, and Glor couldn't figure out what was going on in his mind.

Paul finally said, “I thought all Kinder were normal, like us.”

“What do you mean, *normal*?” Glor was angry.

“You know... men and women normal.”

Glor got up. “Paul, you are a backwards asshole, you know that?”

“What, what did I say?”

“Fuck you. Ask Ke’lir. *She* seems to be willing to educate you. I’m not.” Glor left, quickly, and didn’t look back.

Glor ignored Paul for the remainder of his visit, but for some reason, he kept thinking back on the conversations he’d had with Paul. Ke’lir seemed to have patience for Paul’s idiocy, but everything about Paul just infuriated Glor.

Hol’venif, Rel’toro, Casiti, 80 Musb, 803

Paul was completely miserable. He’d been on Casiti for 25 days. He was counting them. He’d spent most of his time holed up in the guest room at Ro’mer’s family house. Ke’lir came to visit a few times, but Paul was afraid that she’d never come back after the last visit. They’d had a terrible argument. They were discussing history, and Paul was asking questions after having read this history Ro’mer gave him.

Paul said, “There is something I don’t understand about why the Casitians came to Earth in the first place. My pastor said that you came to spread your decadence and sin. But I don’t believe that.”

Ke’lir said, “That’s good, because it’s not true.”

“But this history suggests that the Galactic community forced the Casitians to come to Earth.”

“Well, that’s an opinion. And it’s subtle. I would say it was more like they *strongly persuaded* the Casitians to be involved. Casitians had been visiting Earth for many centuries before contact, and we knew Earth humans better than anyone else. It made the most sense, really.”

“But the reason the Casitians and Galactics came was really the dolphins, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“So if there hadn’t been another intelligent species on Earth, would you ever have come back?”

“I don’t know Paul.”

“But you’d already let horrible stuff happen. For thousands of years.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Really, how can you say that?”

“Look, Paul...”

“Really, you Casitians are a bunch of jerks to let humanity do all that to itself before you came.”

“Paul, that’s not fair!”

“It is fair! You had all the technology, and all the galactic contact, and peace and prosperity. And what did Earth have? War and strife and pain.”

“You did that to yourselves!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We had managed to evolve a peaceful society, while you all went on raping and pillaging, killing and maiming, destroying the planet...”

“And you could have stopped it!”

“Paul, you don’t understand!”

She got up, and got on her outer cloak and scarf, and went out, slamming the door as she did. Now, he felt regret for his angry words. But he was angry. When it was clear to him that the Casitians had let all the horrible stuff on Earth happen for so many years, he suddenly hated all of them. He couldn’t understand how they could have allowed humanity to go as far as it had. And he hated that they’d allowed the ICS to exist. He really hated them, and his family, for that.

He cried for a while, feeling lost. He hated where he had come from, and he hated where he was now. He had no idea what he would do next. Somewhere in his brain, he remembered that he was going to read that second book. What was it called?

“Please give me ‘Spirits Alike’ by... uh, by Ja’lin... ?” He didn’t remember the author’s name.

His unit spoke softly. He didn’t realize it could. “Ja’lend’a. It is now available.”

He tapped the icon for the book, and started to read.

Jor’ar’lir, Rel’toro, Casiti, 20 Klef, 803

Ro’mer sat on the comfortable chair across from Gil’ern. He was unusually unsure of himself. Partially, it was because he had always looked up to Gil’ern, who was, by far the most revered member of the Ja’lit school that Ja’lend’a founded over 13 Casitian years ago. It was the

newest school, but one that had, in some ways, the highest stature, given to it mostly by its famous founder, who helped Casitians embrace all of humanity with her leadership.

Gil'ern said, "Thank you, Ro'mer, for taking the time to come speak with me."

"You are quite welcome, Gil'ern. I can't quite imagine what this is about."

Gil'ern smiled, the wrinkles at the edges of her eyes became evident. "I wanted to talk with you about your... cousin? Paul."

"Paul?"

"Yes, Paul. About fifteen days ago, he petitioned to join the Ja'lit school."

"He did? He didn't mention it to me!"

"I don't think he wanted you to know."

"But why not?"

"Paul is a troubled young man, Ro'mer."

Ro'mer sighed. "Yes, I know. Will joining the school help?"

"He can't join now; he is not ready yet. First, he doesn't have the requisite education. And... well, he's too spiritually confused at the moment. But..."

"But?"

"It is clear from our few conversations that underneath the confusion lies an extraordinary young man. We just have to help that man emerge. He will be ready someday, I know it."

"Do you have suggestions?"

"Yes, I do. He needs to find a craft. Any craft, really. Something to occupy his time, and get him to focus. And he needs to live where it will be easy for him to come to our gatherings and classes."

“I can petition for housing on his behalf. I’m sure they will give him a dwelling. And a craft... I’ll ask him what he likes to do, and I’ll set him up with someone.”

“That sounds good.”

“Alright. Thank you so much Gil’ern. I’ve been worried about him.”

“Was it you that gave him ‘Spirits Alike’ to read?”

“Yes. I had a feeling he might appreciate it.”

“That book is changing him, Ro’mer.”

Ro’mer left Gil’ern’s dwelling, and got back into his vehicle for the trip back to Hol’venif. As he was riding, he sent a message to central Rel’toro housing, requesting a dwelling in northwestern Jor’ar’lir for Paul to live. Ro’mer didn’t know what it would be like for Paul to live on his own, but perhaps it was as good a time as any for it. And the craft... he had no ideas for that, but it could wait until he spoke to Paul.

Paul had gotten several messages from his parents over the course of the time he had been staying on Casiti, and he refused to answer them. Ro’mer knew that eventually, Paul would have to talk with them. The first twenty or thirty days of Paul’s visit had been rather painful for everyone, but since the beginning of Klef, Paul seemed much more mellow and less pained. He’d mended fences with Ke’lir, finally, and they were spending time together. Ro’mer was happy about that, since Ke’lir was due to return to New Earth in a few days.

He arrived back at his house, to see Yel’osi sitting with Paul in the gathering area. He waved, and after hanging up his outer garments, went to join them.

Paul said, “I guess I can’t get my head around the idea that you don’t really have a hierarchy.”

Yel'osi, who was serving on the Rel'toro architectural committee, explained. "There is a little bit of a hierarchy, but it's more a ladder of respect, rather than orders for how to do things or what to do coming down from above."

"Respect?"

"Yes. As people show their abilities and wisdom, they gain more respect, and are thus nominated for things that have more and more responsibility."

"Ah, that makes sense. But you still make decisions collectively?"

"We do, yes. The voice of those with higher positions carries more weight, as it were."

Ro'mer asked, "So Paul, speaking of showing abilities—how might you want to contribute?"

Ro'mer could see the confusion on Paul's face. Paul said, "I want to study truth and life."

Ro'mer nodded. "I know. But you're not ready for that."

Paul looked up. "I'm not?"

"No. I had a conversation with Gil'ern, who thinks you are a marvelous young man who needs more time and guidance."

"I see." Paul looked down.

Yel'osi asked gently, "Paul, what kinds of things do you like to do?"

"Everybody always came to me with broken things. I am very good at fixing things, and learning about how things work."

Ro'mer said, "Yes, I heard you giving your unit some pretty complex commands a while ago."

"I like technology. The more complicated, the better." Ro'mer saw the first smile he'd seen on Paul's face. Clearly, this was a good direction.

“How would you like to apprentice to someone who works with technology for a while? And live in Jor’ar’lir, where you can be close to the Ja’lit school?”

“Really? I could live close to the school, and fix things?” Paul sounded almost incredulous.

“Yes, really. I’ll set it up for you.”

“Thank you, Ro’mer. Maybe I can figure out what to do with my life after all.”

Hilcyon — Lykl 12, 1201

Dlen sat while her mother was cooking dinner for the family. Now that Mrin had wed, and Tyrin was in the house, their regular rations were returned. Not that the rations were all that much food, really. Dlen could hardly remember what it had been like when she was younger, but the five rations they were getting now couldn’t be anywhere near what the family used to eat. She estimated that it was less than 1/2 what a family of five really needed. And once Tyrin was pregnant... Dlen didn’t want to consider what might happen. She tried to get her meals elsewhere, or go without, as much as she could.

Because there were always more women than men, Dlen didn’t feel much pressure to marry. That was a good thing, as she had no interest in it. It was always strange to her that her lack of a husband was stigmatized, given that many women by necessity would be without husbands. But she didn’t really care. She did her best at being a midwife, and that was a fine life for her.

She broke from her reverie. She asked her mother, “So Ma, how is Tyrin getting along with everyone?”

“Tyrin is a sweet woman, you know. She’s smart, and she thinks a lot like us. I’m glad Mrin chose her. No need to hide anything from her.” Her mother continued to chop vegetables.

“That’s good.”

“One of the first things she told me was that her family had a treasured copy of the stories of Dbor.”

Dlen nodded. “She wanted you to feel comfortable.”

“Yes. You’ll like her.”

“What’s going to happen, Ma? Mrin says that eventually, all of the water conduits all over the planet will stop working. He thinks were possibly only a year or less away from that. What happens then?”

“I don’t know, Dlen. I like to think that our leaders will find compassion, and contact the Breft, and save us, but I don’t know that they will. Neither Mirin nor your Da think that will happen.”

“So we all starve?” Dlen shook her head.

“Yes. Or there might be a very few people left.”

“How can the Supreme Chief let that happen?”

“He cares more about a principle than he cares about people, I expect. Besides, he’ll be the last one to starve, you know.”

“I know. There has to be something we can do!”

“What? They hold food over our head.”

Dlen sighed. “I know. I lost Hrihl to that. And I know we would never say a loyalty oath. We will starve sooner, rather than later.”

Her mother nodded. “But you know, Mrin is keeping us alive. Without him, I think all of the conduits would have failed already. They’ve sent him all over to help.”

“I know. Good old Mrin.”

“And his value will keep our family alive, too.”

Dlen said, “Until they decide they don’t value that anymore.”

Her mother looked at her. “Dlen, shall we talk about something else?”

“Ma, what else is there to talk about?”

Jor’ar’lir, Rel’toro, Casiti, 25 Klef, 803

It had happened so fast. First, it seemed Paul was a miserable wretch, and then, he had his own place and a job! Even though it seemed miraculous, it was really just his cousin Ro’mer who made it happen.

Paul had just spent his first day as a student, working under Wer’lar, with six other people who were relatively close to his age. Wer’lar’s shop specialized in repairing and manufacturing equipment related to agriculture. Paul had spent the first day working with a colleague on some equipment used to regulate the melting and pumping of water from ice. Casiti had a lot of ice, and getting the water from where the ice was to where the crops were grown was necessary, as unlike New Earth, there was little precipitation outside of winter snow. And because of the constant exposure to water and mud, the parts didn’t last all that long.

Wer'lar had perfected the manufacturing process, so they were now in a position to not only repair broken equipment, but make new equipment when the old stuff had to finally be scrapped. Paul was starting out slowly, because most of the documentation was written in Casitian, and he wasn't anywhere near fluent in it yet. In fact, after dinner, he was going straight to the language lessons.

He walked out of the cold street into his new dwelling. It was small, which suited him fine. It had a central area, in which he had a corner with comfortable pillows to sit on, a couple of chairs, and his desk. He had a small bedroom, just enough for the bed and a chest to hold his clothes. He had a small bathing room all to himself, and a small kitchen. There was a greenhouse off of the kitchen, and one of his colleagues had promised to come visit and help him set it up. For now, he had been gifted food from a member of the Ja'lit school. That felt both sweet, and uncomfortable. He knew that growing one's own food was how it was done here, and he looked forward to when he could not only grow his own, but grow enough to give some away.

His work schedule was modest, as everyone's was during winter. Some people stopped working altogether, but younger people tended to work a lot during the winter. He would be working for three days, then had three off. The rest of the year, he would likely work five, and get three off. During the time off, he intended to learn Casitian, so he could read the documentation he needed for work, as well as read Ja'lend'a's work in the original language. Ja'lend'a's writing had come as a revelation to Paul. In it he finally began to understand why he had so many doubts about what he learned growing up. And in it he found solace, and places to look for God. That made him feel like maybe he wasn't so lost after all.

He did have an unpleasant task ahead of him. It seemed that his father's threat that he would never be welcome back home was, in fact, an empty one. He had gotten six messages

from them which he had not answered, and Ro'mer, Sa'lira and Hrelr had all gotten messages from his parents asking about him. Ro'mer finally took Paul aside before he moved to Jor'ar'lir, and told him he had to send a message back to his parents. It was time finally. He sat at his desk, and pushed the icon for his AI.

“Please record message for Julia and Jonathon Girard, on New Earth.”

“Recording.”

“Hi Mom and Dad. Sorry I haven't written back. I've been busy, and... delete please.”

“Deleted.”

“Record again.”

“Recording.”

“Hi Mom and Dad. I know that you have been anxious to hear news about me, and I'm sorry I hadn't sent a message until now. I'm doing fine here on Casiti. Cousin Ro'mer has been really helpful, as has Ke'lir. I don't know how long I'll be here... I think it will be a while. Anyway, really, I'm fine. I'm a new apprentice at a workshop that fixes things and makes things, and I love it so far. I'm also... I'm learning more about our family, and history, and all sorts of things I'm sure you'd rather I didn't explore. But I am, and it's good. I promise to be better at sending messages. I hope you are both well. Give my love to Matthew and Martha. Much love, Paul.”

He realized that he wasn't sure he *liked* Casiti. But he knew that somehow he *needed* Casiti right now.

Hilcyon — Mrontl 2, 1202

The new year celebration had been muted this year, because of food shortages. Even the full rations were slim for the five of them. Mrin was hungry constantly. But, he still had to go to work, hungry or not. He walked into the Water Authority building into some degree of chaos. All of his colleagues were gathered around, and there was a shouting argument. He approached his bunched colleagues.

“Look, Ylon might have a more forceful style, but he’ll be fine as chief.”

Mrin said, “Ylon? What happened?”

Kler, who was, by far Mrin’s least favorite colleague, said, “Jlen was removed yesterday by First Chief Zetl.”

“What? Why?”

“Disloyalty to the Kinder way. You’ve seen how he feels about our current predicament. He hasn’t done anything to help us become self-sufficient. He was sent to a prison asteroid yesterday.”

Mrin was angry. “You don’t understand anything Kler! It’s not...”

“Ah, so you are disloyal, too, eh?”

“I am not disloyal. I care about the Kinder. I don’t want us to starve!”

“We must be self-sufficient. That’s what Ylon will help us to do.”

Mrin said, “I see. And I’m assuming you are the one that is going to go out on a glacier and get us water by what? Breathing on it?”

Kler shouted, “Traitor” and swung a punch. Mrin ducked, dodged, and stepped back.

“I’m going to work now. I don’t know what the rest of you are doing.”

Kler said, "Watch yourself, boy. You might have finally gotten a wife, but I'm watching you."

Mrin knew this to be the truth. He left the knot of his colleagues, and went back to the locker room, preparing to go to conduit 39a, which needed some maintenance. It was one of the few left working, and Mrin wanted to make sure it kept working.

A colleague entered the locker room. "You need to be careful, Mrin. They are looking for any excuse anyone can find to drop people from rations."

"I have a wife to take care of now!" Mrin was angry.

"I don't think that matters anymore."

He sighed. "Yeah, I don't imagine it does."

Mrin went out to do his work, and kept his head down all day, thinking of what life would be like under chief Ylon. He didn't have so long to find out. When he arrived back, he was told that Ylon wanted to see him. He changed to a clean uniform, and went to Ylon's office.

"Chief Ylon, Mrin Gnova Jolrs reporting. Congratulations on your new appointment, sir."

Ylon looked up, frowning.

"Thank you. You are being re-assigned."

Mrin asked, "Re-assigned?"

"Yes. I'm sending a team up to Jarth glacier. You'll be hauling ice blocks off of the glacier by cart, and dropping them into Reservoir 2a, which is currently dry."

Mrin struggled. On one hand, questioning Ylon's order would likely have bad consequences. But he didn't know whether or not Ylon understood that he was the one most skilled at fixing the equipment.

"Alright, sir. May I ask a question?"

“You may.”

“I had three conduits on my list to check for repairs, and if I’m...”

“We won’t be doing any more repairs. We know the equipment will fail eventually, and we need to learn how to get the water on our own. After this proof of concept trip, I’ll be asking you to clean out the conduits of any galactic technology so water from our glacier efforts can flow freely.”

“I understand. I wonder...”

“You are dismissed,” Ylon said forcefully.

“Yes sir.”

Mrin had no idea how Ylon had in mind for them to get ice blocks from the glacier, or for ways to get water through the conduits without the galactic melters. The last time it was attempted, using solar reflectors, the amount of water they were able to liberate from the glacier was miniscule in comparison to the water generated by the melters. Mrin could not imagine that carving out blocks of ice would be much better.

He went home, and told the whole story to his family over dinner. He was glad that all of them commiserated with him, and he felt good that Tyrin, like him, cared more about the people than whatever was defined as the “Kinder way.”

Hol’venif, Rel’toro, Casiti, 30 Klef, 803

“But Da, you don’t understand!” Glor was frustrated. Usually, he and his father seemed to be on the same page about most things.

“Glor, you must remember that we are not the true Kinder. We...”

“We are as true as it’s going to get, Da!”

Hrelr took a breath. “Son. We are *not* the true Kinder. We hold their place, in the fervent hope that when they make contact again, we have made enough space in the culture for them to enter. That’s all we can do. If we, who are unrecognizable as Kinder, act as if we are the true Kinder, when the time comes, there will be no room for them.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Da. I’ve read the histories. I’ve read the stories...”

“The stories that got the original publisher sent to a prison asteroid, remember? Glor, look, from what I have heard, you are doing a great job as New Earth Kinder Liaison. And soon, my dream of uniting what I call the ‘New Kinder’ on New Earth will be realized. Our time here on Casiti is over. We have taught them, and they have taught us. It’s time for us to be separate.”

“Well, about that... the housing push is done. We’re ready for everyone. The house three houses from me is for you and Ma. It’s a very nice house—more space than this one. Tvor’s house is also ready, if you want to let him know about that.”

Hrelr smiled. “That’s wonderful, son, although I don’t know what we’d do with more space. Your brother is a bit loathe to leave Casiti, but he will eventually join us all. Anyway, I’m looking forward to being on New Earth permanently.”

“And, we govern ourselves.”

“Yes, I am looking forward to that, as well.”

“How are the Casitians taking this?”

“Quite well. I think they understand that this wasn’t really meant to be permanent. Ngellin felt that it would be good, and I believe it was. I’m glad I get to complete Ngellin’s great work, and call it done.”

“I don’t know how we can keep the space open, Da. If we fill it...”

“We need to be conscious. To try and remember what their needs will be. It will be fine.”

“Do you really think they will ever contact us?”

Yes, Glor, I do. It may not be for a long time, though. Your grandson may well be having this conversation with his son before they contact us. But then, you never know. The deserters who went back might have had an effect.”

Glor’s father went back to what he was doing, and Glor was left with his thoughts. He realized he’d promised to visit Paul, who was living in Jor’ar’lir. Glor hadn’t seen Paul since after that horrible argument the two of them had last year. Glor had seen Ke’lir several times since, and apparently, Paul was getting better, and being less annoying. For that, Glor was happy. Glor didn’t know what would ever become of Paul. He certainly wouldn’t care if Paul wasn’t a part of their family. But he was. At least he was more reasonable than his parents.

Glor said to his AI, “Send, please, a message to my cousin Paul in Jor’ar’lir. ‘Paul, I know a great new little Terran-themed joint in central Jor’ar’lir that serves awesome Terran food, and has nice live music. I’ll come pick you up at 10th hour on 33 Klef.’”

He hoped that perhaps they could find some common ground to stand on together. They were cousins, after all.

Pa’rai’s, North Circumpolar Independent Zone, New Earth, June 5, 2104

Ke’lir’s eyes were closing. She was dog-tired from a long day of meetings in New Orleans, and she’d just gotten back home to find three large reports sitting in her inbox for her to

read in the next few days. She was trying to get a bit ahead, because she had hiking plans with a friend tomorrow. Well, “friend” might not be quite the right word. She was going hiking with Stacey, who Ke’lir was very interested in.

Part of the problem of being a Casitian on New Earth was that there wasn’t a winter in which to hunker down with a companion. Most New Earth Casitians had adopted serial monogamy, or even the semi-permanent monogamy of Terran culture, instead of something that looked more like the 3/4 of the time single, 1/4 of the time with a companion approach. Ke’lir wanted to fully express her Casitian culture, but she wasn’t exactly sure how to go about it. Plus, Stacey was Terran. And Terrans didn’t talk about relationships or sex in the same easy, open way that Casitians did. She was just going to have to wing it, she realized.

The report in front of her eyes at the moment was interesting to Ke’lir. It quantified the number of galactic technical items that Casitians had been able to start manufacturing. Casitians were the only ones that had enough experience to be able to even think about it.

The galactic community had been extraordinarily generous before they closed the wormhole. NEATac, which was only one of two bodies that kept track of technology, estimated that the technology they had been given would last more than 3000 years. In addition, they had provided a rather extreme level of documentation, but it still wasn’t enough for Terrans to manage to figure out Galactic technology.

The Consej had given NEATac the role of tracking technology use on New Earth, and tracking supplies of needed technologies. The Casitians were in charge of learning to manufacture as much galactic technology as they could manage, mostly from raw materials in New Earth’s extremely rich asteroid belts. Ke’lir had read transcripts of early meetings of the Consej in its first days, debating over whether or not it was appropriate to manufacture galactic

technology. Some Casitians were adamant that they should not—that the intent of the galactic community was just that they survive with what they had, until they could rejoin the community. Over time, the Terran approach won over. There was no guarantee that the Kinder would ever rejoin the rest of humanity. And if they did not, humans would remain outside of the galactic community for a very long time. Possibly forever.

And, as of yet, Casitians had been unwilling to let many Terrans learn the details of the galactic technology. This was slowly changing, and Paul's new position on Casiti was certainly helping things greatly, given the stature of their family. And Paul did seem to be enjoying the work a lot. Ke'lir was happy for him. He seemed to be in the process of finding his place.

Hilcyon, Sdert 3, 1202

Mrin walked home, dog tired. He'd spent the last two weeks nonstop on the glacier, helping to carve up large pieces, to be carted away and put in one of the reservoirs. It took a huge amount of effort, and the amount of water they were able to get into the reservoir was tiny. Worse yet, the last conduit in this region failed. There would basically be no water. The Central Valley wasn't faring any better. They had only one working conduit. There were maybe four working conduits in all of Hilcyon, and those were in peril, since no one was repairing them anymore.

The elevation of Zetl to First Chief of Food and Water for all of Hilcyon had been nothing less than a complete disaster from Mrin's perspective. Zetl, who was completely loyal to First Chief Klef, had this silly idea of Kinder self-sufficiency. Mrin wished that the leaders

would at least use some sense. Human self-sufficiency was impossible on Hilcyon—living on this planet required galactic technology. Mrin didn't understand why the Supreme and First Chiefs didn't understand that. Mrin had read his history. During the long period when Hilcyon stopped communicating with the Breft, they were still allowing regular drops of necessary equipment every hundred years or so. But with the last conflict, when the galactic community cut off humans, the Kinder leadership decided to go it alone. It was a disastrous decision.

He opened the door to his home, to find his whole family sitting in the living room. They looked up at him, and he could tell something had happened.

“What's wrong?”

His father said, “Our chief, who had refused to implement the loyalty oath for food rations gave in. And you know...”

“You refused.”

“I refused. We have no food.”

His mother said, “That's not entirely true. I knew this was going to happen, so I have been reserving bits of grain, flour and seeds. We probably can eat for about a week.”

Mrin said, “Well, we'll just starve sooner than others. The conduits are failing, they are refusing to fix them, and the amount of water we were able to get from the glacier over the last two weeks was, well, pitiful.”

His father looked defeated. But Mrin wasn't. He decided to tell the family what he had. He got up, went into his room, and dug out the device from the pile of clothes he'd been hiding it in. He brought it out. Everyone was staring at him.

“Remember when I went to the Central Valley to assess that equipment cache?”

His father said, “Yes.”

“I found this. I didn’t tell anyone, but I’m pretty sure it’s a device to call the Breft.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Look on the side, here. It says ‘Do not, under any circumstances activate this communications device. This device is the property of the Supreme Chief, and must be only used by him.’”

“Well, let’s try it, shall we?”

Mrin nodded. He looked all over the device for some sort of switch, and finally found a depression on one end. He passed his finger over the depression. Nothing happened. As he was turning it over again, a red circle lit on one side. He put it down, with the red circle facing the top. Some symbols appeared in the window that was flush with one side. He didn’t understand the symbols—he assumed they were Breft. The red circle turned green, but nothing else happened.

Mrin said, “I wonder if it’s just sort of a one-way signal?”

They sat, and looked at it, wondering whether it worked, or anything would happen. They waited, and waited. Nothing happened.

Mrin said, “Well... I guess maybe we’ll starve after all.”

They talked for a while about strategies to get food, and ways to conserve. Mrin said that he would quit his job, and try to do something that would get him paid in food. His father reminded him that he’d have to agree to the loyalty oath.

Mrin said, “Da, look...”

“No son. If you feel that you need to say the oath to eat, I won’t stop you. But I would rather starve.”

“I understand, Da.”

They talked some more, then they all went to bed. Tyrin and Mrin couldn't find energy for lovemaking, so they just cuddled, and fell asleep.

Mrin completely forgot about the device, so several days later, when he was in the town square looking for work, and he saw his father rush to him, he assumed something was wrong with Tyrin or his mother.

“Da!” He shouted. His father did not say anything until he reached his side.

His father said quietly, “Come home. Now. Something happened.”

“What?”

His father shook his head, and Mrin followed his father home. He walked into the living room to see a three-dimensional image of a small person on the top of the device.

Mrin was amazed, and didn't know what to say, so he said, “Hello!”

With the strangest accent Mrin had ever heard, the figure said, “Hello. My name is Glor. We didn't think you'd call so soon.”

New Orleans, New Earth, November 5, 2099

Glor hated meetings. They always seemed so pointless. He liked to get things done. Not that there was much to do as the liaison between the New Earth Agency, and the Kinder community. There were few disputes between the Kinder and their neighbors, and few items that needed discussion. But today, it was a meeting to plan the strategy that would help begin to unite all of New Earth under one government.

No one really thought it would happen any time soon. Most countries and zones liked their autonomy, and didn't want to have to answer to anyone. But it was true that there needed to be better stewardship of the resources of the planet, and that was best accomplished by a global government. Glor himself wasn't convinced. And he was bored. He looked at his tablet, reading the local news feed.

He looked up when the door flew open, and Ke'lir of all people entered the room. Glor knew Ke'lir was in town—they were going out to eat this evening with their cousin Liam, who lived in New Orleans. But Ke'lir didn't have a role in this current set of strategies.

Ke'lir interrupted the proceedings, and shouted, "Everyone! The Kinder have called."

Glor stood up. "What?"

"The Kinder have called. The device was activated."

"What?"

"Glor!"

"I'm sorry. I'm just... What do we do?"

She said, "NEATac has a protocol. We need to call the Consej, first."

Lo'eli, the Casitian liaison to the NEA, said, "I'll call the Consej. I imagine we'll have to have a meeting between the Consej and NEATac."

John Broner, the current head of NEA, said, "I should be there, too. This is going to have a big impact on New Earth."

Glor said, "I'm not so sure. I don't expect any Kinder to move here, really. I imagine that they primarily want help to survive on Hilcyon."

Ke'lir said, "That's what I'm expecting, too. Anyway, we don't have time to all go to Casiti—so we need to schedule a virtual meeting. John, I'll make sure you're roped in."

“Thanks.”

Lo’eli said, “I’ll find out how soon all of the Consej can meet.”

The meeting broke up, and Glor followed Ke’lir and Lo’eli out of the room. Ke’lir led them to the communications center, something that wasn’t used so much now that Casiti and New Earth were all on the same network. There were several people in the room, none of whom Glor knew.

“Glor, this is Sandra Germain. She’s the one who has been in charge of monitoring transmissions from Hilcyon. She’s been at this job for a long time now.”

Glor and Sandra shook hands. Sandra said, “Very nice to meet you, Glor. Yes, it’s been twenty years. I never expected to see this in my lifetime.”

Glor asked, “Was there a message?”

“No. They activated the device, but it’s possible they don’t know how to use it. All we know is that it is active, and can receive and send signals.”

“So how are we going to communicate?”

“We send them a message. But the best bet is to synchronously communicate with them.”

Ke’lir asked, “How can we do that?”

“From orbit around Hilcyon.”

Glor said, “But we can’t...”

Sandra interrupted, “I’m assuming if they called, they won’t object to a ship.”

Ke’lir said, “Yes, that makes sense. We should be safe entering their space.”

Lo’eli said, “Unless it’s a trap.”

Glor got really angry. “A trap! That’s absurd!”

Ke'lr put her arm on his, and he felt calmer. She said, "Look, I think that's pretty unlikely. Let's just take this one step at a time, shall we?"

Lo'eli said, "Yes. Let me call the Consej."

She went to a corner of the room, and spoke quietly to an AI. She came back several moments later.

"They have all been notified. It's still night in most of Rel'toro, and the AIs are waking everyone. I spoke with your uncle Zrel, and he's grabbing the next train to New Orleans."

Glor's uncle Zrel was the current head of the Consej, and a Terran representative. Zrel was his grandfather Pkygy's son, but had chosen to live as a Terran on New Earth, in Dlejon. His partner was a Terran, and he was his cousin Liam's father. Glor and Zrel got along OK, but the fact that Zrel had chosen Terran, rather than Kinder culture was a bit of a sore spot for Glor.

"I'll make sure the conference room that has holo projectors is open for our meeting. We should be able to meet in three hours when Zrel arrives. In the meantime, Sandra, can you field the questions that are inevitably going to come from Consej members when they get the message?"

"Of course."

Ke'lr said to Glor, "Let's call Liam, and get an early dinner. We'll need the sustenance. I think it's going to be a long night."

Jor'ar'lir, Rel'toro, Casiti, 24 Wend, 803

Spring on Casiti was a revelation to Paul. Paul knew that Casiti's seasons were starkly different, but spring was amazing. The snow wasn't completely gone, but there were already plants making their way out of the ground. This was the time when Casitians plowed snow off of their fields, and started to turn the soil over in preparation for planting. Paul had taken out the 'dozer bot from the local storage shop, and was watching it clear off his small plot.

His new friend Ka'li'mo had been taking it upon himself to teach Paul about how to grow food. It was fun, and Paul really enjoyed Ka'li'mo's company. Ka'li'mo was a student of the Ja'lit school, and he and Paul had long conversations about God, and theology, and what it really meant to be human. Paul felt like Ka'li'mo really understood him, in ways that no one had before. And the feelings he had for Ka'li'mo made him feel a little uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why.

"Paul, there is an urgent message from Wer'lar," his AI spoke, rousing him from his reverie.

"Play, please."

"Paul, the Kinder have called, and apparently are in great need of our equipment. The Consej is sending a ship to Hilcyon, and we need to send a representative. I nominated you, and the Consej has agreed. The ship is leaving from Casiti, once the Terran representatives get here. Pack some things, come to the shop to pick up the shipment we're preparing right now."

Paul was stunned. First that the Kinder called. Second, that *he* had been chosen as the representative to help the technology transfer. He had only been working in Wer'lar's shop for 9 Terran months! He did know this technology well, though, and had repaired a lot of it in that

time. And, of course, he was a Michaelson, which was probably most of why he was chosen. He also knew that most Casitians didn't like to travel much, and the trip to Hilcyon could be dangerous.

“Thanks, please record a message to Ka'li'mo.”

“Recording.”

“Hi Ka'li'mo. I'm sorry I will miss our time together tomorrow. You might have heard by now that the Kinder have called, and Wer'lar has chosen me to accompany the equipment to Hilcyon. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Can you do me a favor and return the 'dozer bot to local storage when it's done? It should be finished by the end of the day today. Thanks! I'll repay you with dinner at the Eagle's Nest in town when I get back. Send, please.”

“Sent.”

“Thanks, please record a message to my parents on New Earth.”

“Recording.”

“Hi Mom and Dad. I'm on my way to Hilcyon, believe it or not. I was chosen to accompany the equipment they need. I don't know how long I'll be gone, or whether or not I'll be able to be in contact while I'm gone. I imagine cousins Ro'mer or Zrel will know what's up. Love you. Send, please.”

“Sent.”

He hurried around his place, putting away things that needed to be put away, and washing things that should be washed, so he would not return to a complete disaster. He quickly packed his few clothes, and some personal items. He left his dwelling, and walked to the shop, where Wer'lar and a few of Paul's colleagues were busy packing several rather large crates.

Wer'lar saw Paul enter.

“Ah, Paul, good.” Wer’lar handed Paul a tablet. “That’s the manifest. We’re sending lots of melt-pump systems, core controllers, monitors, and analysis units. You’ll see I’ve also included some random assorted tools and parts you might need.”

Paul nodded. “Looks very complete.”

“Well, it’s based mostly on guesstimates. No one has actually spoken directly to them yet. I also ordered 50 remote repair units. They are now being assembled and packed in Rel’toro. That means you’ll be able to send those down and do the fixes, instead of having to go down in person. People think it might be dangerous.”

Paul nodded.

Wer’lar continued, “Others have added other equipment. I know that there are at least some fusion micro-reactors also being sent. I’ve called for an overland cargo transport. Should be here in an hour or so. You’ll go with the cargo to Rel’toro, where a shuttle will take you and all the stuff into orbit.”

Paul nodded again. He was still a little in shock about the whole thing. He started to help his colleagues pack the equipment, taking note of what went into what container. Before he knew it, he heard Wer’lar shouting, “The cargo transport is here, folks. Let’s get this done!”

They finished up, and Paul walked outside, and several anti-grav sleds piled high with containers full of equipment followed him. They all helped to get the cargo on board, and Paul grabbed his bag, and jumped up into the passenger cab with the driver.

“Hi Paul. I’m Re’qal,” the woman said in heavily accented English.

“Nice to meet you, Re’qal,” Paul said in Casitian.

“Ah, you speak Casitian, at least a little, yes?”

Paul nodded, “I’m not quite... fluent yet.”

Paul was getting used to the Casitian language, and he could at least tell that Re'qal had the accent of a true Casitian, someone whose family had lived on Casiti from the beginning. Paul knew that there were still many Casitians that did not speak English at all. English had become, like it was on Earth before the Event, the *lingua franca* of humans on both worlds.

“Well, my English is pretty rotten. So I guess we can go back and forth and get practice, eh?”

Paul smiled. They chatted amiably during the two-hour trip to Rel'toro. Even though Re'qal was in no way connected to the Consej or Caraj, Re'qal seemed to know quite a lot about him and his family. Re'qal even knew about his mother's split with the rest of the family. Slowly, but surely, he had come to realize that his family was famous on both planets. He didn't quite know what he thought of that, but it didn't really matter. He just had to get used to it.

New Orleans, New Earth, November 6, 2099

Ke'lir walked out of the room she was staying in to meet Glor and others going to the transport to Casiti. She wasn't going to have time to go home before she grabbed the transport. It didn't really matter all that much, but she wished at least she'd packed a few more clothes. She would likely be away from home for weeks. The meeting with NEA, NEATac and the Consej had been long and contentious, but in the end, it was decided that she, Glor, Paul, Sandra and a Casitian woman named Potr'elo would accompany a pilot on a cargo ship to Hilcyon. Potr'elo was a member of a little known Casitian defense organization that formed after The Event, in

case any threat came to Casiti from Hilcyon. It was the first and only Casitian military organization ever, and from what Ke'lir could tell, it was tiny and didn't really do anything.

They chose a cargo ship first because it would seem the least threatening, and second, because they actually had a lot of cargo to bring. There was the equipment they assumed the Kinder would need to fix what galactic technology they had to keep them alive, including to supply water and energy. They also brought a lot of extra, in case the Kinder didn't want to keep in contact. During the meeting, Zrel had told the story of how after what was called "The Betrayal of J'lec," about 1200 years ago, even when the Kinder cut off communication, the Casitians would drop necessary equipment once every 10 Casitian years or so. That stopped in the aftermath of the invasion of New Earth, when the Kinder decided to cut themselves off completely. They still hadn't talked to the Kinder Supreme Chief, so they didn't really know what it was he wanted when he called. They would find out soon enough.

As she walked through the New Orleans space port, she saw Glor, sitting with Sandra. She sat down next to Glor.

Ke'lir said to him, "Did you speak to your dad?"

"Yeah. He's happy I'm going, but I think he wished some other Kinder could come, too."

"There's only room for five passengers on the cargo ship."

"He knows. I think he worries a little about what I might say."

Ke'lir said, "What might you say?"

Glor shrugged, "I don't know. Whatever." He looked angry. Ke'lir didn't know what was wrong, but she let it go.

Their transport was boarding, so they got on board. By now, the news that the Kinder had called was all over, and Ke'lir overheard a snippet of conversation.

“So what do you think is going to happen?”

“I hope they don’t invade again.”

“The Casitians wouldn’t let that happen.”

“What could they do about it?”

“Well, something, right?”

“I don’t know. But anyway, that doesn’t seem likely.”

“Maybe they need more slaves. My great-grandfather Gary was one of those stolen teenagers.”

“My great-grandmother’s oldest brother William never came back.”

Ke’lir’s ears pricked up at that. Ke’lir doubted it was the same William she’d heard about in the family stories. The William from the ICS who landed on Hilcyon, and was the reason Beatrice’s Kinder husband had been arrested and killed. Ke’lir knew that no one had ever told that family the story, and William was likely long dead. It was funny how history was still sometimes alive in a moment. And this moment brought it all back to everyone.

She slept, and they eventually arrived on Casiti, at the Rel’toro space center. They disembarked with everyone. They had been told their ship was already in orbit, and to meet Paul in some small, unused corner of the space center. They walked down corridor after corridor, to finally end up at a door with the right label on it. Glor opened the door, and a rush of cold air came through, chilling Ke’lir. It was spring, but it was still mighty cold in this part of Casiti. She saw in the distance a cargo transport next to a shuttle, with cargo being brought on anti-grav sleds from the transport into the shuttle. They walked toward the shuttle, and could see Paul overseeing the cargo transfer.

Ke’lir said to Paul, “Hey.”

Paul looked up and smiled. “Hi Ke’lir, Glor...”

Ke’lir pointed to Sandra. “This is Sandra. Sandra, meet my cousin Paul.”

“Hi Paul. It’s so nice to get to meet you.” Ke’lir could see a little waver in Paul’s smile.

Perhaps Paul had as much trouble meeting people as Ke’lir did.

“Nice to meet you, Sandra,” Paul said somewhat quietly.

Glor said, “Sandra’s coming with us. She’s the one who has been in charge of monitoring the communications channel to Hilcyon, and she’s made her life’s work the study of Hilcyon’s history and people. She might know even more than I do.” Glor smiled. Ke’lir got the definite sense that Glor liked Sandra, which surprised her. Glor seemed to only go for women who considered themselves Kinder. Besides Sandra must be fifteen years older or more than Glor was.

Paul said, “We’re ready now. There are two more cargo shipments that are already on our ship. One is some remote repair units that will allow us to make repairs without having to go down to the surface. The other is apparently a lot of food.”

“Food?”

“Well, the assumption is that their water system is messed up, meaning that they likely haven’t been able to grow much.”

Ke’lir nodded. “Ah. What kind of food?”

“Emergency rations of some sort. Apparently hundreds and hundreds of thousands of meals. I don’t really know any more than that. Also’ Potr’elo the defense officer is on board already.”

Glor said, “Defense officer?” Glor looked angry.

Paul said, "I think they wanted to make sure we had some kind of knowledgeable person in case..."

"In case what?"

Ke'lor said, "Glor, calm down, please. Can't you see why this makes sense based on what we know about..."

"Please, I'm SO tired of..."

Paul interrupted. "Glor, look, don't get angry at me. It wasn't my choice. If you want to get angry at anyone, talk to uncle Zrel. It was his idea."

"Uncle Zrel? What a traitor!"

Ke'lor put her hand on Glor's arm, and sent him calm and ease. She could see him relax.

She said, "Look, this is not the time. Can we discuss this later?"

Paul said, "Yes, let's go, shall we?"

They got on the shuttle, and greeted the pilot. This shuttle was rather bare-bones. Just two rows of four uncomfortable seats. Glor sat with Sandra in the back row, and Ke'lor and Paul sat up front.

Ke'lor asked, "How's Casiti?"

Paul smiled. "I'm having a good time now."

"I'm glad to hear that, Paul."

"I love my work, and I'm learning so much at the Ja'lit school."

Sandra said, "Isn't that the school that Ja'lend'a started?"

"It is. You've read her work?"

"Yes. A long time ago. It is amazing stuff."

"Yes, she had a gift."

Glor chimed in, “Even I’ve read Ja’lend’a.”

Ke’lir was surprised. “Did you like it?”

“Not really. Not my thing. I mean I basically agree with her premise, but I rather like the Kinder Exalted King.”

Ke’lir said, “Even though it’s patriarchal?”

“It’s not patriarchal, not really.”

Ke’lir and Glor had had this argument since they were small children. For a while it had been fun, but it had ceased to be fun quite some time ago, so they both let it go. Sandra and Glor started to discuss Kinder theology, and Ke’lir tuned them out, and got lost in her own thoughts.

Hilcyon, Sdert 3, 1202

“So soon?” Mrin was confused at the statement.

The figure called Glor said, “We didn’t think you wanted to contact us at all. Anyway, we know it’s dire.”

Mrin nodded. He understood most of what Glor said, but not every word. “It is. We have lost the ability to get water from the glaciers. We are starving.”

“We can tell.”

“You can tell?”

“Yes, our monitors have told us all we need to know. We are already repairing the water conduits, so water will start to flow in the next few hours.”

“Wow, so soon? That is great!”

“So, Supreme Chief, we also have...”

“Wait...”

“Yes?”

Mrin didn't know what to do. He looked at his father, who just nodded, as if he trusted him to do the right thing. What was the right thing? Lie, or tell the truth. Telling the truth seemed the best of unpleasant options.

“I'm not the Supreme Chief. My name is Mrin. I'm an engineer. I found this device in a cache. No one knows I have it.”

“Ah. OK. We should probably...”

“He would likely execute me if he found out what I'm doing right now.”

The figure turned its head, and wavered.

Glor said, “We need to confer.”

Mrin nodded. The figure disappeared. A few minutes later he reappeared.

“Mrin, we cannot allow any more communication, since this is not official. We can't be in any more contact. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's alright.”

Glor nodded. “You need to return that device to where you found it.”

Mrin nodded. “I'll do that.”

“Thank you, Mrin. Good luck.” The figure disappeared for the last time, and the unit turned off. Mrin didn't know what this meant. He didn't know whether or not they were saved.

Hilcyon orbit, Sdert 3, 1201

Glor sat down heavily in the chair. He, Pot'relo, Sandra and Ke'lir were in a small communications room on the cargo ship.

He said, "Well, what do we do now?"

Pot'relo said, "Do what we were going to do anyway. Finish the repairs, and drop the food. Then, I imagine, it's best we leave."

"But they are going to know we came. The food rations are Casitian, and every single water conduit is going to be flowing. The only conclusion they can come to is that we are here. It might cause horrible panic."

Sandra said, "What is the other option? Leave, and let all of them starve to death? Even with the new water, it will take months for the food supply to return to normal. Thousands or more will die in the meanwhile. We have to dump the food."

Glor said, "You are right. We have to. But we can't do anything more until and unless we have official permission. And it sounds like that won't be forthcoming."

Ke'lir said, "We should wait a few days. See how things play out. Maybe once they realize that they won't starve to death, they will make contact."

Sandra said, "That doesn't seem so likely, but I agree. Let's stay a bit, and see what happens."

Pot'relo said, "Well, our on-planet monitors have 65 years of data to analyze."

Glor said, "I have to admit to surprise that the Casitians left them there."

“Monitors have been in place since before the Betrayal of J’lec. There were new monitors placed right before we were asked not so politely to never return.”

“So I guess you, Paul and Sandra will be busy for the next days while Ke’lir and I twiddle our thumbs.”

Hilcyon, Sdert 6, 1202

Mrin looked at the inert device sitting on his small desk. He had promised to get it back to the cache, but he actually didn’t know how he was going to do that, without letting anyone know he had it. He didn’t know the combination on the cache. Even worse, he expected the entire cache to be underwater by now. He might find another cache somewhere, but the first step was to get himself back in a position that he could find some other equipment to put around it.

It was late. He was surprised that Tyrin and his parents weren’t back from the meeting. He could imagine it would be a very contentious meeting. What would they do now that they knew that this wasn’t the generation that would be the last, now that they weren’t going to starve? From the conversation he had with his Da earlier, there were a lot of people who were ready for open rebellion. Maybe it was finally time for that.

He heard a loud bang—it sounded like their front door. He was worried, and got up to open the door, but before he got there his door flew open, and several men ran in, and grabbed him.

“Here he is! Take him!”

Mrin was scared. They put some kind of cloth bag over his head, and he couldn't see anything. They tied him up, and dragged him out. He could hear Dlen yelling something, and he fought the men who were grabbing him to move in her direction. He felt a sharp pain on the side of his head, and then felt nothing more.

He woke with a horrible headache. He raised his head, and a wave of dizziness made him put it down again. Finally, he could sit up and look around. He was on the floor of a dingy cell. There was a tiny window far at the top of one wall, and the small amount of light coming in suggested to Mrin that it was probably morning. The walls of the cell were solid, and there were scrawls and scratches all over it. There was a toilet and a sink on one wall, and nothing else. No bed, no chair, no pillows, nothing comfortable.

He used the toilet, and washed his face. He heard the door open, and two men grabbed him, and dragged him out of the cell, and down the corridor to a room with a desk, and a man behind it. He nodded, and the two men left, closing the door.

“Mrin Gnova Jolrs, do you know why you are here?”

“I can guess.”

“You have been charged with treason of the highest order. You contacted the Breft without authorization.”

Mrin said nothing. There really wasn't anything to say. That was exactly what he'd done, and he wasn't about to lie about it.

“Is there anything you have to say?”

Mrin shook his head. He would refrain from saying anything until he could say his last words. He knew the procedure. He'd seen treason executions.

“You have been found guilty by the Supreme Chief, and sentenced to death by beheading. You will be publicly executed tomorrow in the capital square. Your father is on his way to visit. Do you have any questions?”

He shook his head.

“Alright.” The man looked at him with the oddest look, like he had a question he wanted to ask, but wouldn’t. The two men who had brought him to this room, took him, more gently it seemed, and left him in a different cell. It was far more comfortable. It had a much larger window, and a bed with a comfortable mattress, and a chair. He lay down on the bed, numb. He didn’t know what to think. He was going to die soon. Tomorrow. He wondered what dying was going to be like. Somehow, he wasn’t scared.

Hilcyon, Sdert 6, 1201

Dlen gratefully ate the chewy, rich bar. It was wrapped in a strange kind of material, and had words on it she could not read. But it was the first food she’d had in days, and her body was happy. There had been a big food drop in the middle of their hamlet, and the Chief had distributed the bars to those he knew hadn’t had any rations for a while. Dlen wasn’t quite sure why he felt he could get away with it, but he did. Their family now had enough to last a couple of months.

Everything was chaotic. Once the news of the complete resumption of water flows in all of the conduits, even the ones that had been dry for her lifetime, there was a strange mix of celebration and fear. No one was quite sure what would happen if they showed their elation, but it was hard not to be elated. What had seemed like the certain fate of starvation for all Kinder

was gone, and in its place was hope for the future—hope that many people hadn't realize they'd lost years ago. But there was deep suspicion. Everyone assumed that somehow, someone had contacted the Breft. But no one, except her family, knew who it was.

Her mother, father and Mrin's wife Tyrin were out at some sort of meeting, she imagined a meeting of the new reformers. She worried about them, but she also knew that the only way this wasn't going to happen again was for real change to occur. For the traditional Kinder way to finally give way to something else. Something which would allow the Breft to help them live on Hilcyon.

She thought that even though this aid was temporary, it was helpful to remind all of her people that they really did depend on the Breft after all. She knew this idea was anathema to many. But it had to be understood. Otherwise, their society was eventually doomed to failure.

She threw the wrapper out, and grabbed another bar to take with her to bed. It was cold tonight, and along with the food rations, their energy rations had similarly been withheld. It was nice to have food, but it would be nicer to have heat as well. She bundled up in her covers, and fell asleep.

She was awoken suddenly by a big bang. She sat up in bed, and heard voices and shouts. She got up out of bed, and opened the door, only to be pushed to the ground.

“Get away, woman!”

She screamed, “What are you doing?”

“I said, *stay away* from us!”

There were men running around in the house, and Mrin was being held to the ground by several men.

“Found something!”

One of the men was carrying the communications device. Dlen's heart skipped a beat.

Mrin...

They took Mrin, and the device, and slammed the door.

Later the next day, her mother, father, Mrin's wife Tyrin, and she were sitting in the living room, commiserating.

Her father said, "I can't do anything. There is *nothing* I can do to save Mrin. I wish I had been more forceful in making him take that thing back."

Dlen said, "I think he thought maybe they would call back."

"They said they wouldn't call back!"

"Da, look, it's done, it's over."

Her father put his head in his hands. "I've got to be able to do something!"

Her mother put her arms around her father's shoulders. They all wept.

Several hours later, there was a knock at the door. Her father opened it.

"Wlen Gnova Jolrs?"

"Yes?"

"Your son Mrin Gnova Jolrs is set to be publicly executed tomorrow at high sun, in the capital square. I'm here to take you to see him for a last visit."

"Can my family..."

"Just you."

Her father nodded. "Let me gather a few things, please?"

"Make it fast."

Dlen helped him pack a few things. They hugged at the door.

“None of you come to see it. Promise me?”

Dlen said, “We promise Da. We’ll remember Mrin as he was.”

Hilcyon orbit, Sdert 5, 1201

Paul and Sandra were sitting looking at the monitoring data.

Paul said, “All conduits are flowing at full capacity. The reservoirs will be full in a matter of hours. We can scale back the flow soon.”

“How long will these repairs last?”

“Well, since we had the remote units, I figured, why not just leave them here? The AIs can monitor problems, and repair as needed. Between that and the new fusion reactors, they should be OK for a hundred years or so.”

Sandra asked, “And then this will happen again?”

“Yup. The remote units will start breaking themselves, and they’ll run out of spare parts. The reactors will run out of fuel by then as well.”

“So we’re just postponing the inevitable?”

“Is it inevitable?”

“Seems so. If the current Supreme Chief wasn’t going to contact us even if all of his people died, I can’t see how this isn’t going to happen again.”

Paul said, “Change?”

“Everything I’ve been seeing in the monitors suggests retrenchment since the cutoff.”

“Well, we’ve done what we can do. We can only hope for the best.”

“Yes. You’ve heard of the ‘Betrayal of J’lec’?”

“Sure. It seems to be the major reason the Kinder and Casitians hate each other.”

Sandra said, “No, the real reason they hate each other goes back a lot further, to the time humans won their freedom from Tud’scla captivity. But this was another injury that made it worse.”

“What’s the story?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Neither the Casitians nor the Kinder are willing to talk about it. The Kinder call the incident ‘The Betrayal of Klor.’”

Paul said, “Hmmm, that’s interesting.”

“It is. What I do understand from my research is that Klor was a Supreme Chief more than 1200 years ago. And my research on J’lec suggests that she was the Casitian liaison to Hilcyon during his rule. I’m 90% sure the Casitians have a written report, but won’t let anyone translate it into English.”

“Really? Well, I can read Casitian, sort of. When we get back, I’ll look for it for you. Maybe I’ll translate it. It might help me learn better.”

Sandra smiled, “That would be great, Paul. Thanks!”

“Sure thing.”

The AIs voice interrupted their conversation.

“Sandra, we are hearing Mrin’s name repeated many times in various places. It appears he has been arrested, and is going to be executed for treason.”

Paul sat up. “Oh no!”

“Let me get Glor, Pot’relo and Ke’lir.”

Sandra left, and returned quickly with them.

Glor said, “He’s being executed? We know this for sure?”

The AI said, “Mrin Gnova Jolrs, living in the hamlet that we detected the device had been activated from, was arrested and has been sentenced to death.”

Paul sighed. He said, “There isn’t anything we can do, is there?”

Glor said, “No, there isn’t. We can’t intervene.”

The five of them sat there in silence. Paul was upset, but he knew there was nothing they could do but finish their work, and leave.

Hilcyon, Sdert 7, 1202

Wlen could hardly stand up. The last visit with his son had been the most difficult hour of his life. He was prouder than he could ever imagine being of the man his son had become. And he was angrier than he had ever been that his life was going to end this way. He behind the first row of onlookers. A huge crowd had gathered to see the execution. Wlen decided that mood of the crowd was strange. It wasn’t the mood he normally felt at public executions—the mood of proud retribution for wrongdoing. No, this was a different mood altogether. Many of these people were angry. Wlen was confused.

When they brought Mrin out, Wlen could see that he was holding his head high. Shouts and cheers rose up from the crowd. “Mrin, Mrin, Mrin, Mrin, Mrin!”

He looked around. So *that* was what the anger was about. They *knew* Mrin had saved all of them, and they were angry that he was being executed.

A First Chief shouted at the crowd, “Quiet! Be Kinder!”

But the crowd only got rowdier. Wlen was sure there was going to be a riot. But then, the Supreme Chief appeared. The crowd went silent.

He spoke in a loud, commanding voice. “We are here today to carry out justice. Mrin Gnova Jolrs committed treason by contacting the accursed Breft on his own. He has gone against the Kinder way of self-sufficiency. He must *die* for his treason, as *all* traitors of the Kinder must die.”

The crowd was completely silent. Mrin was brought forward. A priest stood next to him, and prayed over him.

“Do you have any last words, Mrin Gnova Jolrs?”

“I do.” Mrin spoke clearly and with determination. Mrin looked up, and saw Wlen looking at him. He smiled, and Wlen felt the tears flowing down his face. They were tears of pride as well as sadness.

“I care deeply about the lives of the Kinder, which is why I did what I did. I won’t live to see tomorrow, but I die gladly, knowing that many Kinder will live to see another day, another year, and the rest of their lives. We cannot live on this planet without help. My dying hope is that our leaders understand this before all the Kinder die.”

The crowd was stirring. Mrin was pushed down on his knees in front of a block, and someone held his head down on it. The executioner raised his sword, and Wlen had to turn away and leave. He could not watch the stroke fall. As he walked, he heard the loud thunk, and felt the life of his son leave his heart. The crowd surged by him, and he struggled to free himself from it, moving away from the center of the square as quickly as possible. It was indeed going to be a riot, and the last thing he wanted was to be caught in it.

He managed to make it out before things really got ugly. He could see a large cadre of men with swords and other weapons flowing into the crowd. The Supreme Chief's men. He knew many in that crowd would not survive the night.

He managed to catch the last tram back to his hamlet from the capital. He was one of a very few people on it. Everyone seemed to be in a very somber mood. Wlen's mood wasn't somber. He was angry, and determined. He would not let Mrin die in vain.

Hilcyon, Sdert 7, 1202

Ylorp stood several paces behind and to one side of the executioner, and watched him. As the sword flew down toward Mrin's neck, Ylorp had to close his eyes. He heard the thunk, and opened his eyes when it seemed clear that the crowd was going to riot.

"Ylorp!" He turned toward his Second Chief.

"You take that side of the crowd. We have to keep this under control! Kill anyone you need to."

Ylorp hesitated for just a moment, then took out his short sword, and headed into the crowd, shouting, "Go back to your homes! Clear the Square!"

From the side, Ylorp saw some movement, and turned just in time to see someone running at him. He turned on instinct, and brought his sword up, and he swung it, missing. But the man decided not to risk another stroke, and veered off in a different direction. He kept swinging the sword ahead of him in wide strokes, and people were avoiding him, and moving

away. Well, he thought, that was clearly what his intent was. And he certainly didn't want to kill anyone.

Finally, the square was clear, but it took almost an hour, and there were at least a hundred dead or injured lying in the square. He looked for the other Chiefs, who were scattered around, standing next to dead rioters. His Second Chief approached him, with a sour look on his face.

“I see your sword is unbloodied.”

Ylorp looked at the clean, shiny sword.

“Everyone ran away from me, sir. I didn't need to use it.”

His Chief shook his head. “Ylorp, go help clean up this mess. Grilt and Ferril are digging a mass grave.”

“Sir, don't you want the families...”

“These traitors do not deserve the death ritual. Bury them.”

“Y... yes, sir.”

Ylorp helped other men in his unit gather up the bodies, trying not to get sick. They placed them in a newly-dug mass grave. He didn't understand why they didn't deserve the right to a family death ritual, but the last thing he was going to do was confront his Chief about it. As he pushed two bodies into the grave, he noticed the headless body of the man who was executed. He felt a small tear roll down his cheek.

Hilcyon orbit, Sdert 7, 1201

Glor asked Sandra, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Glor, I am sure. Mrin was executed in the capital square, and then there was a huge riot. Hundreds of people were killed or injured. There have been riots now in seven hamlets. There is a lot going on."

"Shouldn't we stick around a while?"

Pot'relo said, "I can't imagine this is going to work itself out all that soon, Glor. If it works itself out so that someone will call back, that's great, but it's not likely to be anytime in the next few days. Paul's work is done. It is time for us to go home."

Glor reluctantly agreed. He was getting tired of hanging out in the tiny ship anyway. Sandra, Pot'relo and the pilot had been a nice change from his cousins, but he was happy to think that there was a night soon when he would get to sleep in his own comfy bed. What he wasn't looking forward to was the interminable meetings that would have to happen before said night.

The meetings were interminable. In the end, though, they were all congratulated for a job well done, and good judgment all around. By the time he got home to Zweek, and lay in his bed, he couldn't sleep. There was too much going on in his brain. He got up, went to his desk, and started to write about what had happened, and what he thought might be happening on Hilcyon now.

Hilcyon, Sdert 37, 1202

Wlen was less tired tonight. He felt that was a good sign. The first ten days or so of training had been utterly brutal. He would come home sore and bruised, and wake up the next day so stiff that he couldn't imagine going back to training. But then he would look at the portrait of his son that his daughter-in-law had drawn the day of his execution, and he would somehow get the strength to keep going. But the last ten nights things had gotten a lot better.

Wlen had never been a chief. He'd hated the chief system from when he was a little boy. But he had always liked physical exertion, and he was very healthy. When he decided to challenge Klef, he himself thought he was crazy. But the more he trained, the stronger he got, and the more he was convinced that he could win. Klef had done a good job of keeping all of his First Chiefs in line—none of them would challenge him. And although it was extremely rare, it was possible for a non-chief to challenge even a Supreme Chief for leadership. Wlen would be ready, and Supreme Chief Klef would be taken completely by surprise.

He walked into the house. His wife, daughter and daughter-in-law were all together, talking. They greeted him.

“Wlen!” His wife said. “How was training?”

“Better. I am mastering my short sword.”

“Good, good. Wlen, I don't want to lose my husband and my son in the same year.”

“You won't, wife. I will win this.” His wife smiled. She was supportive, although he knew she was scared, but wouldn't show it.

“So how goes the resistance?”

“Dlen was elected to go to the capital and represent our hamlet.”

“Dlen! Wonderful.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow, Da. I have a birth to attend in Swet, which is quite conveniently on the way. I’m assuming whoever is watching me won’t bother to follow me all the way to Swet.”

“Let’s hope not.”

Independent Christian State, December 23th, 2104

Paul sat on the bus, watching the landscape change as they crossed the border into the ICS. He was reluctantly visiting his family for the Christmas holidays. His paternal grandmother was dying, and no one thought she would live to see the new year. He didn’t especially like his paternal grandmother, but his father asked him to come home to visit, and he agreed. He figured he’d stay through the funeral.

He thought he was prepared for seeing the ICS again, but as he saw the rough and grimy streets, and the buildings that were a hodge-podge of different kinds of hand-built houses and low buildings, he realized fully how much the year had changed his perspective. The ICS was a backwater, and it surprised him how bad it looked in comparison to where he had been for the last year.

He’d read a lot of history since he landed on Casiti, and he felt like he had a better handle on why things were the way they were. He’d known that his paternal grandmother’s grandfather was one of the founders of the ICS, Thomas Martin, who had basically been forced to leave Earth well before The Event, because they were not willing to acquiesce to the demands of the Casitians. But as Paul kept reading, he realized that the demands of the Casitians were quite

reasonable, and wouldn't have interfered with the practice of the Christian faith. In his childhood, Paul had been taught so much that was so wrong. In learning more from Ja'lend'a's writing, and attending classes at the Ja'lit school, he was understanding better why the people in the ICS had developed the theology they had. Banishment from Earth was truly a big deal, and Terran subcultures had a variety of ways of dealing with it, and Paul knew his community's was one particularly extreme version. He couldn't help but hate it.

It was going to be a hard trip for him. He knew his family would want him to stay, but he knew he could not. For one thing, he had an important role on Casiti, now, since his visit to Hilcyon. He had been given a spot as a student in Casitian group whose role was to strategize the long term process of sending needed supplies to Hilcyon, even though they probably didn't really want them. There was so much they learned from that visit, information they would put to work in crafting the next steps.

The bus stopped at his home town's stop, and he grabbed his bag, and walked out of the bus to see his father and brother awaiting him. His father came to hug him.

"Paul!"

"Hi Dad. Hi Matthew." He hugged them both.

"You look good, son. Those Casitians are treating you well?"

Paul nodded, not wanting to get into anything right at the moment. They walked the mile or so to the house, and his father and brother caught him up on the family news: an engaged cousin, a birth, and, of course, his dying grandmother. They were going to visit her the next day. Paul was quiet with the varied news, nodded when it seemed appropriate, and didn't comment or say much.

Matthew asked, "So Paul, what was Hilcyon like?"

“Well, I didn’t really see it - we didn’t go down to the surface. But it is so unlike New Earth—it is extremely dry, and a lot colder. Casiti would be very hard to live on without galactic technology, but it would be at least possible. Uncomfortable for years at a time, but doable. Hilcyon is really not livable by humans without galactic technology, so when the galactic technology wore out, they were in deep trouble.”

“How long have they been on that planet?”

“For about three thousand years, give or take, but until the Event, the Casitians had supplied them with needed technology.”

“Does anyone think they will actually decide to have contact with the Casitians?”

“I don’t know that anyone really knows. Things were in upheaval when we left—we are monitoring the situation, but it’s hard to know exactly what’s happening right now.”

They arrived at the house, and Paul was greeted heartily by his mother.

“Paul! It’s so good to see you.” She gave him a big hug.

“Where’s Martha?”

“She’s with her fiancé. They’ll be by later.”

“She’s getting married? To whom?” Paul was surprised his father and brother hadn’t told him on their walk.

“Franklin Martin.”

Paul was taken aback. Franklin Martin was not only Paul’s third cousin, he was also heir apparent to the current Bishop of the ICS, his father. Martha was most definitely marrying up.

“Wow. That’s big.”

His mother said sternly, “You will not mention Casiti, or your trip when he is present, do you understand?”

“Martha didn’t tell him...”

“No. He knows of the sins of the Michaelsons, but...”

“Mom! Stop it! Do not talk about your family in those terms, please.”

“They are not my family anymore! Jonathon’s family is my family now.”

“Well, then, don’t talk about *my* family that way.”

That tense exchange was the last they spoke of the rift between them. The rest of the day sort of blurred together for Paul. He spent some time with the whole family and Franklin Martin, but said virtually nothing. He then made a lame excuse to go to his room and take a nap, as he could not mention that his body was on a totally different time than ICS time.

The fact that his sister had decided to marry Franklin meant that his immediate family was soon to be at the very heart of things in the ICS. Franklin’s father was ailing, and the wedding was being held in early January. Paul knew there would be no way he couldn’t stay for the wedding, but he was not at all looking forward to spending three full weeks in the ICS with his family. When he got to his room, he grabbed the new phone he’d gotten for his stay on New Earth, and called Ke’lir.

“Hi Paul. How’s the visit so far?”

“You wouldn’t believe it. My sister is marrying Franklin Martin.”

“Who’s that?”

“The heir apparent for ICS Bishop.”

There was silence.

“Ke’lir?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I have to stay for the wedding on January 9th.”

“I’m sorry you have to stay that long, and what are you going to do about...”

“I don’t know. My mother has asked me to keep a very low profile. The Martin family does not know that I live on Casiti. I imagine they would not be happy to hear it. My mother doesn’t want them to know about it before Martha gets married. I can understand that—I don’t want to ruin things for my sister. So I’m going to keep quiet, then leave, and I imagine probably never come back—I’m sure I won’t be welcome anymore, once Franklin becomes Bishop. Anyway, look, I’m going to need a break. Can you meet me in New Orleans, maybe in a week? I can come up with some excuse related to my role.”

“Sure, I’ll call Liam, too. We’ll hang out for a while, save you from your family.”

“Great. Thanks!”

Hilcyon, Cfro 10, 1202

Telling Supreme Chief Klef that he was officially challenging him for leadership turned out to be harder than Wlen thought it would be. He went to the Capital to request an audience. He was in front of a rather dour-looking man sitting at a desk.

“The Supreme Chief is very busy. He only grants audiences from the public in very extraordinary circumstances.”

“Well, I can absolutely guarantee that this is very extraordinary. But I need to tell the Supreme Chief himself. I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Protocol.”

“Protocol? What are you talking about?”

“The protocol for challenge.”

“Are you a chief?”

“No.”

“Then there is no protocol for challenge.”

“You are mistaken. Any person is allowed to challenge any Chief for their leadership.”

“OK, you are right, but no one ever does that!”

“Just because they don’t do it, doesn’t mean they can’t.”

“So you are saying...”

“I cannot say it to you.”

“Just a moment, please.” The man stood up and walked back through the doors behind him. In a while, he came back.

“He says you should go away.”

“Excuse me?”

“He says you should go away! He said he is not interested in a trivial challenge by some idiot who he’ll have kill. He doesn’t have time for this.”

“He must allow me an audience. I am serious.”

The man sighed again. “Alright, it’s your head. Go.” He pointed through the doors.

Wlen went through the doors, and down a long hallway. Two bored-looking guards were standing outside one particularly ornate door. He assumed this was the right door.

“The Supreme Chief?”

“Go right in.”

Wlen squared his shoulders, and opened the door. The Supreme Chief was sitting behind his desk, and there were several other men in the room.

“Wlen Gnova Jolrs, sir. I am here...”

“The father of Mrin the traitor, yes?”

“The father of Mrin, yes.” Wlen didn’t want to say anything that would get him in trouble before he could issue the challenge.

“What is it you want, Wlen Gnova Jolrs?” Klef was grinning wickedly. Wlen trembled.

“I, Wlen Gnova Jolrs, of Drulp Hamlet, challenge you, Supreme Chief Klef Hostro Yurrl for your position. Meet me in the ring.”

The Supreme Chief laughed. “Really?”

“This is a serious, and proper challenge. Meet me in the ring tomorrow, or your leadership is forfeit. There are witnesses.”

“Yes, indeed there are. Alright. It’s been a while since I personally spilled blood. I’m quite ready to spill yours!” Again, the wicked smile. It was all Wlen could do just to turn around and leave. He went back to the hostel where he had rented a room, and collapsed. He wished he’d allowed his family to accompany him. But he was afraid for their safety, should he lose. And he was very scared that he would lose.

The next day, he arrived at the back entrance of the arena. He’d only been here once before, when he was twelve. His father wanted him to see the brutality of a challenge match. He remembered it almost like it was yesterday. There was a man standing next to the door.

“Wlen Gnova Jolrs?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Jwal. I’m here to assist you. I have water, and towels. I see you brought your weapon.”

Wlen nodded. He was carrying his short sword in its scabbard.

Jwal smiled grimly, and said, “That was the right choice.”

“I know.”

Wlen had done his homework. He learned that Klef was a master of the circle blade. It was an almost perfect weapon. It had a large advantage over most weapons... except the short sword. He hoped that this weapon, and his intense training, would be enough.

They walked into the arena, and Wlen could see that it was already filling with people. Far more than he remembered when he was younger.

“Is it usually this crowded?”

“Oh, my no. Generally, it’s 1/4 to 1/3 full. Maybe 1/2 full if it is a particularly popular Supreme Chief being challenged. But the father of the hero Mrin? It will be overflowing tonight.”

Wlen had yet to hear anyone unabashedly call his son a hero. It strengthened him. Jwal helped him get into the traditional fighting uniform. It was a comfortable fabric, with a top that wrapped around his torso, and a fabric belt. He sharpened his sword one last time, and took a deep swig of water. He heard the bell ring, and the crowd roar.

“It is time.”

Wlen nodded. He got up, and walked into the arena. As he walked in the crowd became silent. Then, one by one, they stood, with their right hand at their heart. It was a great sign of respect. He looked at Klef, who was scowling.

Klef said, “Let’s get this over with, shall we? I have things to do.”

Wlen nodded. They moved to the center of the ring, did the traditional bow to each other, and Wlen backed up, wanting to get a measure of Klef. Wlen knew that Klef was a very good fighter. But he also knew that the last fight Klef had was more than a year ago. Wlen doubted that Klef had been training. He knew Klef didn't take him seriously. This was his major advantage.

He let Klef think he had the better of him. He scrambled out of the way of swings, and even let himself trip twice. Klef started to laugh. Klef swung his circle blade, which was a wicked curved blade on the end of a long pole, and Wlen would duck or jump to avoid it. Wlen let Klef get closer and closer, basically making him think he was coming in for the kill.

Klef swung in a direction Wlen didn't expect, and Wlen felt the blade slice through the muscle on his left leg. It was excruciatingly painful, and caused Wlen to stumble. Klef used that moment to swing the back of the pole into Wlen's head, but Wlen was expecting that move. He bent his body sideways, and then swung his right arm, which held the sword, over and up, and leveraging on his uninjured leg, and plunged the sword into Klef's exposed chest. Klef looked up, surprised, and fell over, dead. The crowd erupted.

Wlen bent over, catching his breath. He could feel the crowd flowing over the seats into the arena. He collapsed, sweat running down his face into his eyes, and blood seeping out of his leg. He felt someone come up to him, and lay him down, and put bandages on his leg. He then was carried up, and he could feel the exultation, and hear the crowd yelling "Wlen! Wlen! Wlen!" He realized then that he'd done it. He was Supreme Chief. He knew now, things on Kinder Home would change, finally.

New Orleans, December 28th, 2104

Paul was sitting across from his cousin Liam, and next to Ke'lr at the bar in New Orleans. Glor had gotten up to get them a new round of beer. Paul liked alcohol. Drinking was not allowed in the ICS, but he had been introduced to it hanging out with Ke'lr and Glor. There were quite a number of Terran-themed bars and restaurants on Casiti that served alcohol as well.

Liam said, "Oh, man, I am so sorry about what's happening with your family, Paul."

"It's messy right now, for sure. My grandmother died the day before Christmas, which set everyone on edge. Then, I got cornered at the funeral by my sister's fiancé, who was convinced that I had not spent the last year on the other side of the ICS studying theology, like my parents had told him. Of course, I had to tell him the truth—how could I lie? Now everyone is mad at me, because I exposed a lie *they* told, and Franklin's family is considering revoking the marriage offer."

"Do you think they will really do it?"

"No. I think it's posturing. When I talked with Franklin, it was pretty clear that he'd learned that I had been on the trip to Hilcyon. I guess he, unlike the rest of the ICS, actually reads the news feeds. I don't think it bothered him as much as it bothers his father. He really loves Martha, and wants to marry her. He just had to let his father bluster."

"Ah, I see. Still, that's annoying."

"Yeah. Far more family drama than I want to deal with right now."

Glor came back with the second pitcher of beer.

Paul said, "So Liam, I hear Tricia wants you to be her student."

“Yeah. I don’t know if I want to move to Casiti, though. I like it here. I especially like New Orleans. But it might be good to spend time on Casiti.”

Ke’lir said, “And make something of your life, finally?”

“Ke’lir, that’s not fair!”

“It is fair, Liam. You’re what, 23?”

“I turned 24 last week.”

“Well, then.”

“I know. It just feels so fucking intimidating to be in this family, you know? All of these high expectations from our parents to be leaders, like them, and like their parents, and the *great Michaelsons*. I felt like maybe I was better off just staying at home doing nothing.”

Paul listened to Ke’lir, Liam and Glor commiserate, but he couldn’t really relate. He wished he’d grown up with all of the advantages that these three were railing against. He realized, though, that even though he hadn’t grown up with either the advantages or the expectations, he did occupy a space of privilege he hadn’t expected.

They finished their beer, and went back to Liam’s, where they were all staying for the night.

He’d enjoyed his little sojourn to New Orleans. He liked his cousins, and it had been nice to get a break from his family crisis. When he arrived back home, Franklin and his father were sitting in his parent’s living room with his parents and Martha. He tried to slip past to go back to his room without making himself obvious, but Franklin stopped him.

“Hi Paul. Welcome home.”

“Hi Franklin. Thanks. It looks like you all are busy...”

Thomas Martin III, grandson of the founder of the ICS, Thomas Martin, looked at Paul, and said, “Paul, sit down a moment please, will you?”

Paul nodded, and sat in one of the chairs.

“You know that your trip to Casiti is quite a concern for our family. I don’t want the taint of the Casitians to touch us. We must remain pure. I’m sure that you’ll be able to toss off the things you’ve learned now that you are back to stay.”

Paul didn’t know what to say. He felt insulted and angry, but he knew he couldn’t express that. He closed his eyes for a moment, using the technique he’d been taught at the Ja’lit school to quiet his mind, and open himself to the wisdom of what the Casitians called “re’es,” which translated to “Spirit.” Paul thought of “re’es” as God, but different than the God he’d known growing up. He now knew what to say. He opened his eyes to see everyone staring at him. His mother looked very worried. He smiled.

“Sir, I understand and appreciate your concern. You needn’t worry about our family. God is with us.” It was an easy truth to tell, while leaving out what didn’t need to be said.

Thomas Martin nodded, satisfied. His mother, who knew full well that he would be leaving to go back to Casiti after the wedding, looked at him with a mixture of pleasure and perplexity. His father’s face was unreadable. After some pleasantries, and the assurance that he would let the wedding go forward, Thomas and Franklin left. His father faced him.

“That was masterful. Where did you learn to talk like that?”

“I don’t know that I learned, Dad. I’m learning these interesting mindfulness techniques at the school I’m attending, and I just opened myself to God, and asked God what to say. That was what came out.”

His father looked somewhat surprised, but didn't ask anything else. Paul was glad that he'd been right about Franklin, and glad his sister's wedding was back on.

Pa'rai's, North Circumpolar Independent Zone, New Earth, January 1, 2105

Ke'lir was glad to be back home again after her trip to New Orleans. She liked spending time there, but she loved home a lot more. It was quiet, and her house had a view of Lake Superior. The NCIZ was, alongside the SCIZ, the least populated parts of New Earth. Her town was small, largely Casitian, and everyone knew everyone else. She lived in the same house that Leticia Michaelson and Mira Michaelson-Kline had shared many years ago. It had been occupied by their daughter Kira until Kira married Khalid. Various family members had used it as a vacation house for many years, until Ke'lir had asked if she could live there. Ke'lir loved it. It was a little large just for her. Sometimes she felt herself rattling around in it. Someday, she thought, she'd find someone who perhaps wanted to live here with her. But she hadn't found that person yet.

Ke'lir had a big report that she had been procrastinating on. She was supposed to look over the plans that had been in place for many years for technology release to the Kinder, and do her best to square it with the reality they had seen when they were there. Of course, she could basically write one sentence that said, "There has been no official contact with the Kinder, thus this plan is irrelevant." Somehow, that seemed like not what her teachers would want to hear. So she buckled down to write something much more detailed.

She got sidetracked in thinking about an interesting conversation that she and Paul had had while they were visiting Liam in New Orleans. She thought Paul had grown in the year since he'd left the ICS, and she'd wanted to ask him about his experiences.

She'd said, "So, Paul, it seems like a lot has happened in the last year, huh?"

He nodded. "I'm not sure I can keep up with it all. Move to Casiti, start a job, learn Casitian, learn to grow my own food, get called to go to Hilcyon... It's a bit dizzying. But I'm managing."

"You seem to be more than managing..."

"The mindfulness techniques I've been learning have helped a lot."

Ke'lir knew those were the techniques all Casitians learned as children. She'd learned them as well.

"They help?"

"Yes. And I'm trying to get over my anger about the ICS. I think it's working." He smiled crookedly. "I don't know how much I really like Casiti, or the culture, but it seems that's the place for me right now. And I'm making friends."

"You are? That's good."

"Yeah, one of my co-students in the manufacturing lab is a really nice guy. We've been hanging out together. His name is Ka'li'mo. He's teaching me how to grow food, and helping me with some aspects of being on Casiti. I like him a lot, he's sweet."

She asked innocently, "That sounds nice. Might you be companions next winter?"

Ke'lir could feel the great tension coming from Paul. She had completely forgotten about the norms of the culture he was raised in, and his tension was a surprise. She backpedaled.

"Well, I'm really glad you have a new friend." She felt him relax.

“Yes, thanks.”

Ke’lir thought back on that conversation, and wondered whether or not Paul had really considered what his feelings were. He had waxed so eloquently about how much he liked Ka’li’mo. She remembered how she’d felt about a new friend that she’d had several years ago—the friend who ended up becoming her first companion. Mari’sol had been born on Casiti, and she was fully committed to the Casitian way of doing relationships. They had lived together for a Casitian winter, the equivalent of a year. Then Mari’sol left, to move back to Casiti, and then Ke’lir moved in to this house in Pa’rai’s. Ke’lir hadn’t been so happy to part with Mari’sol, and the two of them were still friends. Even though Ke’lir was raised on Casiti by Casitians, she still couldn’t quite get with the Casitian relationship program. She wanted a partner, like Leticia had in Mira. Yet sometimes, when she was with Terran women, who would be more oriented that way, she felt too Casitian. It was a conundrum she had not yet found the answer to.

Jor’ar’lir, Rel’toro, Casiti, Nird 1, 804

It was Casitian New Year. Yesterday and last night was the somber remembering of everyone who had died during the year. Paul had been at the Ja’lit school, taking part in the traditional rituals of the day. He felt embraced by those rituals, and felt held, in a way. He mourned again for his great-grandmother Beatrice, and even his grandmother Margaret, who had died on Christmas eve.

The day of the New Year was spent in creative pursuits, to bring in the spirit of the year to come. Many people were outside, making sculptures. Many were painting the outside walls of

their houses with riotous patterns, or making mosaics for their front stoops. Paul had decided that it would be fun to paint his door, and he stood back to look at his handiwork. He didn't know how whether it measured up to Casitian standards, but he liked it. It had a sunburst on one side, and rays of sun projecting down and out. It had a deep blue sky, and a green landscape on the bottom.

“Hello, neighbor!”

He turned to see his next door neighbor, one of the few other Terrans living in Jor'ar'lir. Paul remembered her name was Jaimee Waters.

“Hey Jaimee! Blessed New Year.”

“Blessed New Year to you too. Nice door! I made a sculpture in my back yard.”

Paul knew that many Terrans living on Casiti tried their best to join in on the Casitian cultural activities, but amateur public art was something that was hard for many Terrans. Somehow it hadn't been for him.

“Well, I'll have to come see it sometime, but now I need to cook dinner for a friend.”

“Have a good one!” Jaimee started to walk on. It looked like she was on her way somewhere else, anyway.

“Thanks! See you soon.” Paul waved.

He had invited Ka'li'mo over for dinner, and to see his handiwork. Also to eat his handiwork. Paul had a fairly ambitious meal planned for Ka'li'mo: a mix of Casitian and Terran food. He hoped he was up to the task. He went inside, and grabbed all of the ingredients he would need for dinner. As he cooked, he couldn't help but remember the conversation he'd had with Ke'lir when he was in New Orleans. Her suggestion that Ka'li'mo could be his companion had sent him into a tailspin. Paul had been taught that men with men was a perversion, and only

men and women should be together. A part of him still believed that. But Paul had always known he didn't want to do that, but he hadn't really spent much time dealing with those feelings he had for other boys—he'd just stuffed them.

Coming to Casiti, and living in a culture where there were no such ideas had at first felt really threatening to him. And as he got to be friends with Ka'li'mo, he knew there were things going on inside of himself. When Ke'lr made that innocent remark to him, he realized he had to deal with it. He spent days avoiding Ka'li'mo, then finally, he had to go talk with one of the teachers at school, who helped him understand what was happening, and how to separate his own feelings and beliefs from those he grew up with.

Poor Ka'li'mo had been completely mystified about what was going on, and finally, several days ago, Paul had a conversation with him.

“Ka'li'mo, I want to apologize for how I've been lately.”

“It's not a problem, Paul, I just want to know what's going on.”

“I... I've come to know that I can't ignore my feelings for you, even though they feel dangerous to me.”

“You grew up in a different culture. I understand that.”

Paul couldn't help reaching out, and touching Ka'li'mo's arm. “You are such a wonderful man. I'm sorry if my behavior has hurt you.”

Ka'li'mo had smiled this smile that made Paul just light up inside. “You haven't hurt me, Paul. I'm glad you are sorting out your feelings.”

Paul took a breath. “I am. I have come to really appreciate you, Ka'li'mo, and...”

“And...?”

Paul didn't really have the right words. He knew Ka'li'mo wasn't fluent in English, and he still had a way to go in the Casitian language. "I want to... I want to be your companion."

Ka'li'mo smiled. "Well, Paul, just so you know, Casitians don't consider lovers in between winters to actually be 'Companions.' That's reserved for the winter."

Paul was confused, but Ka'li'mo patiently explained the word he was using, and Casitian culture to him, and then expressed his own interest in being with Paul. Paul was relieved to have finally told everything to Ka'li'mo, as well as happy that Ka'li'mo was as interested as he was. Ka'li'mo was due here in just a while, and Paul smiled as he chopped the onions and garlic. He was happy, in a way he couldn't have imagined being just a year ago.

A chime roused him from his thoughts. He stopped chopping, and went to his desk, to see an incoming message from his father.

"Thanks, Play message."

"Hi Paul, it's your dad. Just wanted to let you know that Martha's father-in-law died last night. Franklin is set to be installed as Bishop tomorrow afternoon sometime. Franklin wanted to me to let you know that he will be contacting you. Anyway, I hope you are doing well."

Of course his father had no idea it was Casitian New Year, so Paul didn't feel insulted that he'd not mentioned it. It was strange that Franklin was going to contact him. He couldn't even imagine when the last time the head of the ICS called someone on Casiti. Perhaps it had never happened before. But then, Franklin was Paul's brother-in-law, so that was a bit different. But still, Paul could not imagine why Franklin would want to talk with him.

Hilcyon, Lykl 9, 1203

Wlen was reading the last report from the farm districts, with a smile on his face. At least one thing was going right. There was more water for irrigation than there had been in a very long time, and there was, finally, a real surplus of food. Everyone on Hilcyon would have their fill. Wlen had already set aside the new year, two months hence, as a big feast day. No one would have to work, everyone would celebrate the end of the famine, and danger to Hilcyon.

The last several months had been very difficult for Wlen. First, there were three First and Second Chiefs who had challenged him, and he had to win each one. The last was the most difficult—he'd come very close to losing. After that, and the resistance to even minor changes he had tried to implement, it was clear that the change he wanted wasn't going to come any time soon. In fact, he began to realize that change might not come at all if he lost another challenge. He had only one half-month of respite left, and each of the battles had been more difficult than the last.

He was a patient man, but he was not young. There was a very strong traditionalist community, and now that there was no more danger from starvation it grew in strength. He was going to lose a match. If not this next one, the one after, or the one after that. And then everything he'd worked for, and Mrin had died for, would come to nothing. He couldn't let that happen. He had one thing he could do. He was Supreme Chief, and as such, he had complete power. He would do one thing, a thing that he might be hated for. But he knew that any other path led to another round of retrenchment, then, some decades later, another famine. He could not let that happen.

“Rtlir!” He came in from his adjoining office.

“Yes, sir. What do you need?”

“I need you to obtain the communications device that Mrin used. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes. It’s in my office. I’m glad you are finally coming around to its necessity.”

“I know, you explained this to me, what, in the first few days? I have finally realized the truth of it. I can’t survive more challenges, Rtlir. And if I lose...”

“We will call them. There need be no more challenges.”

Wlen nodded. Rtlir left, and brought the device into Wlen’s office, and placed it on his desk. Wlen found the button Mrin had pushed, pushed it, and then put the device back on the desk.

“It will take a while before they contact us.”

Both Wlen and Rtlir was surprised to hear a voice speaking in a relatively decent accent.

“Hello, I am an artificial intelligence. Do you have a message?”

Wlen was surprised. He didn’t really know what an artificial intelligence was, but he assumed that meant that it wasn’t a real person. “Yes. This is Supreme Chief Wlen Gnova Jolrs. I would like to invite the Breft to a meeting here on Hilcyon.”

“Message relayed. There is an approximately 1.5-day delay before you will receive a message back.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” Nothing more came from the device.

Wlen said to Rtlir, “I guess we wait.”

Rtlir nodded.

Zwek, Kinder Zone, New Earth, January 13, 2105

Glor was awoken by a chime. His AI intoned “Glor, there is an urgent message for Sandra Germain.” Glor turned, and could see Sandra waking up. He put his hand on her shoulder.

“Sandra?”

She mumbled, “Mmm, I’m awake. Can your AI play the message?”

Glor said into the air, “Play message.”

The voice of Lyndsay Fox, Sandra’s supervisor, said, “Sandra, we have just received an official message from the Supreme Chief on Hilcyon. He wants to have a meeting. I briefed NEA and the Consej, and they want you, and the rest of the crew that went last time to go back. The Consej has chosen Glor Hostro Zolor to be the leader of the mission, and the official representative to the Kinder. Please let him know when you contact him. There is a pilot and ship waiting on Casiti for you all.”

Sandra looked at Glor. “Didja hear that, sir?”

Glor grinned crookedly. “I did, indeed. I guess no more sleep for us, eh?” Glor could see the light color of the sky. It was morning, anyway.

“I guess not.”

Glor got up, took a quick shower, and had his AI contact Paul, Ke’lir, and Pot’relo. He arranged a shuttle ride to the New Orleans spaceport, and called for a car to take them to the Zwek shuttle port. Sandra had been visiting for the past week, and they both packed their things, and got in the car when it arrived.

When they got to the spaceport in New Orleans a few hours later, they found Ke'lir and Pot'relo in the waiting area for the next transport to Casiti.

Ke'lir got up and hugged Glor. "Hey there. Funny you two happened to arrive at the same time." Ke'lir smiled.

"Sandra was visiting me in Zvek. We traveled back together."

"Ah, I see. Are you happy?"

He looked in Sandra's direction. "Very."

"I'm glad for you. And a little envious."

"You'll find her, Ke'lir. She's out there somewhere."

Ke'lir nodded, but Glor sensed a bit of sadness in her.

Pot'relo came up to Glor. "Good to see you. I guess I should call you 'sir?'"

"Please don't! Not my thing—that's a Terran thing. The Kinder thing would be for me to be a chief, but we Kinder here have given that up in favor of something that is more like the Casitian model. Think of me as your head teacher."

"Alright, then." She smiled.

Ke'lir said, "I talked with Paul. He's actually here on New Earth. He should get here soon."

Glor asked, "Is he still around from his Christmas visit?"

"Yes. Apparently things in the ICS are getting very interesting now that his brother in-law is Bishop. Apparently, he is much more of a reformer than anyone knew."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. He wants to bring the ICS out of the dark ages."

Glor said, “Well, that’s a very good thing. I hope it works out, and I hope Paul doesn’t get too tangled up in it.”

Ke’lir nodded.

ICS, New Earth, January 12, 2105

Paul couldn’t quite believe it. He was sitting in the office of the Bishop of the ICS. And he was glad to be here. It had been a strange visit. First, he had surprised himself in wanting to go back home for a Christmas visit. He had been having a lively written conversation with Franklin, his brother in-law, who was now the Bishop of the ICS. Franklin didn’t want the ICS to be a backwater anymore—he wanted it to return to being a full participant in the life of New Earth. And being a full participant in the life of New Earth meant communicating with Casitians. Franklin had a theological task, not only a practical task.

Paul had read a very detailed history of the theology of the ICS, written by a Terran researcher about 25 years ago. It explained how the ICS started out with a theology that resembled very closely conservative Christian ideology of the 20th Century on Earth. But after The Event, when many Christians decided to leave the ICS, and not settle there because of the much more primitive conditions, the theology took some strange turns. The initial reasons why Casitians weren’t allowed into the ICS had to do with a political stance. But that progressed into a theological stance of Casitians as a manifestation of the evil of Satan.

Franklin had never believed that, and, of course, neither had Paul. In fact, Paul knew his own opinion was fairly common in the ICS. But it was definitely not the party line, so Franklin had to shift the party line, somehow.

“Thanks for coming here, Paul.”

“I’m glad I’m here. I can’t quite believe I’m here. Your father is likely rolling in his grave.”

“Yes, I’m sure he is. I need some help. I’ve been tired of the state of things in the ICS since I was a lot younger, and now that I’m Bishop, I see it in numbers. We are dying, Paul. There are few jobs, we export nothing. There are people in the ICS who are poorer than anyone on New Earth would imagine, or accept.”

“I know.”

“But I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I’m not sure I know either, Franklin, but I would suggest that a good first start is to send a representative to the NEA.”

“I don’t think I can. There are all sorts of requirements for countries and independent zones that we can’t meet.”

“Look, let me talk with some folks, and see if there is a way that you can be brought in without those requirements. They have to be willing to start somewhere. I think a representative is a good start. Begin the conversations necessary. Also, didn’t you used to have an ambassador from New America?”

“We did, but that ended more than 40 years ago.”

“Bring it back. Ask for an ambassador, and send one. Most countries have ambassadors to most other countries now. Even the zones do, too. My cousin Khalid is the NCPIZ’s ambassador to New Aard.”

“Those sound like very good ideas, Paul. Honestly. I must tell you, I’d love it if you came back to the ICS, and worked with me.”

Paul figured this was coming, and he had an easy answer. Coming back to New Earth was a possibility for him, but coming back to the ICS was not. He’d like to help the ICS move forward, but he would have to do it from a distance. Besides, he loved his studies at the Ja’lit school, and his work.

“I’m sorry, Franklin. I won’t. I have work that I love on Casiti, and I am studying there.”

“Studying?”

“Yes. I will officially be a student of the Ja’lit school later this month.”

“Is that a technical school?”

“No. It’s the Casitian equivalent of a seminary. It was founded by the great Ja’len’da, who studied many Earth traditions.”

Franklin got a strange look on his face. Paul realized that perhaps, the reform was not as deep as Paul might have wanted, or expected. He decided that he probably didn’t need to play his trump card, Ka’li’mo.

“I see. Well, I’m sorry you won’t consider returning. Perhaps in the future.”

“Perhaps.”

“Will you marry a Casitian?”

Paul was surprised by this question. “Casitians don’t marry, Franklin. At the moment, I have no plans in that direction.” This was most definitely true.

Franklin nodded.

They talked for a while further about strategy, then Paul took his leave, and went back to his parent's house. He would be leaving in the morning.

Hilcyon, Lykl 11, 1203

Dlen was sitting at the table with her mother and father, and sister-in-law Tyrin. They had dinner together alone a few times a month. Mostly Wlen had to entertain this Chief, and that priest, and that guest, and when that happened, all of the women of the house ate separately in the small dining room. Dlen was happy that her mother no longer had to cook or clean, but sometimes she thought that perhaps she was bored. She did help to coordinate the house, and was also entertaining wives of Chiefs.

Dlen didn't have any official or unofficial role, so she kept being a midwife in the capital. It was good work, and she enjoyed it. People liked the work she did. Unfortunately, she had a surfeit of suitors, now that she was the Supreme Chief's daughter, and she could feel the pressure to wed. But she had no interest in doing that—Dlen couldn't see herself as a wife and mother.

Now that her father, as a reformer, was Supreme Chief, perhaps there would be more room for Dlen to be on her own, doing what she wanted to. But Dlen worried about him. He had been challenged at the end of each month of respite, and the last time, he almost lost. She looked at him. The weal on the side of his face was still clear, and he limped around most days.

Her father said, "I have big news."

She looked up. "What, Da?"

“I called the Breft.”

There was silence in the room. Dlen smiled. Maybe he wouldn't have to fight again.

Her mother asked, “What's going to happen?”

“I don't know. They said they were sending a contingent, which will arrive in a few days.”

Dlen asked, “Are you going to announce anything?”

“I must, at some point. I don't quite know how, yet.”

“You want to stop challenges.”

“Yes. I do. And I will. But I need their help.”

Her mother leaned over to Wlen, and put her hand on his shoulder. “Well, husband, I will be happy if you won't have to fight again.”

He nodded.

They finished up dinner, and Dlen was called to a birth in the outskirts of the capital. Somehow, even though everyone knew that her father was a reformer, and the father of Mrin, even traditionalists wanted the honor of Dlen, the daughter of the Supreme Chief, attending their births. This birth was to the wife of a very prominent Second Chief, one that Dlen suspected might well be next in line to challenge her father.

It was an easy birth, and Dlen was compensated handsomely for it. As she was taking her leave, the Second Chief stopped her.

“Dlen, thank you for helping my wife.”

“You are very welcome, Chief Hwel. I am happy to.”

“May I ask you something?”

“Certainly.”

“Why does your father continue to allow you to stay unmarried, now that you could have virtually any single man in the Capital?”

Dlen didn't like the question, but she didn't really know how else to answer it. “He values my work, and lets me make my own choices.”

“He thinks women have the capacity to make choices? You are too beautiful to be allowed to remain unmarried.” There was a dripping acid tone to his voice. She ignored him.

“Excuse me, Second Chief, I must leave now. I hope your wife and daughter do well.”

“*Daughter*, you see that's the problem. This is her second.”

Dlen slipped past him, out the door. Change couldn't come quickly enough for her.

Hilcyon Orbit, January 16, 2105 (Lykl 15, 1203)

The team had just arrived, and were in orbit over Hilcyon. The next step was to make contact with the new Supreme Chief, and talk about next steps. They really had no idea what he had in mind, although given that he was in contact, it suggested a desire for ongoing connection. This time, they had come in a larger ship, and had a much larger team of people with them, although the five of them would go to the surface.

Sandra said, “OK, it's time to make contact. Glor?”

Glor, who was standing in the middle of the room, nodded. Sandra said, “Communication on.”

The communication started, and the image of the Supreme Chief and one other person materialized near Glor. The voice of her AI translating the conversation was in one ear.

“Supreme Chief, my name is Glor Hostro Zolor. I come from a planet we call New Earth.”

The Supreme Chief nodded. “Yes, I know of this planet. My grandmother Krely knew a woman named Btric, who came from your planet.”

“Your grandmother knew Beatrice?”

“Yes. You sound surprised.”

“Beatrice was my great-grandmother.”

“How did you come by that Kinder name?”

“Great-grandmother Beatrice married a Kinder man, Ngellin Yolse Marn.”

Wlen looked surprised. “How could there be Kinder on New Earth?”

“About 2,000 Kinder soldiers deserted during the invasion. They settled first on New Earth, then many went to Casiti.”

“Really? I had no idea so many...”

“I imagine that was kept from the leadership at the time. Anyway, Supreme Chief...”

“Wlen. Call me Wlen.”

“Wlen. How can we help?”

“It is time for the Kinder to re-join the rest of the people. Change must come. Unfortunately, there is resistance to this idea.”

“Resistance? In what form?”

“I am being challenged for my leadership each month.”

Glor said, “I don’t understand.”

“Here, if someone wants to be promoted, they challenge the one above them to battle in the ring. The winner gets the job. The loser dies. The winner cannot be challenged for one month.”

Ke’lir could feel the emotion in the room change. Even though they all knew about the way the Kinder chose leaders, somehow hearing it again was shocking.

“I see. So at the end of that time, you are being challenged by people who don’t want the reforms you seek.”

“Yes. And I will lose. If not the next one, the one after that. I wish to be the last Supreme Chief. I want the people to be able to choose their leaders. I must change this system, but in order to...”

“You need our presence.”

“Yes.”

“We understand. We are prepared to send down a small team at first, and then continue discussions. We also have to confer with our leaders at home about the best way to approach this.”

Wlen’s expression changed, and there was a pause. “Yes, of course. When can your team arrive?”

“We will send a shuttle down to arrive mid-day in the Capital. Is there a preferred place for us to land?”

“The Capital Square. We will meet you there.”

Glor nodded. “See you tomorrow. Communication off.”

Pot’relo said, “This is a bit of a pickle, now isn’t it?”

Ke'lir nodded. "We have very clear directives to only do what the people of Hilcyon ask us to do. Yet, there is clearly differences of opinion."

Glor said, "But the Supreme Chief is the spokesperson for the people..."

"Yes, but he probably would be replaced in a month or two if we don't intervene. But if we don't intervene..."

Pot'relo said, "We go down with a small contingent—the five of us, plus three of my security team. We talk with Wlen, and we also wait to see what the Consej will say."

Ke'lir said, "This is going to cause an uproar in the Consej!"

Glor said, "Let them be in an uproar. We're here, on the ground. The overall goal is to have the Kinder rejoin the rest of humanity. Our involvement will help assure that."

Sandra said quietly, "But what if this causes a big backlash? We need to know how strong the resistance to reform is. If it's stronger than the reform movement..."

Glor said, "I doubt it. The people know how they were saved from famine and near extinction."

Sandra nodded. "Yes, this is true. I guess we'll have to find out."

Ke'lir was happy that she'd spent the last few days in intensive language training, although she did have her AI to help.

Hilcyon, Lykl 15, 1203

The image of Glor faded, and Wlen was left with Rtlir and his thoughts. He realized that he didn't know that the Breft would choose to save him. He turned to Rtlir.

“Do you think they will help?”

“I wish I knew, Wlen. Their very public arrival alone might tip the balance in your favor...”

“Or out of my favor.”

“Yes, there is that possibility. There are plenty that wish the Breft help, but, few, really that want their influence.”

“But we can’t have their help without their influence. We can’t seem to change our culture on our own. Each time it has happened, it has been stifled. Perhaps, since the Breft have been influenced by those from Grier Nro, as well as the Kinder deserters... maybe they will seem different.” Wlen knew that Rtlir was a student of history.

Rtlir said quietly, “I don’t know if it matters, Wlen. The only long-term hope for the Kinder is in the Breft. Sadly, that has always been true. They have always had the key. We have always been unable to stand without them.”

Wlen nodded. “Rtlir, gather the ten most loyal Chiefs we have. Have them meet us at the Capital Square at mid-day.”

Rtlir said, “Yes, sir.” He got up and left the room. Wlen decided to go home, and talk with his family. Suddenly, he missed Mrin. He so much wished Mrin was here to see this day.

New Orleans, New Earth, February 5, 2105

“And this, *exactly*, is why we should have never, *ever* agreed to allow Terrans to represent Casiti on the Consej!” Holt’eron’s angry voice boomed above the din.

Ro'mer sat at the table, feeling relatively calm, although he knew that what was happening now was the conflict that they knew had been coming, ever since the second call from Hilcyon. The report from Glor's team made it clear that the situation on the ground was going to be very complex. What degree of interference in Hilcyon's government should they have? How could they assure that the current reformer Supreme Chief remained in power?

All of the Kinder representatives felt it necessary to intervene and assure the continued leadership of the reformer Chief. The Terran representatives, including the current chair, his cousin Zrel, were evenly split. The Casitians were dead set against any interference. This was not surprising to Ro'mer. But because he was a Casitian representative, he was going to tip the balance. He thought intervention was wise. It would have been a deadlock, assuring no intervention, had Ro'mer not been on the Consej.

It had been a major concession of the Casitians 50 years ago to give up consensus decision making in favor of majority rule, since neither the Terrans, nor the Kinder had that tradition. Ro'mer imagined that they were regretting that concession greatly at this moment. But it didn't matter. The Consej had decided that they would intervene. The question now, was how much.

Zrel rang the bell repeatedly. "Please settle down. The vote is complete. We have decided that we will intervene in Hilcyon's process, for two aims. First, to assure their continued well-being, and second, to assure the eventual peaceful re-unification of all humans. But we need to decide on parameters. Let's each go and confer with our communities and committees, and come up with a series of proposals, to create a plan. Our team on Hilcyon is going to need guidance, and the sooner we can give it, the better."

Ro'mer did not look forward to the meeting he knew would happen right after this one, with the Casitian representatives of the Consej, and the Casitian council, the Caraj. He had several friends on the Caraj, but the Caraj had never been open to Terran representatives. His mother was nominated to the Caraj just a few years ago, but was not invited by the Caraj to join.

Hilcyon, Lykl 15, 1203

Paul squinted in the unfamiliar sun. The sun of Casiti was pretty similar to the sun of New Earth, just further away. This sun just seemed different from either. It definitely was colder. Paul knew from briefings that the mean temperature for most of Hilcyon was about the same than the mean temperature for Casiti. Casiti was tilted much more than Hilcyon, so it at least had periods of pretty warm weather. Hilcyon wasn't tilted, and the mean temperature was not so far above freezing most of the year. The temperate zones near the equator were better, but it never got really warm on Hilcyon. Between that, and the lack of rain, Hilcyon was a forbidding place.

He was with Ke'lir on one side of him, and Pot'relo on the other. Glor was in front of them, greeting the Supreme Chief. Paul looked around. There was a huge and growing crowd. They seemed mostly friendly and curious, which was a relief. Pot'relo and the security team had given them all some defensive devices in case of a riot.

He heard his AI's voice, translating the conversation Glor and Wlen were having.

The Supreme Chief, who's name Paul learned was Wlen, said, "I welcome you and your team to Kinder Home. You will be staying with my family, in our house. There will be a reception, then dinner. Tomorrow, we will start discussions of our exchange."

This seemed to be very careful talk from the Supreme Chief.

Glor said, “I wish to thank you for your gracious welcome and hospitality. We look forward to meeting your family and more Kinder Chiefs. We also look forward to our conversations about the relationship of Kinder Home, New Earth, and Casiti.”

Paul thought it was diplomatic of Glor to put New Earth first, but then Paul remembered that Glor really was of New Earth, not Casiti. He wondered what instructions he was given from the Consej before they left.

They walked away from the shuttle, and the pilot took off to return to the ship. The group of them, both the team from the ship as well as a group of Kinder, walked down some streets, and toward a pair of rather imposing buildings.

Wlen said, “This building on the left is the Capital. That’s where I have my offices, and where the First Chiefs and staff have their offices. On the right is my residence. Come.”

They followed him and his entourage into the large residence. There was an enormous entryway, and Paul could see a large room to the right with tables where there were people bustling about, obviously preparing a feast. Several men and women approached them.

One tall, striking woman, with a shorter haircut than any other woman he’d seen so far, was introduced to them as Dlen, Wlen’s daughter. Paul noticed that Ke’lir was staring at the woman with an odd expression.

Dlen said, “Welcome to our house. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to the suite where you will stay. It was designed for the Breft when the residence was built, but had remained empty and unused since...”

Ke’lir said, “Since the Betrayal of Klor.”

Dlen smiled at Ke’lir, and nodded. “Yes.”

They walked upstairs, down two halls, then into an open parlor.

Dlen said, “This is the parlor. That room in the far back,” she pointed, “is your office space. Its windows look down on the atrium between this building and the Capital. Over there,” she pointed to the left “are two of the guest rooms, and bathing room. To the right over there are the remaining three guest rooms. One room has one bed, and the other four have two. We didn’t know how many you would be. Is it just you eight?”

Ke’lir said, “At the moment, yes. This will be fine, thank you.”

Dlen said, “You are very welcome. This is Tylr, she will see to your needs. Feel free to ask her to find me when needed.” It seemed to Paul that she said that directly to Ke’lir.

Ke’lir smiled. “Thank you so much, Dlen. This is wonderful. We’ll see you at dinner?”

“Yes, you will.” She turned and left them then, but before she walked completely out the door, she turned to look again at Ke’lir.

Glor came back from walking around. “Sandra and I can share the room with one bed - it’s a queen-ish sized bed.”

Pot’relo said, “I’ll share a room with Zer’oltar, and the two other security team members can share a room. Paul and Ke’lir can have their own rooms.

Paul was grateful of that.

Sandra said, “Uh, folks, I know you Casitians grow up with communal baths, but the rest of us didn’t. Can we agree this isn’t communal? When the door’s closed...?”

Paul was greatly relieved when the Casitians agreed. He’d get his own room, and get to use the bathing room alone. Things were looking good.

Hilcyon, Lykl 15, 1203

Ke'lir dropped her bag on the bed. It was a small bed. Large enough for her, but she was used to more spacious sleeping surfaces. She sat in the chair that was facing a small window. The window looked out onto a courtyard, and there were people moving back and forth across it.

She couldn't help but think back on Dlen. Dlen was, of course, quite beautiful, but it wasn't really the beauty that struck Ke'lir—it was the way she carried herself. She seemed sure of herself, and strong, among what seemed to be a lot of cowering, afraid women.

Ke'lir knew this was a patriarchal society, so she had no illusions about what life was like for women here. But she did wonder what Dlen's life was like. She imagined it was likely different than most. She was looking forward to learning more.

Ke'lir also worried about Dlen. Ke'lir had no idea how this endeavor was going to go, and it certainly had dangers for anyone associated with this reformer Chief, particularly his family. When most of them eventually left, which they would have to, what would it be like? Would he lose his place? How could they prevent that?

She knew that at this very moment, on New Earth and Casiti, there were raging arguments about what to do, and how much to intervene. But they were here, on the planet, and she wasn't sure she knew. She wondered whether Dlen might have some insights.

Ke'lir got up, and went to the parlor, and left the suite, to find Tylr sitting in a small alcove sewing. She jumped up.

“Ma'am, how can I help you?” Ke'lir's AI translated. She subvocalized, and the response in Kinder came into her ear. She repeated it.

“I wonder if you can find Dlen for me. I need to ask her something.”

“Certainly Ma’am. I’ll be right back.” Tylr ran off before Ke’lir could say anything. In just a few minutes, Tylr came back with Dlen in tow.

Ke’lir said, repeating her AI’s translation of her intended statement, “Hi Dlen. I’m sorry to interrupt whatever you were doing...”

“It’s fine. Come, let’s find a place we can talk.”

Ke’lir followed Dlen to a small library, with walls of books. The sat down.

“This is one of my favorite places to spend time. You would be amazed at what books are here. Luckily, the previous tenants simply ignored this room.”

Ke’lir smiled. “First, I need to apologize for my language skills. I have an artificial intelligence help me translate, so I will be slow in speaking.”

“Artificial intelligence? That seems a contradiction in terms.”

Her AI gave her a very quick etymology of the Kinder words, and she nodded.

“Yes, I can see why you would think that.” Ke’lir pointed to her ear. “I have this in my ear, which speaks to me, and hears me think. You can think of it as a library like this, with an assistant who works really, really fast.”

Dlen said, “Hears you think?”

“Well, that’s an exaggeration. I speak without sound, and it can hear it.”

“Ah, I understand. Like when we learn to read silently as children.”

“Yes! Exactly.”

Dlen smiled. Ke’lir could feel her heartbeat get faster. She was captivated by Dlen’s eyes, and face. She loved the way her hair... Ke’lir could feel herself blush, and she re-focused herself.

“Anyway, I thought it would be good to get your view of what you think would be best for us to do here. You know the inside of this society, more than your father can tell us.”

“When you first came, and fixed the water, and sent food, people were happy. They thought of my brother as a hero.”

“Your brother was Mrin?”

“Oh, I thought you knew.”

“No, we had no idea the new Chief was the father of Mrin. We knew Mrin got executed for talking with us.”

“Da didn’t want Mrin to die in vain. So he trained and trained and challenged Klef. And won.”

“I see. Keep going.”

“But the people think the Breft are evil. They have for many, many years. Since the beginning, really.”

“The Casitians called the Kinder ‘accursed’ for a long time. But since The Event, Kinder have lived on Casiti, and the Casitians have learned more about them.”

“The Event?”

Ke’lir realized that Dlen likely had no idea what had happened. She asked, “What do you know of Earth?” She spoke the translation, “Grier Nro.”

“It was the origin of all of our people, until the Breft abandoned us here on Kinder Home. The Exalted King wanted us to return there, but the Breft refused us.”

Ke’lir asked, “Is that what you think?”

Dlen shook her head. “I don’t really believe in the Exalted King, or at least not as He is talked about by the priests. I think the history is probably a lot more complicated.”

Ke'lir nodded. "I've read some of the early histories, and I know that it was very complex. In terms of recent history, The Event happened sixty-six years ago, when the Galactic government cut us all off from Earth for 1000 years. All Terrans had to leave Earth. My family is 1/2 Terran, and 1/2 from Casiti."

Dlen said, looking overwhelmed, "Ah, there is so much to learn!"

Ke'lir smiled, and without thinking, put her hand on Dlen's, sending her reassurance. Dlen's eyes went wide, and withdrew her hand. Ke'lir swore inwardly.

"I'm sorry, Dlen. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't upset me, I just..."

"I'll explain it sometime, I promise."

Dlen looked her straight in the eye, and said quietly, "I will make you keep that promise."

Ke'lir could hardly stand resisting the urge to touch Dlen again. She sighed.

"OK, so back to where we were. What can we do, do you think, to sway the people?"

"Sway the women. Although women don't have any political power, they do have a lot of influence on their husbands, fathers and sons."

"And how can we sway the women?"

"Make their lives easier. First off, make childbirth less dangerous. I lose too many women."

"*You* lose?"

"I'm a midwife. I attend the births of about ten women each month. I lose three or four a year in childbirth. And there are many more babes that die, too."

Ke'lir was frankly shocked. "Three mothers out of 100?"

"How many do you lose?"

“This is not my field, but I don’t think any women die in childbirth on Casiti. There are some areas of New Earth that have fewer and less developed medical facilities than others, and they might lose one every twenty years or so. But in most areas, I don’t think they lose any. It seems we need to start with medical assistance.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any births soon?”

“There are a few women I am waiting on. Why?”

“Can I bring a doctor? We brought one with us. To observe, and get an idea of how best to help.”

Dlen nodded. “Of course. That would be wonderful.”

“Alright. I’ll bring her down. She can stay with us.”

Dlen got up. “I’m sorry, I must go back to the preparations for the feast. It will start soon.”

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to delay you.”

Dlen smiled, the smile that was melting Ke’lir’s heart. “Not a problem. It was nice to talk with you.”

“I enjoyed our conversation, Dlen. I look forward to more.”

“There will be more, you can count on it.”

Ke’lir watched Dlen walk out of the room, her heart finally stopped beating quite so quickly. Ke’lir could feel that familiar feeling, like how she felt when she first met Mari’sol. But Ke’lir had to remember that Dlen wasn’t Casitian, or even Terran.

Rel'toro, Casiti, 73 Hevl, 804

Ro'mer sat on some pillows in the room he shared with Mi'nali and their newborn son. He was exhausted and deeply troubled. After his vote broke the tie on the Consej for intervention into the politics of Hilcyon, all hell had broken loose. The Caraj, who were responsible for nominating Casitian members of the Consej, came to consensus that no one with less than 63/64ths native Casitian heritage could serve as a Casitian member of the Consej. Given that only 67 years had passed since Terran presence on Casiti, it eliminated everyone with any Terran relatives. No member of the Michaelson family would again serve on the Consej as a Casitian representative for many, many years, if ever. They also decided to revoke Ro'mer's position, so Ro'mer was about to lose his seat. This would virtually assure that any assistance that they would have given to the current Supreme Chief would not be coming.

Even worse, the Caraj were even considering asking the Consej to bring the delegation back home immediately. From Ro'mer's perspective this would be a disaster. It would have the certain effect of weakening the hand of the reformer Chief, potentially reversing the reform movement.

Ro'mer could see the somewhat hidden undercurrent of suspicion of his family, not only on the Caraj, but in Casitians in general. There were some number of blended families by now, but none were nearly as well-known as the Michaelsons. And few contained members of all three branches of humanity. Ro'mer could see the beginning of the erosion of the long work of his family, and of the peaceful coexistence fostered by Ja'lend'a and others during, and after The Event.

Well, there was no point in rehashing these events. There wasn't much he could do about them. He didn't know when Glor, Ke'lir and Paul would be returning. He hoped at least that the Consej would give them time enough so that some good could be accomplished. And he needed to get busy shoring up his family's position.

Hilcyon, Lykl 20, 1203

Dlen washed off her hands, while the doctor that Ke'lir had brought with them took care of the mother and baby. Dlen knew that both would have died without this help. She had worried about Hjirn's pregnancy for months, and when they had arrived during her labor, she knew that Hjirn could not survive it. Yet...

Dlen walked to the side of the room where Ke'lir stood, watching.

She said, "Ke'lir, I wish to thank your doctor for saving Hjirn's life, and the life of her son. Her husband Ylorp will thank you both."

Ke'lir nodded. "I'm glad we were here, Dlen."

Something in the way that Ke'lir looked at Dlen made her heart flutter. But she needed to focus on the tasks ahead.

"Can you bring more doctors? How can we save more lives?"

"We only have one, Dlen. I've been talking with her, and she has a training plan in mind. We'll be able to leave you with tools and instruments that you need, and train you to use them."

"So you'll stay for a while?"

Dlen could hear something strange in Ke'lir's voice. Ke'lir had gotten better and better at speaking in their language, but Dlen could tell there was some hesitation.

“Dlen, we have been told we need to leave soon. We can't stay as long as we originally thought. Glor is speaking with your father about this. We have been ordered not to intervene in your governmental process. I'm so sorry, I wish things could be different.”

Dlen felt her heart drop out of her chest. She had been so hopeful. Hopeful that her father would survive, and hopeful for the reform effort. Now, she knew. There would be war. She looked at Ke'lir, who looked sad, and had tears in her eyes. Dlen knew that Ke'lir cared about them, but she had no idea it was so much. She reached out to Ke'lir, and touched her arm.

“I know you would do everything you could do to help us, Ke'lir. Perhaps it is right that we have to be the ones who will work this out on our own.”

“But I don't want you to be in danger...”

Dlen said quietly, “We'll be alright.” But Dlen didn't believe that. The reformers would take to arms to keep her father in place as Supreme Chief, and Dlen wasn't at all sure they could survive the war. But she would do the best she knew how.

Ylorp, Hjirn's husband, and father to the newborn boy, approached Dlen and Ke'lir. He looked at Ke'lir.

“I know my son and wife would be dead if it were not for you. We had tried so hard, for so long, to have a child, and when this pregnancy was so difficult for Hjirn, I had little hope. I believed you would bring evil to Hilcyon, but in fact, it appears you bring life.”

Ke'lir said, “I'm glad we were here to save these lives. There are many more we could help.”

Ylorp nodded. “I wish to help spread your knowledge to assist more families. But I am in a precarious position.”

Ke’lir said, “You all are. But why are you particularly?”

“I was in a unit that was secretly dedicated to stamping out reform. Now that Wlen is Supreme Chief, my Second Chief is secretly working against him. I knew of Dlen a long time ago, and each time she came to this hamlet, I was told do watch her. If my Second Chief knew that she had delivered my son, he would probably have me killed—but I knew she was the only hope we had.

“And I am carefully watched. My father was a rebel, and was executed for sedition when I was a child. My grandfather was the great Supreme Chief Willm. I am watched from both directions.”

Ke’lir said, “Willm?”

“He was from Grier Nro, but that is a closely held secret of our family.”

“William! He became Supreme Chief?”

Dlen was astonished that Willm had been from Grier Nro. She said to Ke’lir, “He is considered the most revered of Chiefs in the current era. He re-united all of Hilcyon after the rebellions. You know of him?”

“Yes, from my own family history. Most on New Earth don’t know his story. Beatrice, or Btric as you called her, found out he was on Hilcyon. But no one knew he became Supreme Chief.”

Ylorp said, “He pledged to never contact the Breft.”

Ke’lir said, “Of course he made that pledge. If we were contacted while he was still alive, his secret would have been exposed!”

Ylorp's eyes went wide, and he nodded. "And he would have been killed for his treachery."

Dlen said, "We must go. It would not be good to be here too long."

Ylorp nodded. "Thank you again."

Dlen nodded, and Ke'lir and the doctor joined her at the door. They left, and walked to the edge of the hamlet and took the shuttle back to the capital, and walked to the Supreme Chief's mansion.

Ke'lir said, "Dlen, I know it's late, but can we talk? I need to discuss some things with you."

"Certainly. Let's go up to the library."

As they settled in to chairs opposite each other, Dlen had another look at Ke'lir. She realized that not only had she come to greatly enjoy Ke'lir's company, but the idea of losing it was wrenching. She took a few breaths, to settle herself.

Ke'lir started, "Dlen, I don't know how much time we have, but we need to train you, and as many other midwives as you can gather, on how to use the equipment we have. I've talked some with our doctor. If we had more time, we would take you all through a normal educational process, but we don't have time for that. We also don't have time to translate all of our medical documents into your language. Our AIs are working hard, but we need your help. We don't have any relatively modern language guides."

"I have four midwives in mind already. They are smart, and fast learners. We all can help you translate. I've already set aside some rooms for us all to work."

Ke'lir smiled, and Dlen felt herself get warm. It was an unusual feeling, one she hadn't had in a very long time. She realized that she'd felt this way with Hrihl. Sadness and fear overtook her for a moment, until she felt calmed by Ke'lir's touch on her arm.

"How do you do that?"

Ke'lir half-smiled. "It's a technique we are taught as children. We can send and receive feelings."

"But you are human..."

"It's a human ability—just not one that many humans outside of Casiti learned."

"Can I learn?"

"It's harder to learn as an adult, I hear, but still possible."

"I don't have enough time to learn it, do I?"

Ke'lir's face fell. She said quietly, "No, I don't think so."

Dlen needed for this moment to end. "It's late—I have much to do, and need rest. Let's reconvene tomorrow."

"Yes, I'm sorry to keep you up. Tomorrow." Ke'lir got up, and left the room. Dlen watched her leave with sadness.

Hilcyon, Lykl 20, 1203

It always calmed Ylorp to sit in the large temple hall, listening to chanting. He was always one of only a few men in the audience—most men thought that going to services was a weakness. Ylorp didn't care.

When he was a boy, he wanted more than anything to become a priest. But then his father was executed for treason, and everyone around him wanted him to redeem their family name. Going into the priesthood was then out of the question. So he sat in services instead.

He let the mellifluous chanting wash over him. He was so grateful to the Exalted King for the life of his wife and son. He felt that there was something he should do, but he didn't know what. He was pledged to stop reform, but he had no heart for that. But he knew that reform would die this time, again. There just weren't enough people who wanted it, even with the end of famine.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't notice that the service was over, and everyone had left. He sat for a while, and then saw the head priest, Hgrun, walk toward him. Priest Hgrun sat next to him.

“Son, you seem troubled.”

“I am, Priest Hgrun. My wife and son were saved by the Breft.”

“The Breft have much to offer the Kinder, son.”

Ylorp looked up into the priest's wrinkled, friendly face.

“You think that, Priest Hgrun? Can they help us?”

“Son, we have been separated from them for too long. The Exalted King wants us to be united again, to heal the original wound.”

“I didn't know...”

“We have learned through this famine, and through prayer and song, that we all need to unite. It will be a slow process. One full of pain and death. But it must happen.”

“What can I do, Priest Hgrun? How can I help?”

“Watch and wait. You will see your opportunities. Report to me when you can.”

Ylorp felt great relief. There was someone who understood, someone on his side.
Someone who knew what was right.

“Thank you, sir. And thank the Exalted King.”

“May He reign supreme forever.”

Hilcyon, Lykl 21, 1203

Glor looked at Ke’lir, listening to her tell the story of the woman their doctor saved from dying in childbirth.

Ke’lir continued, “So I think the more we can support women in childbirth, and their infants early in life, the more women will appreciate our presence here, and the more they will influence their husbands, sons, and fathers.”

Glor said, “I don’t know, Ke’lir—this is a pretty patriarchal society. Will the women have that much influence?”

“If more of men’s sons survive, Glor, that will make a difference to them.”

Paul said, “The Consej isn’t going to limit how much medical and humanitarian aid we can provide, are they?”

“No, I don’t think so. Most of the Casitian representatives want us to leave, but enough of them are willing to have us help for a while. We can stay for another 20 days.”

Ke’lir said, “That’s not enough time to train the midwives...”

Glor said, “Can’t you train Dlen, and a few more enough so they can train others?”

“Glor, these people are using, what, 19th century Earth level medicine?!”

Glor sighed. “Ke’lir, I can’t fix this. We have 20 more days. There is nothing I can do.”

“We have to stay longer, Glor! Besides, no one at home is going to...”

“You want to threaten all of our careers? Ro’mer was clear—our family *reputation* is in peril.”

“These *people* are peril, Glor!” Ke’lir got up, and walked out of the room.

Glor looked to Paul. “What’s up with her?”

Paul took a breath before speaking, which gave Glor time to think something big was going on.

“She’s been spending a lot of time with the Chief’s daughter. I don’t think she’s completely neutral anymore.”

“Alright, I’ll have a talk with her. She can’t go off the rails now.”

Paul nodded.

“We’re done for now. I need to talk with Ke’lir, and with Pot’relo. I’ve been feeling a lot of tension during my meetings with Wlen and other Chiefs. Something is going on underneath the surface. Now that we have clear orders not to intervene, we have to figure out how we’re going to minimize our risk while we’re here.”

Glor got up, and went in search of Ke’lir, who was in her room.

“Knock, knock?” Ke’lir looked up.

“Yeah, come on in.”

Glor sat down, and said nothing for a minute.

Ke’lir said, “Look, Glor, I’m sorry for storming out like that. Dlen has been giving me a lot of information, and I’m learning a lot. This society is on a kind of cusp. If we can’t intervene,

and give support to the reformers, things will get bad. Dlen knows a lot of reformers, and they are ready to take up arms to support her father. There will be war.”

“I know. I wish I knew a way we can prevent that, but we can’t. The Casitians are really clear—they don’t want us to intervene, and a lot of Terrans don’t want that either. There isn’t anything we can do.”

“I don’t want to go against orders. I just…”

In a rare moment, Glor wished he’d learned lyre’es’gkin, the Casitian technique of sending energy and feelings to someone else. Ke’lir looked worried and scared in a way he’d never seen before. He knew he didn’t have anything he could say that would make her feel better.

He said, “Let me know if there is any way I can help with anything, Ke’lir. I’ll stretch our orders as far as I can.”

Ke’lir looked up. “Thanks, Glor.”

Hilcyon, Lykl 25, 1203

Ylorp was fidgeting. It was hard for him to keep still at this meeting, knowing that he’d be reporting it all to Hjirn, who would then send it all to the reformers. But he felt right in what he was doing. This is what the Exalted King wanted of him.

First Chief Msrotl was speaking. “Wlen has no idea I’m not completely loyal to him. I hear everything. At the last meeting, Wlen let it be known that the Breft have no intention of leaving. The time to strike is soon, and we have a perfect opportunity in two days.”

His Second Chief asked, “What’s happening in two days?”

“Wlen is hosting another dinner for the Breft. This time, he’s invited Chiefs from all over. Chiefs we know are loyal to us. After the dinner, when everyone is drunk and sleepy, we’ll take over the mansion, then the capital building. I will take the Supreme Chiefdom, and this silliness with Breft will stop.”

Ylorp realized that Msrotl might think Wlen thought he was loyal, but Ylorp knew that the Breft were leaving in fifteen days. It made some sense for Wlen to make people think they weren’t going to leave. Well, he could do nothing to stop the attack, but he would warn them.

His Second Chief called out several names of men who would be in the first wave. Luckily, Ylorp wasn’t one of them. As the meeting broke up, his Chief called him aside.

“Ylorp, you know why I didn’t call your name?”

“Um, no sir.”

“I don’t think you are capable of holding your own in a fight, Ylorp.”

“I understand, sir.”

“You think that’s a compliment? You should be hanging your head in shame. Anyway, I want you to go with the mop-up squad. They will be positioned near the capital building. Talk with Third Chief Zseft.”

“Yes sir.”

Ylorp turned to leave, and could almost feel the hostility oozing from his Second Chief. He didn’t much care at the moment. He had to hurry, so that Wlen would have enough time to prepare.

Hilcyon, Lykl 25, 1203

Wlen sat with his attaché Rtlir, and several other extremely loyal associates. He looked up as Glor entered his office.

He said, "I understand you need to see me?"

"Yes, sir. You know we established a line of communication from Hjirn, Ylorp's wife."

"Yes. You heard something?"

"Two somethings. First, they are planning a takeover the night of the dinner in two days."

"That does not surprise me. Alright, we can get ready for that. What else?"

"They seem to think that we're not leaving, and that you told them that."

"Do you know who said that?"

"A Chief named Msrotl."

Wlen smiled. Yes, his intuition was right. He was feeding disinformation to everyone who he was unsure of. And of course, Msrotl wanted to become First Chief without the danger of the ring.

"Thank you. I was feeding some Chiefs misinformation."

Glor nodded. "We need to see to our security, sir. We'll be bringing some more people down from the ship."

"Yes, of course, I understand. I would not want you to be in danger, although I think this rebellion is bound to fail."

"I certainly hope so."

Glor left, and Wlen spent the next few time periods with his loyalists, planning their defense. He estimated that Msrotl could only gather fifty or so men, and they were easily defended against. He would still have a nice dinner, but he would be careful not to drink very much. In fact, he reminded himself to tell his wife to have the drinks heavily watered for that night.

Wlen knew that even after they fought off this rebellion, there would be more to come. War was inevitable. There was too much of an even match between the numbers of reformers and traditionalists. The only way out was going to be war, now that the Breft were not going to intervene.

On one hand, he wished that he'd never called them. But on the other, perhaps, the reformers would finally win. He doubted he'd survive the war, but perhaps one of his young, strong associates was up to the task of bringing Hilcyon forward.

Hilcyon, Lykl 25, 1203

Dlen, Ke'lir, the Casitian doctor, and several midwives had been busy at work all day. Between training the midwives and help with translation of documentation, they had had several long days already, and they would have more long days until Ke'lir and the rest of them finally left.

In the morning, Dlen had alerted them that there would be an attack in two days, at a big dinner that had been planned for some time. Ke'lir had alerted Glor, who had then told Wlen.

Glor said Wlen was confident they could defend themselves, but Glor had sent for more defense staff from the ship, bringing their guard detail up to seven.

Ke'lr had been in a terrible state, but was trying hard to not let anyone know it. She had irretrievably fallen in love with Dlen, but, of course, she hadn't told Dlen. And spending time with Dlen was exhilarating and deeply painful at the same time. At the end of every day, she spent most of the night sleepless and crying.

Ke'lr tried to focus. She was working with Dlen and her AI to translate, and then further explain, the Terran medical documentation they would be leaving behind. Ke'lr had decided that basic Terran medical documentation was going to be easier for the Kinder to understand, even though they also would be trained to use the Casitian medical equipment without understanding much of how it worked, since Casitian medicine was much further advanced than Terran medicine was.

Dlen said, "This translation doesn't make sense. The AI got caught on this word, and I can't pronounce it."

Ke'lr said, "Let me see." Dlen pushed the tablet toward Ke'lr, and pointed the word out.

"Spleen."

Dlen tried, "Splin."

Ke'lr smiled. "That will do." Ke'lr had encountered how difficult vowels, especially long vowels, were for the Kinder.

"What is it?"

"It is a relatively small organ, to the left of the stomach."

"Oh! We have a name for that. I'll have the AI replace the words."

"Thanks!"

After a few minutes, Dlen said, “Speaking of stomachs, I’m rather hungry, and I’m sure you are too. I’ll go get someone to bring us all some dinner.”

Ke’lir nodded gratefully. She was hungry, and between the work, and trying hard not to let her distress show, her appetite hadn’t shown up. But now that food was on offer, she realized how little she’d eaten all day.

After the dinner break, and another time unit of work, the other midwives left to return to their families, and Ke’lir and Dlen were left alone. The last thing in the world that Ke’lir wanted to do was leave and go back to her room. But her brain was pretty much done, and focusing on work had become impossible.

Dlen finally interrupted Ke’lir, who was repeating herself a few too many times.

“Ke’lir, I think it’s time we stopped for the day. It’s been a very long one, and you look so tired. Are you sleeping?”

Ke’lir looked up at Dlen, and saw the concern in her face. She felt a tear drop down her cheek. She wiped it off “Sorry. I’ve been under a lot of stress.”

Dlen reached for Ke’lir’s hand, and folded hers over it. “I can see how much you care about us.”

Ke’lir was fighting with herself. She wanted more than anything to tell Dlen how she was feeling, but she knew there was no purpose in it. What could it matter how she felt? They had no future but the next fifteen days.

There was silence between them for a while, then Dlen said quietly, “Ke’lir, what are you not telling me? I can feel it—the conflict you have inside of yourself. Please, tell me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s not about...” Ke’lir took a breath, and looked into Dlen’s eyes. She came to a quiet conclusion. If fifteen days was all they had of a future, it was better than nothing.

“Dlen, I know that your culture is very different than mine. In my culture, there is space for two women to love each other, to be intimate with each other... to live with each other, make a family together.”

Dlen nodded, but said nothing. Ke’lir forged ahead.

“Over the past 10 days, we’ve worked closely together, and I feel as if I’ve gotten to know you well. You are a beautiful person, smart, deep, fascinating... I...” She was struggling with the language. She subvocalized words to her AI, and finally, it gave her the words to say.

“I have fallen in love with you. I don’t know whether you feel anything for me, and I know we can’t have any sort of future together, but...”

Dlen said nothing, and got up from the table. Ke’lir was afraid she had offended Dlen.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean...”

Dlen said quietly, “Don’t be sorry.” Dlen took Ke’lir’s hand, and led her through the corridors back to the library, their favorite place to spend time together. Dlen closed the door, and motioned to have Ke’lir sit on the large, plush window seat.

“We won’t be disturbed here.” Dlen sat next to Ke’lir, their bodies in contact. She put her arm around Ke’lir.

Tears were flowing down Ke’lir’s face. She couldn’t help it. She felt undone.

Dlen said, “When I was a girl, I had a friend. Her name was Hrihl. We played together all of the time, and sometimes we played at being husband and wife together. I never really knew what that meant, but I knew what I felt for her, and I knew there was no room for what I felt.

When I met you, I felt the same way again, but I didn't really admit it to myself—I couldn't admit what it meant.”

Ke'lir wiped tears from her face and looked at Dlen. She moved toward her, and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips. The kiss became less gentle, and more urgent, the longer it lasted. Dlen and Ke'lir lay down finally on the seat, aware of nothing else but the movement of their bodies together.

Hilcyon, Lykl 26, 1203

This morning, Paul had gotten up early, and was sitting in the main room of their suite, reading his tablet before breakfast, which was due soon. He had felt a little bit like a fifth wheel over the past few days. Ke'lir was busy with Dlen and the midwives, Glor and Pot'relo were busy with Wlen and security concerns. Sandra was busily studying every book and archive she could get her hands on in the capital.

Paul had several meetings with engineers, with the hope of doing some degree of technology transfer, given the reality that they were leaving, not to return until things settled out and they were called back. The problem was that there just wasn't the expertise to handle the information. Mrin had been the last engineer who understood or really cared about galactic technology, and no one else had nearly the experience and knowledge that he'd had. After discussions with Glor and Ke'lir, they agreed that at least for now, technology transfer would be limited to medical technology.

So that left Paul with helping Ke'lir, but there wasn't a lot to do. He was getting bored. But he had brought a very large collection of Casitian theology texts with him on this trip, so he could keep his mind occupied to some extent.

He also had his continued correspondence with Franklin Martin to keep him occupied. Franklin had, at his suggestion, sent an ambassador to New America, and accepted one. He had also sent an ambassador to the South Central Independent Zone. They had not yet sent an ambassador back, but one was promised. In addition, due to Paul's coordination, the New Earth Agency was considering taking a representative from the ICS. It was a step in the right direction.

But Franklin was facing a lot of opposition, not the least of which was Paul's mother and father. Franklin's last missive asked Paul for advice in that department. Paul didn't have much to suggest. His mother was so stuck in the idea that anything outside the ICS was evil, that there wasn't much Paul could imagine that would sway her. He wished he understood why his mother had ended up this way after growing up on Casiti.

He had also been in contact with Ro'mer, who was busy doing his best to keep their family reputation intact, now that the Caraj had made the drastic decision to revoke his place on the Consej, and prevent anyone with any degree of Terran heritage from filling a Casitian slot on the Consej. Ro'mer felt that he could see and hear the Casitians closing up again, after the open period after The Event. That worried Paul, quite a lot. Hope of a re-unified human species depended upon Casitian openness.

He heard the front door open, and he was surprised to see a somewhat disheveled Ke'lir enter instead of their breakfast.

“Hi Ke'lir. Did you work all night?”

“Uh, um. No. I gotta get a bath. Breakfast not here yet?”

“Nope. Should be here momentarily.”

He watched her go into her room, get a bundle, and then go into their bath. Paul was a bit puzzled, but when the door opened again, with one of the servant women of the house bearing a cart with breakfast, he forgot all about it.

Later, after everyone had left to go about their tasks, Paul was getting bored with sitting inside and reading, and he thought that he'd take a little walk around the area of the palace. As he got outside, he looked again at the sun, wishing for a little more warmth. He walked a block or so, and saw a small gate. As he looked through the gate, he was faced with most verdant green he'd seen so far on Hilcyon. The gate was unlocked, so he went in, and looked around. He recognized a few of the hardier plants from Casiti, and he also could see a greenhouse in the distance with even more plants.

The strains of a chant found his ears, and he turned toward the sound. It was incredibly beautiful. He walked toward the sound, and saw a large red stone building with a metal door. He hesitated, but was so intrigued and enchanted by the sound that he opened the door. Rows and rows of seats faced an altar that looked almost familiar to him, yet utterly different. There were few people seated—women and only one man. In front were about 10 men in robes that indicated to Paul that they were clergy of some type. He closed the door quietly behind him, and sat down. Luckily, it seemed no one had noticed him enter.

His AI couldn't interpret the chanting, so he closed his eyes, and let the sounds just wash over him, and he sensed the presence of God for the first time in a very long time. The chanting finally ended, but Paul was still entranced. Finally, he opened his eyes, and realized that the large room, which he instinctively called the sanctuary in his head, was empty. He rose, turned, and came face to face with one of the men in robes.

He subvocalized and his AI told him to say, “Hello! I hope I didn’t disturb the service.”

The man said, “We are glad you came. You seemed moved. Do you worship the Exalted King?”

“Well, we have a different name, but yes, yes, I guess you can say that.”

“What is your Exalted King’s name?”

“My family and community called Him ‘Father God.’ I like to think of this being as more than that, bigger than just ‘Father’, but father, mother, sister, brother, creator, lover...”

The man smiled. “Yes, yes, we ourselves have gone beyond the notion of a King, but our people still need someone strong to follow. For now.”

Paul cocked his head. “For now?”

“We priests know that it is almost time to *heal the wound*, to bring all of our people together again, finally. For that, we will need more than a King.”

Paul noticed that he said the words that his AI translated as “heal the wound” with a kind of deep, reflective sound that was different than the other words he spoke. It was almost as if those words were sacred.

Paul said, “Yes, we want that too. But we don’t know how to make that happen.”

“It is not time yet. Be patient.”

The man turned, robes flowing with his motion, and walked away.

Hilcyon, Lykl 26, 1203

Glor watched Sandra sleep for a while. He didn't want to get up quite yet. He loved watching her sleep—her unguarded face, relaxed, open, was almost the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. Although this trip was stressful and dangerous, it almost felt like that didn't impinge on the happiness he felt.

The fact that Sandra wasn't Kinder seemed surprisingly irrelevant to Glor. They had an ease of being together that he'd never imagined he could have. She brought out the best in him, and she said he brought out the best in her. Their love was growing, and he could feel it in his heart. Soon enough, he knew he would ask her to come live with him in Zweek.

Her eyes fluttered, and opened. She saw him looking at her, and she smiled.

“What, dear heart?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Just enjoying watching you sleep.”

They heard a knock at the door, and heard Paul say, “Breakfast has arrived.”

Glor said toward the door, “Thanks, Paul.”

They got up and did their morning rituals, and eventually joined Paul and Ke'lir at breakfast. Paul was mostly done, and Ke'lir was still in the midst of eating a breadmuf. Glor hadn't liked the authentic breadmufs much at first, which surprised him, since at home it was one of his favorite things. But he had gotten pretty used to them by now, and was happily slathering one with the local nut butter and spice.

Glor said, “So Ke'lir, how's the midwives' training program going?”

Ke'lir looked up as if she'd been distracted from a deep thought.

“Alright. We won't possibly be able to finish, but Dlen has been diligent in getting the Terran biology and medical texts translated. Our doc has been training all of them on how to use the medical equipment and medicines we're leaving. They won't have nearly what they need, but

they will have enough to save a lot more lives than they are able to now. That's a step in the right direction."

Glor said, "Perhaps, when we can return, we can take this up again."

"Perhaps. Dlen is not hopeful. She knows the reform movement, and she's not sure they have enough people and power to win."

Paul said, "Even if they do, with the current situation on Casiti and New Earth, I'm not sure we'll be sending anyone back anytime soon to find out."

Glor thought that was an overly pessimistic interpretation of the missives being sent them by Ro'mer and others, but he understood why Paul might feel that way. Ro'mer was doing the best he could, but the landscape the group of them returned to was going to be pretty different than the landscape they left.

Glor shifted the subject. "I've been reviewing with Pot'relo and Wlen our security procedures for tomorrow. Please come back here on time for dinner tonight so we can review and be ready. Wlen seems confident that they can fend off this particular challenge, and I do hope he is right. But we need to be ready to protect ourselves, and get out of here very quickly if we need to."

Everyone nodded, and then they all went about the business of the day. Sandra kissed Glor, and went back to the capital building to scan archival documents. He knew that she had the work of the rest of her life to read, interpret and write about them. He needed to meet with Wlen again, and get a new assessment of the threat.

Hilcyon, Lykl 26, 1203

Wlen watched Glor leave, and he thought back on his day. It was full of meetings, with people he knew were loyal, and some he now knew were not. Tomorrow was going to be a test of his abilities to keep things in check. He felt as if he had a good idea of the size and shape of the threat, but he feared being too optimistic. He'd even considered canceling the dinner, but he didn't think that would have the effect of canceling the takeover attempt.

He was hopeful of fending off this particular attack, especially since the attackers did not know he knew about it. The element of surprise, and of attacking on a night where everyone was sleepy from food and drunk was lost. But he was on edge anyway.

It was time to go home to his family. He missed them. His daughter was always busy with the midwives and Breft doctor, and his wife was busy preparing for the large feast, and attending to the needs of their guests.

He heard an inner door open. Rtlir, his attaché, came into the room.

“Sir, glad you are still here!”

“What?”

“I have information about the attack tomorrow. The Central Valley Chiefs are not loyal.”

“No?”

“No. I have heard from one of my inside informers. And, they have gotten wind somehow that we might know about the plan.”

“Alright. Let’s adjust our security to make sure they are watched carefully. And perhaps they might think twice if they think we know.”

“Yes sir.”

“I’m going home now, and I’d suggest you do the same. Tomorrow might be a very, very long day.”

“Yes, Wlen. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Wlen got up, and walked down the hall, and out of the capital building, then to his mansion. As he looked up and down the street, seeing his guard always at the ready, he felt confident again. They would survive tomorrow night.

New Orleans, New Earth, February 25, 2105

Ro’mer sat with some Terran and Kinder members of the Consej, along with several other members of the Michaelson family. It was a strategizing meeting, to try and move the Consej back to a position of intervention, before Glor had to bring everyone home. Ro’mer was cautiously optimistic.

Tanessa Bird lived in the South Circumpolar Independent Zone, which had a very large Casitian population, and followed Casitian culture fairly closely. She had been dead-set against intervention of any kind, and Ro’mer didn’t think this conversation was moving her position at all. Christoph Kim was from the North Central IZ, and had been supportive of some kind of active intervention to keep the reformers in place. Jayden Armstrong was also from the NCIZ,

and had voted against intervention, but she was now ready to change her vote. Welburn Snider had voted against intervention, but was leaning toward changing his vote. This meant that two new votes could go in favor of intervention.

Ro'mer's cousin Zrel, a Terran representative to the council, and its current chair, had called this meeting. He had hoped that the information Ro'mer had to share about what was happening on Hilcyon might sway some votes. Especially that they didn't really have enough time to do enough knowledge transfer to save many lives. Jayden was moved by that, but Welburn hadn't been sure.

Welburn said, "Look, they have been living and dying without our help for a long time. I'm leaning toward intervention, but maybe they are better left alone."

Ro'mer said, "But Welburn, that's just it, they need help. They can't live on Hilcyon without our help, as was proven just a few months ago. We had to fix their equipment and send down food, or else they all would have died! Our support can help them even more, which might, in time, lead them to be more willing to stay connected to us."

Tanessa said, "Well, some Casitians argue that letting them all die might be the best alternative. Let them die off, then, when they are gone, re-populate Hilcyon. When the Galactics return, we'll be unified."

Ro'mer said, "Oh, and you think the Galactics won't be able to tell we just let them all die? I'm sure when they learn that, they are going to lock us in here and throw away the key for good!"

Tanessa sighed, and everyone was quiet for a while.

Zrel spoke, "Welburn, Jayden, can we count on your changed vote?" They both nodded assent. "Tanessa?"

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Zrel, my people in the SCIZ would never forgive me. They just don’t agree. And I don’t either.”

Zrel nodded. “OK. Thank you all so much for coming. The Casitian members of the Consej are likely going to put some procedural blocks in place. I hope we can get this vote going before our team has to leave Hilcyon—it will make things so much easier.”

As Ro’mer and Zrel sat in Zrel’s vehicle for the trip back to Dlejon, where Ro’mer was staying for a while, they talked about the current situation.

Zrel said, “As you know, the Casitians are not happy right now.”

“You would not believe the meeting I had a few days ago with Trel’or’li. He has been doing everything he can to strip power and influence from the Casitian arm of our family. Tricia has had her official role reduced dramatically, as has my mother. I’m pretty sure Paul will be removed from his role when he returns, which is going to break his heart. And it’s not just our family. Every blended Casitian/Terran or Casitian/Kinder family living on Casiti is feeling the heat. I think they want us all to just go away.”

“I’ve heard they are now decreasing visitation permits for Terrans.”

“Yeah. They are seriously retrenching. I’m not even sure how long Terrans will be able to be residents of Casiti. There are already several measures pending in the Caraj to greatly reduce the Terran population, especially in Rel’toro.”

“It’s hard to think that we might witness a breach, or separation. I don’t know what to do, Ro’mer. I don’t know how to keep this together. If the Casitians want to separate, they will, and there isn’t much we are going to be able to do about it.”

Ro'mer silently assented, feeling depression move over him in a wave. All of the work he and his family had done for so many years to bridge the gaps between the Casitians and others seemed to be turning to dust. He was glad grandmother Beatrice wasn't around to see it.

Hilcyon, Lykl 27, 1203

Ke'lir looked over at Dlen, who was doing the last review of the translation of one of the key texts they would leave behind: a Terran textbook on childbirth. As she looked at Dlen, she couldn't help but think about the last two days - and her complicated joy of being in Dlen's presence.

She would have to leave in less than 15 days. She had no idea whether she could ever return here. She was glad that she and Dlen had this time together, but she could hardly imagine leaving, and knowing Dlen was here, possibly suffering, and dying, during the inevitable war to come.

She thought of asking Dlen to return with her, but she knew, somehow, that Dlen wouldn't, and couldn't leave her family and the women of Hilcyon behind. Ke'lir couldn't think of asking her to do that, even though she wanted it desperately.

Dlen looked up. "I think we're done for now. My last review of this text is finished. We can start the text on surgical interventions tomorrow?"

Ke'lir nodded. "Yes. And I imagine you need to go and help your mother with preparations?"

Dlen smiled. "No, actually, I have free time until the banquet. My mother relieved me of my household duties when it was clear I needed to focus on this work."

“Well, we could get started on the surgical...”

Dlen took Ke’lir’s hand. “No. I can’t really focus, and we haven’t had a nice break. I want to show you something.”

They got up, and went downstairs, and outside. They walked a few blocks, and came to a long wall, which had a gate in it. Dlen opened the gate.

Ke’lir said, “What is this?”

“It’s a garden. I learned of it just after my father became Supreme Chief. It was locked for many years, and tended by some priests. Come.”

They walked through the gate, and into a small area that was the greenest space she’d seen on Hilcyon. There were many plants she recognized from Casiti.

Dlen said, “This garden was watered and tended even when we all almost starved.”

“Why is this preserved? And why the priests? I thought they were the most vociferously anti-Casitian.”

“Actually not. Although they are protective of Kinder culture, they understand that we cannot live without these plants, and without help from the Breft. The priests have always been in opposition to the recent isolationist Supreme Chiefs. They know what we need to survive.”

“Ah, so they can be allies to the reformers?”

“Perhaps. I don’t think they want to see changes in the Chief system, or changes in the treatment of women, however.”

“I see.”

They walked around, and came across a priest who was watering a patch of soil. The priest looked up.

Ke’lir said, “Hello.”

He nodded. "Hello. Welcome to Kinder Home. And welcome to our garden."

"Thank you. It is so beautiful."

"We keep it to remember where we come from. And where we should go."

Ke'lir wasn't sure she understood what he was saying. "Where you should go?"

"It is time we were reunited."

Ke'lir was shocked.

"Really? You wish your planet and our planets to reunite?"

"The Exalted King wishes the wound to be closed and healed."

Ke'lir knew that the Exalted King was their name for God. They had a monotheistic religion, not unlike some Terran religions.

Dlen said, "I hope for that as well."

The priest nodded, and went back to watering. They walked around for a while, with Ke'lir asking questions, and Dlen explaining what she knew. Eventually, it was just about time to return to the mansion for dinner. Ke'lir knew that she would need to find a way to make a liaison with the priests. They could be a key factor once they left.

As they were approaching the large, imposing Supreme Chief's mansion, Ke'lir noticed a number of men in specific positions around the mansion, and a few milling suspiciously in front of the set of large doors. She pointed this out to Dlen, who nodded.

Dlen whispered, "I will tell my father when we get inside. Something is very wrong here."

Ke'lir nodded. They walked into the side entrance of the mansion, and there was a fair bit of the chaos of servants bustling about in final preparations before any guests arrived.

Dlen asked of a passing servant, "Do you know where Supreme Chief Wlen is?"

“He is in his rooms with your ma.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Ke’lir. “I should go tell him about the men outside.”

“I’ll join you.”

They walked up the stairs, and down a long hallway, and turned into a corridor with several guards stationed. They walked into a large suite.

“Dlen, Ke’lir!”

“Hi Ma.”

“How is the work going?”

Ke’lir said, “We are making a lot of progress. Dlen is a very quick study.”

Ke’lir looked at Dlen, who smiled, melting more of Ke’lir’s heart.

“Ke’lir is too generous. It’s hard work, but we have learned a lot. Where’s Da?”

“I’m here.” Ke’lir and Dlen turned to see him, dressed in a new set of clothes. He had on a deep blue tunic, loose pants of a brushed fabric, and a traditional elaborately woven multi-colored belt.

“Da, you look so wonderful!”

“Your Ma was insistent that I wear something new, and got something for me. You like it?” He spun around.

“Very sharp!” Dlen said. Ke’lir nodded.

“Da, we wanted to warn you...”

A very loud bang, interrupted Dlen. It was quickly followed by the building shuddering. Men flooded into the room, and another loud bang and shudder followed.

“Sir, we need to get you all to safety!”

Ke'lir had, like all of the visitors, a small defensive device on her belt. But it couldn't do much in the case of an explosion. She followed the men out, along with Wlen, Dlen and her mother.

As they went downstairs, all she saw was total chaos. The explosion had completely destroyed the front of the building, and there was dust in the air, and groans and screams. She hesitated.

"Dlen, we need to help these folks..."

Just then a large man wielding a sword came out of nowhere, and rushed toward Wlen. He was intercepted by one of Wlen's guards, and a big fight ensued, when more and more men came wielding swords and spears.

Ke'lir's first thought was to get them all to the shuttle.

"Dlen, what's the quickest way out of here? We need to get to the shuttle - we'll be safe there!"

Dlen pointed, and Ke'lir got Wlen and his wife to follow Dlen. The guards helped, and they were intercepted a few times, but they were able to fight off their attackers. Ke'lir couldn't use her defensive tool, because it would render Wlen and the rest unconscious as well, and she needed to get them all to safety.

Finally, they managed to find their way out, and Ke'lir led them to the shuttle, which had several security team members guarding it.

One of them said, "Ke'lir! Go inside. We'll make sure you're safe."

Ke'lir nodded, and led all of them into the shuttle, where Te'riol, Pot'relo's second in command, sat in front of some equipment.

He said, "Have you seen anyone else from the team?"

Ke'lir shook her head.

“The last thing I heard from Pot'relo was they were doing a last survey of the security details in the mansion. Then the explosion happened. I haven't heard anything at all from them.

The shuttle door opened again, and Paul, who clearly was injured, and covered with soot and dust, stumbled in, looking shocked.

“They are dead. Everyone else is dead.”

Hilcyon, Lykl 27, 1203

Pot'relo said, “I'm hoping we've prepared for all contingencies. Our knowledge of the technology available to them for defensive and offensive purposes is somewhat incomplete.”

Glor said, “Well, we've done the best we can. Let's just get this day over with, shall we? Wlen is hoping that because the anti-reformers know that he knows they are planning an attack, they won't attack tonight.”

Glor wished for a quiet evening. The tension around this upcoming attack had given him stomach aches for the last few days. They had all been given the sleep defensive device, which would put everyone within a 50-foot radius immediately unconscious. Glor assumed that would be enough.

Pot'relo said, “Alright. Shall we go downstairs and do a last survey?”

They all agreed, and trooped together downstairs, toward the front of the mansion. There were servants busying about, doing last preparations before the doors would be open for the varied guests to arrive. The guards were at their stations, and everything seemed quite calm.

Sandra exclaimed, “What’s that noise? I think it’s coming from just outside!” She walked to the large ornate front entrance, where the metal door was still closed.

Glor walked toward Sandra, but then he felt a huge explosion, and was thrown to the ground suddenly by what felt like an enormous shove. Debris started to fall on him, and he saw Sandra felled by a large column that had been dislodged by the explosion. He then felt a weight on his legs, and he looked toward them to see them covered by another column. He couldn’t move. There was still debris falling everywhere.

“Pot’relo! Paul! Help!” The pain in his legs was getting unbearable, and he started to feel light headed. Then, he heard another loud bang, and knew no more.

New Orleans, New Earth, March 1, 2105

Ro’mer was sitting in the passenger shuttle for the trip to orbit, where he would pick up a transport to Casiti. The transport schedule had already been cut back, since the Casitians were reducing travel permits for New Earth residents. This particular shuttle seemed to have a lot of Casitians who were moving back to Casiti after having lived on New Earth.

He was no longer surprised, although he was still upset. He knew that eventually, Casiti would try to reduce the influence of Terrans as much as possible. Ro’mer was only one-eighth Terran, but even he was feeling the heat. He hated the current situation, and felt as if it was pulling the process of unification of the human race back further and further. All of the work that his family felt was their mission was turning to dust in front of him, and he didn’t know that there was much he could do about it.

He was jerked out of his reverie by hearing, “Ro’mer z Hera’ldin, please come to the front of the shuttle.”

He got up, and walked toward the front, where one of the flight attendants was standing.

“I’m Ro’mer.”

“There is an urgent message for you. You need to go immediately to the Consej headquarters.”

He nodded, ran back to get his bag, and then exited the shuttle. He couldn’t understand why he was being called back, especially since he was no longer a part of the Consej anymore. He left the spaceport, grabbed an automated vehicle, and put in his destination.

When he got there, and checked in at the desk, he was told that Zrel wanted to see him. He went up to Zrel’s office, where there was not a small amount of chaos. He made his way through.

“Zrel...”

“Ah, Ro’mer. Glad I caught you. Everyone - please give Ro’mer and I the room?”

Ro’mer watched the assorted staff walk out, and the last closed the door.

“We got a message from Hilcyon. Apparently some forces that are against the chief we’ve been in contact with used explosives to partially destroy his mansion. Five team members were killed. I’ve called an emergency meeting of the Consej, and the Casitians have agreed.”

“Who was killed?” Ro’mer thought of Paul, and worried.

“Sandra Germain, the communications expert, Glor, Pot’relo, and two other team members. A lot of people died and were injured in the attack. Paul and Ke’lir are the only ones of our team who survived. Reports say that the anti-reformers took over the mansion and the capital.”

Ro'mer was shocked. "What happened to the Supreme Chief?"

"He is safe with Ke'lir in orbit."

"What are we going to do?"

"Bring them home. There isn't much else to do at this point."

"So the mission was a failure?"

"Yes, I guess you could certainly say that."

Hilcyon Orbit, Lykl 28, 1203

Ke'lir, Te'riol, Wlen and Dlen sat in the small conference room on their ship. Paul was finally getting his injuries attended to by the doctor.

Te'riol said, "They demand the return of Wlen and his family in exchange for the bodies of our dead."

Ke'lir said, "There's no way we can agree to that..."

Wlen said, "I will not let my family be killed, but I will return. I am really all they want."

Ke'lir could see that Dlen was distraught. "Da, you can't do that! What would it mean for you to die like that? Mrin's death will have been in vain!"

Wlen put his arm on Dlen's. "Daughter, what would it mean for me to be in permanent exile from my home? You and your ma can find a nice, comfortable life with the Breft."

Ke'lir said, "No. I don't think we can negotiate."

Te'riol replied, "If Wlen is willing..."

Ke'lir was angry. She got up. "How can you say that? We can't negotiate this!"

She started pacing. She was angry and sad all at once, and didn't know what to do with the feelings. The families of Sandra, and the loved ones of Pot'relo and the other Casitians would probably be OK without the bodies. But she wanted to be able to give Glor the Kinder funeral that he would have wanted, but she couldn't do that without his body. But how could she condone offering up Wlen to die in exchange? It just didn't seem right.

She felt Dlen come next to her and touch her arm. She looked into Dlen's eyes.

Dlen said quietly, "My da wants this, Ke'lir. We need to give it to him. I don't want him to die, but I know he will slowly die of heartbreak in exile. The anti-reformers really just want him. They will exchange him for the bodies of your team."

Ke'lir nodded, feeling tears flow down her face. It was all one—the sadness of losing Glor and the rest of the team, the sadness of leaving Hilcyon, the sadness of a failed mission. Dlen held her while it all came crashing down on her.

The meeting broke up, and she went to her quarters, while Dlen went with Wlen, her mother and Tyrin for a final goodbye. Ke'lir was at loose ends. She had no idea what was coming next. She suddenly had a sweet image of Dlen, her mother and Tyrin sitting at the dining room table at home. It made her smile. Maybe she could do something, and create a life for them, a life they could enjoy, even if they were in exile.

She heard Te'riol's voice. "Ke'lir, the Supreme Chief has agreed to the exchange of just Wlen for the bodies of our team. I'm about to leave with Wlen in the shuttle. I imagine you want to say a last goodbye."

"Yes, thanks. Be right there!"

She ran to the shuttle docking area, and saw a knot of people, including Wlen, Dlen, and her ma. Everyone had tears in their eyes, but there was a sense, somehow, of hope alongside the resignation.

Wlen said, "If Msrotl allows me final words, I do certainly have some things to say."

Dlen smiled. "You tell them, da! Tell them what kind of mistakes they are making."

Ke'lir said, "I'm so sorry, Wlen, that we failed you."

He shook his head. "You didn't fail us. It's not yet time. I was impatient. But I do hope that all the work you did with the midwives will help."

Dlen said, "Yes. They have a lot of tools now. We didn't quite finish, but they are in much better shape than they were. And they will train more, and more. More women and children will survive."

They all said their last goodbyes, and Wlen and Te'riol entered the shuttle, and the shuttle undocked. Ke'lir held Dlen, who was crying softly. She looked up to see Dlen's mother looking at them with an odd mix of puzzlement and joy. Ke'lir realized that there was a conversation that they needed to have.

Hilcyon, Lykl 29, 1203

Ylorp sat again in the temple, letting the chanting wash over him. He felt worse than he had felt in a very long time. The reformers had been ousted, some Breft had been killed, and First Chief Msrotl, a man he hated with all of his heart, had pronounced himself Supreme Chief. None had challenged him, even though he had not won fairly in single combat.

No Kinder Chief had ever done what Msrotl did, and Ylorp was on the wrong side. He knew it. He knew now that his father had been a hero. And he was stuck. He didn't have the strength to challenge anyone. The only reason why he didn't just give it all up and enter the priesthood now was that he had a wife and son to feed.

Everyone was scared, and everyone was doing their best to make sure they ended up on the right side when all was said and done. Msrotl was manipulative and brutal, and had used the explosives a second time in a hamlet with a reformer Chief. Being on Msrotl's wrong side was dangerous.

It was unlikely that anyone knew of Ylorp's spying for the Breft. Everyone who had known was either dead, or gone. He wasn't worried about his life. But he was worried about his soul.

After the service, he asked for an audience with Priest Hgrun.

"Son, do not despair."

"How can I not?"

"You are in the Exalted King's hands. All will be well."

"What should I do?"

"I have some people that you need to meet."

Hilcyon, Lykl 30, 1203

Wlen was sitting in his cell, awaiting his execution. They told him it was going to happen at high sun, which was soon, given the light coming from the single high window of his cell. He

was grateful, at least, that Msrotl had been willing to spare his family. One of the good things about the anti-reformers was that they consistently underestimated the value of women. That had worked in his favor.

He wasn't sad, really. He realized that he had known a long time ago that this wouldn't end well. But it didn't really matter. The Kinder were changing, bit by bit, and the reform would happen eventually. He just wouldn't be alive to see it.

When he had landed in the shuttle, he had finally seen how much damage had been done by the explosives. The whole front of the mansion was destroyed, and it seemed that it all looked ready to tumble down. He doubted anyone could live in it again. Somehow, that made him feel better.

He heard footsteps in the hallway, and watched as Msrotl and a few of his associates gathered in front of his cell. They opened the cell door.

“Ready to die, traitor?”

“I am not a traitor. I won the Supreme Chief position honorably in single combat. Why didn't you challenge me, instead of blowing up my house and killing innocent people?”

“They were not innocent! Breft scum, here to corrupt our life!”

“They were here to help.”

“No matter. Come, be ready to give up your life.”

Wlen got up, and followed the men outside to the square. It was the same place Mrin had died.

They made him kneel, and put his head on the block.

“Wlen Gnova Jolrs, you have been found guilty of treason. The sentence for treason is death. You have already spoken your last words.”

Wlen was a little surprised that he would not be given the chance to speak. But everyone knew where he stood, anyway. He took in what he knew was his last breath.

He heard a young voice shout, “Heal the wound!”

His last thought was puzzlement.

Hilcyon Orbit, Lykl 30, 1203

Paul sat in his quarters, still feeling shell-shocked from the events two days ago. He already missed Glor terribly, and he felt the weight of their failure. He didn’t want to think about what would be happening on Hilcyon, now that the anti-reformers were solidly in power again.

He was listening to some messages he’d received from home. One was a video message from his brother in-law. He could see the stress on Franklin’s face. The last few months of being the new Bishop had not been especially friendly to him, it seemed. He touched the play button.

“Paul, I’m sorry to hear the news—I know that mission meant a lot to you, and I know it was hard for it to have failed so badly. I also know that you might be at loose ends now, and want you to know that I really you to represent us in the New Earth Authority. Everyone who wants the job wants to use it to tell everyone they are going to hell, and although I do believe it, I am pragmatic—before we all go back to Earth when we die, at least our lives should be better. I want to move the ICS forward in time. Please consider it. Just let me know one way or the other when you can.”

Franklin’s face faded from view on Paul’s tablet. On top of the grief he was feeling, he heard the news that he had lost his position on Casiti, and with his position, he’d lost his housing.

Ro'mer and the Ja'lit school had done the best they could, but it wasn't enough. Casiti was closing down. It had started before, but the violent overthrow of the government on Hilcyon had accelerated the process. Some Terrans were being politely asked to leave Casiti, others, like Paul, were unceremoniously fired. No new Terran immigration permits to Casiti had been allowed at all. He doubted any would any time soon.

He was a little sorry about that. He hadn't learned all that he could learn from his teacher. Second, if he couldn't live on Casiti, his relationship with Ka'li'mo would have to end sooner than he had expected. He knew Ka'li'mo would not move to New Earth to be with him. Ka'li'mo was a true as well as full-blooded Casitian.

Somehow, at what felt like one of Paul's lowest moments, something in the message from Franklin felt promising, hopeful. Perhaps he could be of use, somehow, somewhere. Perhaps he could make a difference in what seemed to him the unlikeliest place. Home.