

The Story of New Earth

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Table of Contents

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1: Under Tulip Trees](#)

[Chapter 2: Grapeberries](#)

[Chapter 3: Tato Root](#)

[Chapter 4: Greenwood leaves](#)

[Chapter 5: In the Horsehair Grass](#)

[Chapter 6: Burger and Fries, Please](#)

[Chapter 7: The Accursed](#)

[Chapter 8: New Miners](#)

[Chapter 9: Acts of Courage and Cowardice](#)

[Chapter 10: Change is Possible](#)

[Chapter 11: The Unthinkable Happens](#)

Preface

In the first book of this series (*The Casitians Return*) the Casitians—human beings from another star system who are a part of the Galactic Community—came to Earth in 2011 for two purposes: to bring Dolphins into the Galactic community, and to reunite two branches of humanity. Many Earth humans resisted the changes required, and the Casitians unveiled a surprising solution: Terrans were given the option to migrate to a whole new planet, if they chose. This planet, called “New Earth” (or Rec'jeter'she in Casitian) would be free of Casitian or Galactic interference or influence. This is the story of that planet, now home to millions of Terrans. This is also the continuing story of the relationships between Casitians and Terrans.

Chapter 1: Under Tulip Trees

Those who settled Casiti tried hard to understand those who wanted to stay behind. In the end, that understanding did not come, and in its place, came the name: Za'aref.—Ul'tretor (20)

Independent Christian State, New Earth, Month 1, Year 3

Leticia sat brooding under her favorite tulip tree in a grove she'd found about a mile from the edge of their settlement. It had become her refuge very soon after they had landed. She was unhappy, again and still. She felt, yet again, her anger at her mother and father's decision to move here. She didn't understand why her parents wanted to leave Earth, and she hadn't wanted to. It had been two years, or one Earth Year, and it seemed to Leticia like forever. And she knew she'd never get to go back home, or to Casiti, where she really wanted to go.

It was getting toward fifteenth hour, and she knew her mother would be wondering where she was, so she got up and made her way home. As she walked in the door, she saw her mother cleaning up their dwelling, and her little sister Beatrice was playing with her toys.

“Leticia, your father and I need to go to a church meeting now. I need you to stay here with your sister.”

“OK, mom, that's fine. See you later.” Leticia was happy to get some time without her mother around. She could spend the time compiling the notes she'd been taking on her explorations, and the plants and animals that she'd found.

The next day, Leticia sat at the back of her classroom, restless and uncomfortable in the all-in-one desks of the small classroom. It was inside one of the prefab buildings that had been put up just after landing. The new school hadn't been built yet. Of course, churches were first, and next were the houses of the powerful people in the settlement.

Her ninth grade science class was boring, and she knew it was all wrong. She didn't understand why her classmates just went along with it. She'd read a lot of science before they moved to New Earth. She'd even read parts of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. But this class was all based on the Bible's origin stories. And she tired of hearing things that were patently ridiculous, parroted by a teacher who clearly didn't comprehend a whole lot of real science.

She knew that she didn't have any choice. All of the schools in the Independent Christian State were run entirely by a group of ministers. All of the schools taught, as they called it, a "Biblically-based education." They read the Bible in English class, studied the history of Christianity in Social Studies, and then had what she felt was pseudoscience in the Science class. Leticia hated all of that. Luckily, her math teacher had realized how talented she was, and had taken her under his wing, and she was now doing much more advanced math than the other students in her class. She felt that was keeping her from complete insanity.

"Leticia?"

She raised her head, realizing that she had not been paying attention at all to what her teacher had been saying for the last while. She looked at what was on the board. Oh, talking about fossils back on Earth. She dredged up her knowledge about the reasons why these people thought fossils weren't as old as they really were. She scratched her short Afro, as if in thought. She looked down at her notebook, as if looking at her notes. But there was only a blank page.

"Because it is impossible that the earth is older than about 6,000 years, so the dinosaurs and humans must have coexisted," she said it with certainty, emphasizing the "impossible" and "must."

The teacher smiled, nodded, and said "Yes, Leticia, thank you very much."

Leticia had realized a long time ago that this teacher really didn't care what you said, as long as it fit into her paradigm. And Leticia thought it was even stranger that they insisted on teaching this, even when they were on a completely different planet than Earth, and had learned much about the galaxy in the last few years.

The bell rang, and she put her notebook into her book bag, walking out with the other students. She was on her way to her required class in sewing. She was getting into a foul mood, when Susanna ran up to come beside her, her long blond hair waving.

"Leticia, come over to my house after school? My parents won't be home until right before dinner."

Leticia smiled. She really liked spending time with Susanna. Susanna was a good friend. She had liked the Casitians too, and had come here against her will. Her father was the pastor of one of the local churches, the largest in this settlement. They had gotten so large that they had been given special dispensation to build a new building. And that made her father powerful in the settlement. Susanna, though, didn't like it.

“Yeah, OK. My mother won't mind. It will be fun!” She wished for the days when she had a cell phone, and she could just call and ask. But her mother liked that she had a friend who was the daughter of someone so powerful, so she knew that it would be fine.

“OK, I'll see you after school!” Leticia watched Susanna bound off, to get lost in the crowd of students going to classes.

New America, New Earth, Month 1, Year 3

Gerard got up from his midday sleeping period disturbed. He'd had another nightmare, which seemed to come to him only during his midday sleep. It had taken him a long time to get used to days that were more than twice as long as days on Earth. The accommodation that New America had come to was to simply divide the day into two effective days, with two sleep periods. But most people had been finding that they didn't sleep as well during the mid-day sleep, nor did they work as well during nighttime. He had resisted any adjustments in the daily schedule. Gerard wanted an efficiently run, well organized society. Farmers, however, had completely rebelled. They wanted to spend as much of the day working as they could. They were busy raising crops for biofuel to run vehicles of all sorts, since food was so easy to get, at least now. Gerard knew that in 10 to 20 years, when the population was much larger, large scale agriculture would become a necessity. Gerard had let the farmers off the hook, as the only exceptions.

He was working hard to make himself lifetime leader of New America. Luckily, everyone was too busy starting to build their own homesteads, learning the new planet, and starting new businesses to think much about things like elections. And, he got things done for people. Dennis had come in quite handy. He was good at being secretive, and setting up structures that would build and maintain Gerard's power. And, of course, Dennis was good in bed.

But, Dennis's complex about their relationship kept it secret. The truth was the last thing Gerard wanted was for people to know. And, Dennis was busy making alliances all over New America, particularly in the Independent Christian State. The ICS had their own government that

took care of just about everything, and they had power and resources—it would be important to keep them part of the fold.

Gerard got up, got dressed, and left the prefab he lived in, and walked the few feet to the prefab that was serving as the government center for the time being. About 1/2 kilometer away, the new “White House,” as well as the adjoining government buildings, were under construction, and nearing completion. Gerard had let Dennis do all of the coordinating work of the construction—Gerard was busy with keeping people as happy as he could, and fulfilling promises that he and Dennis had made.

As he walked in, one of his aides came up to him and said, “Gerard, the gentlemen that you gathered as your economic advisory council have all arrived.”

“Thank you.” He had been looking forward to this meeting for days, now. His advisers included John Mitchell, head of the brand new New America Bank, which acted much like the Federal Reserve Banks back on Earth, except that it was completely privately owned. Keith Harrington had been an economist at Harvard, and was slated to head the economics department at the first university in New America when it was finished being built. Ralph Merrill had brought his entire company to New America. It had been the third largest farm implement manufacturing company in the US, and was now the largest corporation in New America. Finally, there was Timothy Christopher, a successful steel manufacturer who had his pulse on industry in New America. He was now advising Gerard on all things related to industrial infrastructure.

Gerard walked into the conference room, and saw the men seated around the table. They became silent all of a sudden as he walked in. Gerard wondered what they had been talking about.

“Hello gentlemen, and thank you for agreeing to work with me.”

John, head of the Bank, stood up. “I think I can speak for the group - thank you, Gerard, for choosing us to advise you - you made wise choices.” A chuckle went around the room.

Gerard sat down. “So, let’s get started, shall we?”

New Aard, New Earth, Month 1 Year 3

“How are you, Olam?” Abdul Jammal looked at his friend.

Olam shook his head. “Not well, Abdul. Ever since our old Imam was asked to resign, I’ve felt at odds with everyone.”

Abdul felt a deep sadness. “The new Imam is quite strict - I had originally hoped that our mosque could be a model for others in the area, but those from New Islamabad must have other ideas.”

“I don’t know how long I can survive here, Abdul. They are always giving preferential treatment to the conservatives. I might end up living in a tent for the rest of my life.” Olam put his head in his hand.

Abdul touched his friend’s head gently. “Olam, Olam, we will get out of here at some point. We will find a way to create that settlement that we have talked about.” Abdul knew that it would take some time.

Abdul watched his friend Olam leave. Abdul had become an important person in his mosque because he was a fluent speaker of Arabic, and was quite good at administration. He had realized, right after his moderate Imam was replaced by the more conservative Imam, that if he did not act as if he towed the party line, he would be in a lot of hot water. Already, a couple of more vocal moderate members of the mosque, like his friend Olam, had been ostracized, and were living on the outskirts of the settlement in tents, and were not being given work. Even though getting food in the surrounding wilderness was easy, the ostracism was hard. Abdul had decided to keep his mouth shut for the time being. Olam stayed in his house quite a bit, and Abdul helped him out as much as he could. He was glad that Olam didn’t resent him, and understood that this was only a means to a greater end.

Abdul eventually had become head of administration for his mosque. His mosque had quickly become the largest in the region, so he became a powerful man. This didn’t sit well with him, though, since he knew that by being silent, he was basically lying about how he felt about the policies of New Aard. It was a good thing that they weren’t quite as bad as the legendary Taliban on Earth, but they were far more conservative than he was. He didn’t understand why

this was necessary. They had a whole large territory to settle, most of which was still wilderness. Why not allow for Muslims of all stripes to follow their own hearts?

Abdul's eventual goal was to create a new, progressive settlement far away from the original settlements. But it would take a lot of doing, and a long time. The Imams had already carved up the territory of New Aard, and were making plans for new settlements. Abdul had obtained, at great cost, a map of the entire world, and there was a lot of territory still unsettled. He thought that perhaps, soon, he could gather with him people who were progressive like him, and settle in a new place.

Outside New Columbia, New Earth, Month 1 Year 3

Timothy looked over the latest batch of mining reports. He wasn't happy, not at all. His company had just begun the manufacturing of steel that would be needed all over New Earth for a variety of purposes, but in other kinds of metal production he was stymied. Getting iron wasn't the problem. The rock below the soil of New Earth was extremely rich in iron. In addition, one didn't need to dig too deeply: New Earth had a lot of iron-rich laterite soil. There were also deposits of hematite in many areas—another source for iron.

With the available iron ores they could make most kinds of steel very easily. The problem was there were virtually no sources of titanium, platinum, zinc, silver or gold. He was in the process of equipping an expedition group to go up north above the Chalcedon River to look for sources of these metals, but he wasn't especially optimistic.

He heard a knock on his office door. "Come in."

His assistant poked his head in the door. "Mr. Christopher, I just got a message from John Culvert."

Timothy sighed. He was getting tired of John Culvert. Culvert was working on getting an electronics manufacturing operation off the ground, and had been pestering Timothy pretty much since they landed for raw materials.

"What does he want now?"

"He wanted me to tell you that he had been talking with some banks and the like, and some financing could be on its way."

Timothy shook his head. He would have to visit Culvert personally and give him the bad news.

“Ah, Timothy, come in. So nice of you to visit.”

Timothy walked into the ornate office. Clearly Culvert had used up most of his cargo allotment in furniture and furnishings, rather than anything that would actually help him start his business. They shook hands, and sat down.

“Anything to drink?”

“No thank you. I’m fine.”

“So, I imagine you are here to talk about that financing that I’m working on.”

“No, John, I’m here to deliver some pretty bad news.”

“Bad news?”

“We’ve surveyed 50 sites over every area of New America, as well as several sites in both Independent Zones. We’ve started several iron ore mining operations, and are producing lots of varied kinds of steel, as you know.

We’ve also located at least one source which will provide us with tin and aluminum. It’s a large formation of granite in the south western part of New America. But the granite present on New Earth seems to be bereft of other metals. And we have yet to find any significant sources of titanium, zinc, platinum, silver or gold. And the Rare Earth elements aren’t so rare on Earth, but they sure are rare here.”

“But without those metals and others ...”

“I know, you have no business.”

“We have no electronics manufacturing capability at all! And without that, we can’t begin to have any advanced manufacturing of anything.”

“I am aware of this dilemma.”

“What are you doing to solve it?”

Timothy was angry. Who was this guy to demand anything of him? Despite his anger, he answered Culvert.

“I am sending out expeditions up north toward the poles. Based on my reading of the Galactic reports on this planet, if we don’t find what we’re looking for nearer to the pole, we won’t find it anywhere.”

Dlejon, New Earth, Month 2 Year 3

“Is there anything else anyone wants to share?” Douglas's booming voice carried over the quiet but insistent din of the gathered group.

Joan, a short, compact woman with dark hair, stood up. “We have already been in contact with the Lakota nation next door to us to the west, and I think there will be a lot of fruitful dialogue and trade. We have chosen, at this time, to not engage in a dialogue with our neighbors to the east. I think, however, that it might be time to start. We have much to offer many of the settlements along the river, and they are quite an independent and varied lot.”

Some in the room nodded, others shook their heads. Douglas had been considering whether or not to create relationships with those settlements that were a part of the Southern Independent Zone. He agreed with Joan that it would be to their advantage, and would help with their long-term goals. Douglas pointed to a tall man in the back.

“Peter, you have a comment?”

“Joan, I understand why you think this is a good idea, but many of the settlements in the SIZ are allied with the New Americans. I think we need to understand much better what those relationships look like before we plunge in and start trade. I worry what might happen if the New Americans find out much about our settlement.”

Douglas said, “OK, we need to wrap this up. Clearly this isn't something that is going to be resolved today. Thank you all, for a wonderfully productive council joining. Third meal was postponed until we finished. I think it's probably ready now. Farewell blessings.”

Everyone in the room got up, and filtered out of the meeting hall. It was a wonderful day in Dlejon. Doug looked up at the orange tinted evening sky. Doug had fallen in love with New Earth the minute he stepped out of the colony ship. It felt so much like home to him.

He had started out being very doubtful of his mission in life. He had realized when he first heard about the Casitians, that he really was a lot like them already. He had become so committed to the Casitian way of life that he first had wanted to move to Casiti. But then the moratorium that stopped emigration to Casiti made that impossible. He could understand that, even though at the same time it angered him. He imagined that it would eventually be lifted, but there was no way for him to know when. So he thought he could stay on Earth, and live in a community that was committed to Casitian culture.

But then, one day, he and a group of friends were hanging out at his house talking about Casiti, Earth, and New Earth, when an idea was hatched. He remembered the conversation vividly, as though it had occurred yesterday.

“Louis, are you nuts? Create a Casitian-like settlement on *New Earth*? Most people settling New Earth hate Casitians, and want to get as far away from Casitian culture as possible! They will hate a community of people who want to live like Casitians.”

“Douglas, have you read the most recent emigration reports? It looks like 75% of the people emigrating from Earth are small, independent communities that are going primarily for the adventure, and for space to grow. I talked to an old friend of mine who is going to settle in the Northern Independent Zone, as part of a new community they are calling 'Burning Man'—a bunch of artists and such who have been involved with that gathering for years. They want to create a permanent 'Burning Man,' basically. That's hardly a bunch of folks who will hate us.”

Sally chimed in, “I think it's a great idea. There are abundant resources, and we could really create an environmentally sustainable community. And I bet the Casitians would really like having a reliable community that they knew could contact them if necessary.”

They were easily able to recruit several hundred people to come with them, and they came to New Earth. Once they landed on New Earth, they called their territory Dlejon, which, in Casitian, meant “spirit ground.”

Knowing that people of New Earth could contact them was something that had been important for the Casitians. The Casitians did appreciate their presence, and had entrusted them with a one-way communications device. The Dlejonese had promised never to use it to contact the Casitians unless there was complete consensus of all communities on New Earth that it was time.

The eventual goal of the Dlejon community was to unite New Earth into a society that could be in contact with the galactic community again. Douglas knew that subsequent generations of New Earth people would not feel the same way as the original colonists who had wanted to escape the Casitians. He realized that it was likely his children's children would be the ones to reunite New Earth with the galactic community, and with Casiti.

Chapter 2: Grapeberries

We had great courage. We had the courage to stand by the beings who were our friends, allies, and mentors.—Jlir Nern Klaft (1st age)

Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 1, Year 7

“Don't you think he's so totally cute?” Susanna asked Leticia, as they sat in Susanna's bedroom. Susanna went on to describe Kurt, her current crush. He was blond like her, tall, and had what Susanna thought was a “gorgeous body.”

“Um, well, I guess so, sure.” Leticia had honestly been finding it difficult to find any of the boys at school cute, even though she understood it was expected. She had never really been drawn to boys. It was something that seemed to really bother her mother, which Leticia couldn't understand. Why would her mother care? It had come to a bit of a head around the Junior Prom. Her mother had asked her whether any of the boys had asked her to the prom. She had lied, and told her that none of them had. In fact, four different boys had asked her, and she'd declined.

Susanna, on the other hand, was ecstatic about going, and excited that the boy she had a crush on had asked her. Her mother had sewed her prom dress. Leticia just couldn't get her mind around it—she'd much rather sit under a Tulip tree and read.

“So you really don't want to go to the prom?” Susanna looked puzzled.

“No, I really don't. I'd rather be doing almost anything else.”

Susanna nodded. Leticia thought that even though Susanna knew her well, she sometimes didn't really understand. But Susanna was very accepting anyway.

Leticia got up from sitting on the floor. “Well, I should get back home. Dinner is going to be soon. And I promised Beatrice I'd help her with her homework.”

“OK, see you Thirdday? We were going to explore the ridge.”

Leticia smiled. “Yes, the ridge it is! See you at first light.” She walked out of Susanna's room, and left the house, and turned toward the street that her house was on. It was pretty quiet after everyone got home from the work periods. Leticia hated the rigidity of the ICS. She knew that other states in New America were much more fluid and flexible. But people in the ICS were

following the Bible, or, as Leticia said to her mother one day, what particular people thought the Bible meant. That had generated a severe punishment from her mother. She'd been grounded from doing anything except going to school and church for weeks, and she had been sent to a church class for recalcitrant kids where they spent a lot of time trying to scare them about hell.

The one thing that she was glad of was that there was a lot less school here than on Earth. School was only three days a week, and lasted for about six hours a day. That gave them three days off a week. One of those days was invariably the Sabbath day, which rotated, since the Bible said that there had to be a Sabbath every seventh day, but New America had six day weeks. Sabbath days were filled mostly with church things. But the other two days Leticia had free to do whatever she wanted, since her parents were usually working. She used to have to babysit Beatrice, but now that Beatrice was 13, or, rather, 26, she didn't need to anymore.

She had to admit there was one thing she loved about New Earth: the planet itself. She had spent countless hours exploring the landscape around the settlement. She kept notebooks filled with the new things she'd found and questions about them that she wanted to research more. She once asked her science teacher about some of what she'd found, thinking that perhaps her teacher had gone to one of the workshops she'd heard about for people who wanted to learn more about New Earth. But the teacher hadn't. Leticia knew more about the planet than her teacher did, by far.

It was Leticia's dream eventually to see the whole planet. She knew that the only way she'd be able to do this was to escape from the ICS. She knew she had to escape from the ICS just to be able to live in the way she wanted to. She had found out about maps that existed of the territory beyond New America, and she was saving up to buy one. She was learning about all of the edible plants, the small animals and water creatures (they really couldn't be called fish) that could be caught and cooked. She was learning that some plants had medicinal uses. She was surprised by how many of them existed, and how few people knew about them. She had already begun to gather together things she might need for her trip, and was hiding them under the bed and in the back of her closet. When the time came, which she thought might be soon, she'd be prepared.

New Columbia, New Earth, Month 1 Year 7

Sean looked over the epidemiology reports he'd managed to get from the few health care practitioners in New America, and some beyond. They had spread slowly, so most of them were months old.

It was an interesting mix of things. Accidents were common, which was to be expected. Infectious diseases, primarily of Terran origin, were growing alarmingly, some of them quite dangerously. That was going to be something that needed close attention.

The strangest thing was that cancer diagnoses were ... well ... non-existent.

Cancer had seemed simply to disappear. Although Sean's specialty on Earth had been oncology, he had been spending all of his time in general practice since he moved to New Earth. He had imagined that eventually he would be able to return to his specialty, but the disappearance of cancer would mean that would never happen.

He wanted to spend time working out what was going on, but he doubted he'd find space in his schedule for that any time soon. He indulged himself in a little bit of consideration on it. He thought that it could be selection bias—those who had chosen to leave Earth were healthier. He then thought that perhaps, he needed to give more credit to the idea that the environment caused cancer. But he had a sneaking suspicion that there was more. People came to New America as smokers, and they were already raising tobacco. But there had been not one new lung cancer case diagnosed since they landed. This seemed rather unlikely to Sean. Some people must have arrived on New Earth with cancers that were at an early stage. Why hadn't any of those shown up?

He looked at the epidemiology report he'd gotten from some people in New Calgary in the NCIZ. They had a preface which at first Sean ignored, but now he went back to read it. Apparently, they had found very active antiviral and antioxidant activity in a large variety of local plant life, including grapeberries. Sean wondered whether this was part of the key. He also wondered whether he could get more information from them to help New America.

He looked at the clock. It was time to leave to go to his meeting with the President. He gathered his notes, and got up from his desk. He walked out of his office to start the relatively long walk to the White House. Sean didn't really regret the lack of a real transportation system—he knew that would come in time. As he walked, he noticed how quickly things were changing.

New buildings were being built at a rapid pace, now that building materials such as granite, steel and brick were in much greater supply than they had been at the beginning.

He walked into the White House, registered with the desk, and was met by an aide, who led him into the Oval Office. Sean had heard about how large and ostentatious it was, but he wasn't quite prepared for what he saw. He was almost ashamed.

"Mr. President, Dr. Sean Joseph," his secretary intoned in a way that suggested she was bored.

Sean thanked the aide for showing him in. He then turned to the President, holding out his hand. The President shook it, and then motioned Sean to sit.

"I have heard good things about you, Dr. Joseph."

Sean felt uncomfortable. "Thank you, sir."

"You have a report for me?"

"Yes, yes, Mr. President. I have some sobering news about health in New America..."

"Well, go on, then."

He looked briefly down at his notes, and looked back up at the President, whose face was hard to read.

"After seven New Earth years, it has become clear that the life expectancy of people in New America is going to be much lower than it was in the United States. We certainly came with the full spectrum of Terran medical knowledge. But we haven't been able to begin production of either vaccines or antibiotics, or really any of the advanced pharmaceuticals that we had on earth. Plus, new ailments from the natural environment here are cropping up, and the few medical and scientific people we have haven't had enough time to figure them out. The good news is cancer has seemed to disappear, but infectious diseases that we brought with us are growing in frequency, and in some cases, virulence."

"So the rumors and scattered anecdotal reports I'd been hearing are true, then. What does this all mean?"

"I'm sorry Mr. President, but unless some large-scale efforts are put in place, people just aren't going to be as healthy here as they were on Earth."

"What are the steps you will be taking to create these efforts?"

Sean looked down again at his notes, feeling nervous.

“First, we need to find ways to encourage the beginning of a pharmaceutical industry. We need incentives from the government for this to happen.”

President Hopkinson said, “Incentives are not the problem, Dr. Joseph. The problem is the lack of raw materials.”

“Lack of raw materials?”

“Yes, apparently we don’t have the materials needed to manufacture most kinds of electronics, which makes pharmaceutical manufacturing extremely difficult.”

“Honestly, Mr. President, without electronics—it’s nigh on impossible.”

The President nodded. “Indeed.”

“Second, we need to train more medical professionals—public health professionals, doctors, dentists, scientists, the whole gamut. We just don’t have enough. We need you to set aside money to start schools for this.”

The President shook his head. “Dr. Joseph, you know the story. This is a pure laissez-faire government. We don’t do schools, we don’t do health care, we don’t really do much of anything except protect people’s right to property, do policing, provide transportation infrastructure, and patrol and protect our borders. Local communities, if they wish, can deal with health education. We are trying to keep this as small a government as possible. You’ll have to look elsewhere for money for schools. I’m sure there are some enterprising people who will see the value in this.”

Sean sighed, feeling exasperated. “Mr. President, small communities can’t shoulder the burden of medical and dental schools - it’s just not possible.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. The one thing I can do is call a meeting with those that I know who have some capital to throw around, and see if I can get them on the bandwagon.”

“Thank you, President Hopkinson, I appreciate that.” Sean got up from his seat, shook the President’s hand again, and made his way out the door and back home. As he walked home, the unease at the pit of his stomach grew; he knew that things weren’t going to get better any time soon.

Dlejon, Rec'jeter'she, Month 1, Year 7

“Feeling better?” Theresa looked into Douglas's ears. “Looks like your ears have cleared up tremendously.”

Douglas nodded. “Yes, I feel so much better. No more pain or dizziness.”

“Great. I'd say take the infusion for another week, then stop.”

Douglas nodded, got off of the examining table, and gave Theresa a clasped arm hug. “Thank you so much, Theresa.”

“No problem, Doug. You realize that you are somewhat of a guinea pig. There haven't been so many cases of adults getting ear infections, and so we're trying out larger doses of the same infusions that we've been giving the kids. This seems to work fine.”

Douglas nodded. “I am so glad that we started this program of investigating the health benefits of the local plants. It seems we are learning some very useful things.”

He gave Theresa farewell blessings, and left the medical compound to go back to the central coordinating compound. He realized he had been spending too much time in the central compound working. He needed some time off. He decided he would spend the next half-month in his cabin in the hills. Or, he should say, in his construction project in the hills. The foundation was in, and he had begun to put up the walls.

It had turned out that the most common tree in this part of New Earth, the tulip tree, made great wood for buildings. Based on their studies, Tulip trees did not grow quickly; they needed to find ways to use them sustainably. They had calculated that each person could only use two tulip trees in a lifetime. Luckily, older Tulip trees were very large, and one tree would provide enough wood for the basic necessary framing of a small house. But they had needed to find another possibility where wood was usually used for things like the framing of the walls, windows, the floors, etc. No other type of native tree would work. So during the first two years, they had experimented with creating small bamboo plantations. It turned out that the bamboo grew very well. And as long as they were careful—because it could be invasive—they could use bamboo for all of the other needs they had for wood, including furniture.

Douglas had gotten his allotment of tulip wood, in the form of big beams, which were all up. His next task was to use the bamboo planks to frame the walls. Douglas liked construction, and he liked the idea that he would soon have a retreat in the hills that he and his companion

could enjoy. He thought that perhaps he could convince his companion to join him for a few days.

He thought, briefly, about his daughter, Mira, who was now sixteen (or thirty-two—it was hard for him to adapt to the new numbering scheme). She'd been living in the youth settlement for a couple of years now, and he only heard from her once in a while. When he did, it seemed she was really enjoying herself. He felt a twinge of guilt. She had said that she missed her mother. Her mother hadn't wanted to emigrate, and she hadn't wanted custody of Mira, so Mira came to New Earth. Douglas suspected that Mira would, in fact, have done better on Earth, but at least here she was part of the New Casitian settlement.

Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 7

“Leticia, where did you get this book?” Her mother looked really angry. It was the book about Buddhism that she had gotten from Susanna. Susanna had picked it up surreptitiously during a trip her family took to the capital. She wasn't about to give Susanna away.

“It was in a trash bin, Mom. What's the problem?” Leticia knew what the problem was. There was a relatively short list of books that were allowed to people in the ICS, and her mother was petrified of being caught with a book that wasn't on the list. It could result in all sorts of punishment: ostracism, privileges being revoked—even, in extreme cases, time in a re-education program.

“You know darned well what the problem is. This book is going in the burn bin right now. You will march it to that bin, and give me the receipt.”

Leticia knew that she didn't have a choice. She would have to apologize to Susanna for getting caught with it. She'd been careless in hiding it, and her mother had begun to search her room. Leticia didn't know whether or not she suspected something, but she realized that she could no longer hide her stash of supplies and information in her room. She would have to find somewhere in the places that she explored with Susanna—a place to hide it all. She thought of the deep cave she and Susanna had discovered on the ridge. Yes, that would be the place. It was on the eastern side of the settlement, in the direction she'd have to go anyway when she escaped.

She would have to slowly and carefully move items from her room, and hope that in the meantime, her mother didn't discover anything.

She took the book from her mother's hand, and walked out the door, toward the central government building of the settlement. It was a good thing she'd read the book already. As she arrived at the building, and was going to the side with the burn bin, she heard a voice that brought her to attention.

“What's that?”

She looked over, and saw Maybell, one of her least favorite people.

“None of your business, excuse me.”

“Looks like a banned book to me.”

“Go away, please.” Maybell was the daughter of the pastor of the church they went to. She was also in her grade in school. She had been the one to tell the school principal that the math teacher was tutoring her in calculus. It was because of her that the teacher was fired, and she was disciplined to three weeks of church class, which had primarily consisted of learning and reciting verses from the bible such as I Corinthians 14:34: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” This, of course, had simply made her hate Maybell even more.

“Well, I'm going to tell my dad that you have a banned book!”

“I'm burning it, OK? Leave me alone!”

“My dad might have something to say about it!” Maybell walked off, looking triumphant. Leticia sighed, and wished she was able to demonstrate the kind of tolerance and love that the book she was about to have burned had espoused. Right at the moment, she hated Maybell and her father, her own mother, and everyone in this stupid place.

New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 7

Gerard woke with a start, and then calmed down, realizing he'd had another nightmare. He hated the nightmares—they were getting more and more frequent, and had moved to all of his sleep periods, whether mid-day or night. They had the same motif: someone threatening his

power, and taking over, and him not being able to do anything about it. But it was silly. He was still firmly in control.

He remembered what was going to happen today, and groaned. He had the meeting he'd been dreading with Robert Hurler, the current governor of the ICS. Maybe that was the source of his nightmares. The ICS was becoming more and more powerful, and demanding more and more from New America. Primarily, they were most interested in making New America a lot like the ICS, which Gerard resisted as much as possible.

He got up and saw Dennis in the bathroom, cleaning off his face after shaving.

“So what are you up to today, Dennis?”

“The usual, Gerard.”

“You've given me that answer for months. But I don't even know what the usual is.”

Dennis flung the washcloth into the sink. “Why does it matter to you? You don't really care what I do.”

“But I do care—I need you to help me keep things in check.”

“Things are fine, Gerard. Don't worry about it.”

Dennis walked by Gerard, quickly finished getting dressed, then walked out the door.

Gerard got on his shirt and suit, and walked into his breakfast room to eat, hoping that Dennis would be there drinking his standard cup of coffee. But he had left the residence already, so Gerard had breakfast alone.

After breakfast, he walked down the long hall from the residence to the Oval Office. It was, in fact, larger than the Oval Office in Washington, DC on Earth. He'd commissioned a portrait of himself, first President of New America, and it dominated one of the walls.

Lately, there had been some agitation for elections. People were beginning to feel that since almost four Earth years had elapsed since they had settled in New America, it should be time for elections. He knew that sooner or later they would have to hold them. But he was doing his best to work on how he would maintain power even with elections. There were several ideas, one of which included the ICS. If he could give the ICS what it wanted, he would own the presidency, since more than 35% of the population of New America now lived in the ICS.

“Mr. President, your first meeting of the day is with Dr. Sean Joseph.” Sean, who was now the head of the New American Medical Association, and had organized the doctors in New America. Gerard knew what he was going to ask for, and knew he would say no. His government

was laissez-faire, and he was going to keep it that way. Tax money went to transportation infrastructure, defense along the border with the North Central International Zone, and internal law enforcement, and nothing more. And all of the major business leaders were in agreement with him. He had the chance to remake the United States the way it should have been, before things like the New Deal.

Gerard nodded at his secretary. "What's after that?"

"You have a meeting with your economic advisers, then with the governor of the ICS, Robert Hurler. After that, interviews with potential interns."

Gerard nodded. It was going to be a long day. Meetings mostly with people he had no interest in talking to. His economic advisers were likely going to give him news he didn't want to hear. Robert Hurler was going to make demands, and the stupid little interns were going to annoy him.

Gerard sighed. His secretary said "Dr. Joseph is waiting, shall I show him in?"

Gerard nodded. As he looked at his secretary, a lean, tall woman who always wore severe dresses and high heels, he was suddenly reminded of his mother. He shook that thought away as Dr. Joseph walked in the room.

He looked terrible. It looked as though like he hadn't gotten much sleep in the past week or so.

"Hello, Mr. President. I'm glad that you could see me. We have a problem on our hands, a big problem."

Gerard looked at him with some suspicion, wondering what kind of problem it could be.

He nodded, and said, "Go ahead."

"There is a growing epidemic of a new strain of polio in western New America. It clearly is a result of some sort of mutation - people who had been vaccinated as children still seem to be susceptible. And it is very virulent—many people are getting paralyzed and dying—possibly as many as 30% of those infected, although it's hard to know. We've had ten deaths from polio in the past month. We need some resources to be able to begin to research and manufacture a vaccine. If we don't get on this now, we could be decimated by this."

"There is nothing I can give you, Dr. Joseph, I'm sorry."

"Well, perhaps there is one thing you can do."

"What would that be?"

“Apparently, people both in the Southern IZ as well as the Northern IZ have been studying the medicinal properties of many local plants. We need their expertise. Can we ...”

“Dr. Joseph, New America stands or falls on its own. I will not have influence from outside this country, no matter what! Anyway, thank you, Dr. Joseph, for that report. I'll keep in touch.” It was a dismissal. The doctor turned, and walked out of the office.

Gerard walked around his desk and sat down. There were several bills he hadn't signed yet. A bill that finally divided up all of the land in New America, and made it open for sale. A bill to prevent private citizens from complaining about industrial waste that might end up on their land. A bill to define marriage as between one man and one woman. Gerard looked at that bill, and for a moment, had some hesitation. But if people wanted to get married in some other configuration, they could always leave, and go to an IZ, where there were settlements and communities that fit anyone.

“Sir, your economic advisers are here.”

“Thank you.” They walked in, all four of them. He'd been meeting with them regularly for years now, and knew them well. They all sat down on the couches, and Gerard sat in his signature chair.

He'd never actually been to the White House, and had never seen the real Oval Office. He remembered what the office looked like on that old TV show, *The West Wing*. He'd liked an old-fashioned-looking style, and he had done his best to make his office look majestic. And he did his best to act presidential, even though sometimes in New America that seemed, well, overly formal.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming today. I have a couple of specific items I would like to discuss with you, after I hear your assessments of New America's economic situation.”

He pretty much knew what they would say—he knew them well, and had taken care to learn what was most important to each of them. He figured that Ralph would be happy—people needed the equipment his company made, and were willing to pay for it. He was fiercely against any sort of government regulation of his, or any, business. George and Keith were worry warts about the diversity of the New America economy, and the fact that there was little trade between NA and the burgeoning economies of the Independent Zones and New Aard. And Timothy would wax on about the lack of supply of raw materials.

Ralph cleared his throat. “Well, Mr. President, what is most on my mind right now is that I can't get enough workers, and the ones I have are out sick far too often. And further, I thought that the training programs I'd put in place were going to be enough—but the schools here are not preparing enough students for the jobs I have, and the older, more experienced workers keep getting sick. You are going to have to do something about this situation.”

Gerard was taken aback. “Ralph, you have been fiercely in favor of the kind of government that I have put together—we only deal with infrastructure issues, defense, and defending property rights—you didn't want the government to start a pharmaceutical manufacturing facility, or any medical facilities at all—you wanted that to be private. And schools—last I heard, you wanted all of the schools to be private schools.

Keith spoke up. “I think many people have come to realize that the health issues are creating serious difficulties for everyone. We need government leadership.”

“Well, government leadership requires taxes. You're suggesting that we start corporate taxes, and increase the personal tax rate?”

Ralph said, “Gerard, if I knew that paying my taxes was going to help my workers stay healthy, it would be worth it to me. Otherwise, I'm going to go out of business.”

Gerard looked at Christopher. “Any changes?”

“No, Mr. President. We're going to be stuck in the early 20th century, possibly forever. There just aren't any of the necessary precious or rare earth metals we need for advanced technology. People have been working on alternative methods for manufacturing things like chips and the like, and there are some positive results, but it's going to take a long time.

They talked more about taxes, and about the government's role in health care, and the general economic status of New America. By far, the most pressing issue was health care—Gerard would have to get Sean back in his office, soon.

North Central Independent Zone, New Earth, Month 2, Year 7

“It's amazing, isn't it? We've so far been able to demonstrate antibiotic properties in five native plants, antiviral activity in six, and anti-cancer activity in twelve. There are four food

plants that have more antioxidants than all of the fruits and vegetables from Earth we can grow...”

“Too bad they taste so bland.” Jeffrey laughed.

“You love grapeberries, though, don’t you?” Thomas walked over to Jeffrey, and affectionately rubbed his hands over Jeffrey's naturally kinky hair. Thomas and Jeffrey had been lovers for years, and had decided to settle on New Earth, simply because of the adventure. Thomas had been interested in medicinal plants on earth, and it had turned out that he was really in his element here. Jeffrey, an epidemiologist, had been able to help Thomas document the benefits of the plants. Their settlement and the ones surrounding it had benefited greatly.

“Now the question is, how do we publicize this all over New Earth?”

“Well, publicizing it in this part of the Independent Zone is easy. The new widenet has been up now for a couple of months, and most of the settlements around here have at a cybercafé. We can put up a website, and get the announcement on the newsgroups and email lists. But outside of that...”

“I heard that there are noises about expanding the widenet, and connecting our net to some others, like the Southern Independent Zone in particular. That would help.”

“But Tom, that will take months or longer—I hear there has been a lot of trouble getting electronics for the widenet. People need to know this, *now*. I'm thinking I need to start to travel.”

Thomas groaned. Sometimes, Jeffrey's sense of doing anything he could for the common good made their life difficult. Back on earth, Jeffrey had gone to sub-Saharan Africa about a year after they became partners, to spend three years helping to get people treatments for HIV/AIDS. Thomas had visited Jeffrey about five times in Africa, but it had been a strain on their relationship. Traveling around New Earth would be worse. Thomas realized that it meant that if he wanted to see Jeffrey anytime in the next couple of years, he'd better travel with him.

“OK, I'll come with you. It would be good to find more about the range of all of these plants anyway.”

Jeffrey smiled. “Besides, admit it, you love adventure!”

Thomas couldn't help but agree. “Alright! Let's start planning...”

***Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 1, Year
8***

“OK, so do you remember how I factored that last equation?”

Leticia and Beatrice were sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over Beatrice's Algebra 1 assignment. Leticia had gotten a chance to learn calculus, and math came fairly easily to her. It was a struggle for Beatrice, although Leticia was always surprised by how Beatrice was able to analyze people, situations, and people's motivations far better than Leticia could.

Beatrice started to write on the page. “OK, I think I get it—the x squared minus 6 becomes x minus three times...”

“Yes, there little sis, you got it.”

At that moment, Yolanda came into the room.

“Leticia, I need to speak with you now.”

“Mom, I'm helping Beatrice with her algebra homework.”

“It's important.”

“Oh, OK.” She turned toward Beatrice and rolled her eyes, tilting her head toward her mother. “I'll be right back.”

She followed her mother into the living room. She knew exactly what it was going to be about.

“So, Leticia, I was wondering whether there were, you know, any boys you liked at school.”

Here it was again. Her mother's angst and stress about the fact that she didn't really have any interest in a boyfriend.

“No, mom, I don't right now. I don't even want to think about it. I have my studies, and I'm exploring ...”

“But Leticia, you *have* to get married. You will be thirty-two very soon. The new guidelines say that women have to be married by thirty-six, so that they have time to produce a lot of children before they get too old.”

“Mom, I've already told you, I don't want to get married, and I don't want to have children. Why don't you just leave me alone?”

“Leticia, you don't have a choice. Get married, or join the Mission Society. You have only two months before your thirty-second birthday, which is the end of school for you.”

This particular rule, enacted last year, had really made Leticia mad. Not that she liked school all that much, but that there was a difference between boys and girls. Boys could graduate from high school, and even attend the new Bible college or the new technical schools in the ICS. Girls, on the other hand ...

“Look I can get a job or something, until I'm eighteen, then I can find a place on my own. I don't need to live here.”

“Leticia, you are not on Earth anymore. Single women live at home or in the Mission Society. There are no other choices.” That was another new rule. Leticia knew that her days of stalling her mother were coming to an end.

“Mom...”

“Leticia, this is your choice. Sign up for the Mission Society this week, or I will go to the marriage matching service, and find a husband for you. You are still a minor, and still have to do what I say. What are you going to do?”

Leticia knew what she was going to do, but she wasn't about to tell her mother. “I'll think about it, OK?”

Yolanda nodded. “OK, but this is it, Leticia. I'm not even sure the Mission Society will take you, given how many disciplinary problems you've had at school and church. But if you don't want to get married...”

“Alright Mom. Will you leave me alone now?”

Yolanda nodded, and walked out of the room. Luckily, she and Susanna had already planned an exploratory trip on Thirdday that her mother had approved of. That would be the last day her mother would ever see her again. She regretted having to leave Beatrice behind, and even thought for a minute of bringing her, but then she realized it would never work—Beatrice wasn't old or strong enough.

North Central Independent Zone, New Earth, Month 1, Year 8

Thomas and Jeffrey sat in their living room, with notebooks, and paper and maps strewn all over the floor. They had been planning this trip in earnest for about two weeks, spending much of their waking time on figuring out logistics. Thomas was a better planner for trips of this sort than Jeffrey, even though Jeffrey had done more of it. Thomas had an idea of how long they were going to be away, and what sorts of things they would need. Jeffrey was in charge of letting people know what they were doing, and finding people who might want to join them.

Thomas picked up one notebook and looked at his notes. "So I contacted several guides, and one of them said he could take us from New Calgary to Dubuque. He was sure that there were plenty of river guides to take us down the Mississippi river once we got to Dubuque."

Jeffrey nodded. "That sounds good. What did the guide say about places to stay along the way?"

"He said we'd need the full spectrum of camping equipment, although there were a number of settlements we will be staying at with inns or hotels. We'll be spending plenty of nights in our tent, though."

"That's fine. I like our tent." Jeffrey smiled.

Thomas flipped the page. "It seems the best route will be to go from here overland to Dubuque, then down the Mississippi river to New Orleans. At that point, we can start with New Aard settlements along the Nile River. We can then go back down the Nile to the Mississippi, down the Mississippi to The Great Western River, and travel that along the South Central IZ, and then up into New America. From there, using the River Chalcedon, we can visit settlements both in the Independent Christian State and the settlements of Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists."

"Yeah, it's those last three I'm most looking forward to," Jeffrey said with a wry look on his face.

"We don't have to tell them anything about ourselves, Jeff. It will be fine. Don't worry about it."

Jeffrey picked up a sheet with notes that he had written. "OK, so it looks like we have gathered our team. Leonard, one of the people who started the widenet wants to come so he can help connect the unconnected settlements, and then also perhaps work with folks in the other territories."

Thomas nodded. "Great idea. And we can use his help in spreading the word."

Jeffrey nodded. “And then there is Johanna, the anthropologist. She's pretty keen to find out how the cultures of these isolated different groups are evolving. We can definitely use her in the epidemiology studies, as well.”

Thomas nodded. “Keep going.”

“Georgia and Chuck want to come.”

“You're kidding! She's going to get Chuck out of New Calgary? I guess he's running out of material, now that he's interviewed every single New Calgary resident on video.”

Jeffrey chuckled. “And she's ready to write the great New Earth travel guide! This guy Jon contacted me, from the next settlement over. He's a geographer, and wants to do as much mapping and exploring as possible. He wants to know how far and wide people have managed to settle, and put those settlements on the maps. I thought he would be a great fit.”

“Wow, it is sure going to be a motley crew.”

Thomas was excited. He liked adventures, and this would certainly be one. And he did like that it would end up helping a lot of people, and that made him feel good.

Independent Christian State, Month 1 Year 8

Leticia, Susanna, Susanna's boyfriend Kurt, and Leticia's friend Terrance sat down in the grass in a small area just outside of their settlement. Leticia could see the stakes and strings in the ground, suggesting that someone was planning to build here.

“So I have to leave sooner than I thought. My mother is threatening to send me to the Mission Society or a marriage matching service, neither of which I want. I've been gathering my supplies up in the cave that we've already explored. I'll have to leave when we are supposed to be exploring thirdday.”

Susanna seemed positively excited. “Kurt and I have also been stashing supplies—we're ready to go whenever, and thirdday is as good as any, as far as I'm concerned.”

Leticia looked at Terrance, who if anything looked terrified.

“I'd... I'd like to come. I have some things I've stored in my room that I'll bring with me.”

Kurt snorted. “Are you sure you can handle what we're going to do?”

Leticia was about to come to Terrance's defense, when Susanna said, "Kurt, he's a strong kid, like all of us. He'll be fine—won't you Terrance?" She smiled at him.

He smiled back. "Yes, I'm ready. Really, I am."

Leticia wanted to get back to planning their escape.

"So this is what I think we need to do..."

Casiti, 18 Klef 781

Marianne was fertilizing her greens in the greenhouse alongside Ja'el, and she was thinking about New Earth. She wondered how her sister and nieces were doing. By now, she hoped things had settled down. Leticia and Beatrice would be in school, still. Marianne wondered what colleges had started, and where Leticia might end up going.

The Casitian winter had been both hard and wonderful. It was cold, and going outside for even a little bit was brutal. She spent her time with Ja'el, gardening, writing about Earth. She was in the middle of a very long and engaging discussion with Diana back on Earth about politics and the future of Earth now that what they were calling "The Casitian Crisis" was over.

She knew that in a relatively short time, at the end of this Casitian winter, Ja'el would leave. She was getting used to the idea, but she knew that when it happened it would be difficult. She thought that she'd probably go back to Earth—Casiti hadn't been the haven she'd imagined. And she'd faced more anti-Terran prejudice than she'd ever expected. The very few Terrans on Casiti talked together often. They all experienced pretty much the same thing as she, although it seemed that some were better able to handle it. One of her fears was a slow separation over time between Terrans and Casitians. Casitians weren't allowing any immigration, and few Casitians were living on Earth. That made her sad.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Ja'el's beautiful voice brought her out of her reverie. That wasn't at all what Ja'el had said, since they always spoke Casitian these days. But it was Marianne's best internal translation of the Casitian colloquialism that was often used to mean pretty much the same thing. Money, of course, was not part of the Casitian phrase.

"Just thinking about the future, love. And wondering how Leticia and Beatrice are doing on New Earth. I sometimes regret not trying harder to get Yolanda and Stanley to stay..."

“You did your best, and they really wanted to join the ICS. It’s understandable.”

“I know, but I hate to think about what Leticia is going through. And worse yet, I’ll never know how things turn out for them.”

Chapter 3: Tato Root

We must never forget the experiences of slavery that have shaped us.—Ul'tretor (20)

Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 1, Year 8

Leticia was lying in bed, waiting for her alarm to ring. She had finally told Beatrice what she planned, and Beatrice had promised not to tell what she knew. The conversation had been difficult for Leticia.

“Bea, I just have to leave.”

“I'm going to be lonely without you, Leticia. Mom is going to go crazy when you leave.”

“No she's not. She knows I can't fit in here, not the way she does, or the way you can.”

“I don't really want to fit in, but you're right. I actually want to get married to Craig. But I hate the ICS. I know we'll leave soon after.”

Leticia grinned. She liked Craig—thought he was decent, and she knew that he and Beatrice would make a nice couple. Craig had been Beatrice's best friend since the first day that they landed on New Earth. They'd met on the colony ship. He had become “officially” her boyfriend last year.

“But Leticia, things are bound to change. I've been watching the way the ICS government is working, or, really, not working.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can see that there are not enough resources to do the things that need to get done, and people want more freedom, even people who follow the faith. There is a lot of stress on the system—things will have to change. But I know you can't wait. Don't wait. I'll miss you.”

“I'll miss you too.”

She tossed and turned in bed, not able to sleep. Susanna was coming with her, of course. So were Kurt and Terrance. Kurt and Susanna had gotten involved, but they both knew they couldn't live in the ICS. Terrance was a slight boy, with piercing eyes, and very soft features. He had been teased terribly in school, and Leticia and he had become good friends.

She looked at the clock, and saw that there were only fifteen minutes before the alarm. She could see the first beginnings of light showing in the sky. She got up, turned off the alarm, and went to take a shower. She suspected that this would be the last shower she got in a while. As the water washed over her, she thought about what lay ahead of her. She, Susanna, and Kurt had done a lot of exploring east of the settlement. Kurt had taken a five-day canoe trip a while back, and had heard about the river network that led to the big Chalcedon River. That river, Kurt was told, led to the River Nicea, which was the borderline between New America and the Independent zone.

The hardest part was going to be getting out of the ICS. Once they got into New America, they would probably be left alone. But no one was allowed to leave the ICS. They would travel over land, or follow some rivers on foot, until they reached the border with New America, then they would keep going until they got to the border with the Independent Zone.

Leticia finished her shower, dressed, put the last of her things in her day pack, and walked downstairs. She smelled breakfast cooking.

“Leticia, I'm glad you are up. I'm sorry, but you have to cancel your exploration trip.”

“What do you mean?” Leticia got panicked.

“I managed to get us an appointment with Maria of the Mission Society. She was so gracious. She said that it might help you to decide to talk with her.”

“But Mom, Susanna is expecting me!” Invoking Susanna had worked less and less over the past few months.

“I'm sorry, but you can't go, and that is that.”

“Mom, at least let me go to Susanna's and tell her? I'll be right back.” Leticia hoped that her mother would allow this. Otherwise, she would have to quickly figure something else out.

“OK, go right this minute, before breakfast.”

“I'll be right back.” She picked up her bag and began to walk out the door.

“What do you need that bag for? Leave it here.”

“It has something of Susanna's I need to return. I'll be right back, Mom.” She gave her mother no chance to protest further, bolting out of the door and jogging down the street.

She ran to the gathering point, which was at the end of a dead end street, on the east side of the settlement. She saw Susanna, but not Kurt or Terrance.

“I’ll have to leave, and meet you at the caves. My mother made an appointment for the Mission Society for today, and I was supposed to be going to your house to tell you I can’t come today. But if I take too long, she’ll probably start looking for me at your house.”

“Oh no! I should go too, then, but then what about Kurt and Terrance?”

Just at that moment, they saw Kurt rounding the corner. Leticia ran to him. “Kurt, wait here for Terrance, and then meet us at the caves. It’s a long story, I’ll tell you later.”

Kurt looked startled. “OK, meet you later.”

Leticia ran back to Susanna, and they started running toward the ridge. Luckily, Leticia had never told her mother about the cave in the ridge, and she had told her mother that she and Susanna were taking a trip southwest, to Lake Timothy. Hopefully both of those things would mean that they would never be found.

They slowed down once they had lost sight of the settlement. The hills leading to the ridge were steep, and it was slow going. Usually, the cave was about a two-hour hike. She hoped they could make it much sooner. They decided to take the lesser used trail, which led around the ridge from the north, and was steeper, but shorter. They knew that once they got to the cave, they would be fine. It was easy to see anyone approach from quite a distance, and they had found another exit from the cave far to the northeast, where they would go to start their trek to the river.

They finally arrived at the ledge that had the cave entrance, and decided to wait there for Kurt and Terrance. It took a while for them to catch their breath.

Finally Leticia said, “I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to leave today. I think somehow my mother knew.”

“Yeah, it seems pretty convenient that she made that appointment for today, huh?”

“Well, we managed to get away. I can’t imagine that they will be able to find us.”

“No, they’ll never find us. I’m really confident we’ll get out of the ICS.”

“What about your dad? Are you worried that he will get a huge search party going?”

“I don’t know, but we can evade them. We know this territory better than they do.”

Leticia nodded and smiled. “And we’re younger.”

Susanna laughed.

“What’s so funny?” They heard a deep voice, then scuffling, and finally they saw the figures of Kurt and Terrance appear around the corner of the ledge. Susanna got up, and hugged Kurt. “I’m glad you made it. Any signs of pursuit?”

“Nope, everything was all quiet. I only had to wait for a few minutes.”

Leticia got up. “Well, shall we? We've got supplies to pack, and a long trip ahead of us.”

They all started to walk toward the cave, and once in it, they stopped for a moment to let their eyes adjust.

Terrance asked quietly, “So what happened, Leticia?”

“My mom canceled the exploratory trip. I was supposed to go meet with the mission board. So we don't have the benefit of a whole day's lead time.”

He replied, “Yeah, and, my dad forbade me from coming, which is why I am empty-handed. I had to sneak out, too.”

Kurt said, “OK, it looks like the adults will know soon that we're missing. We have our work cut out for us. The question is, should we stay here for a while, or start?”

Leticia said, “Start. They might eventually find the cave. I want to put as much space between us and them as possible, as quickly as possible.”

They all agreed, and moved into the cave, to the small side tunnel that held all of the supplies they had been accumulating. There was an extra pack for Terrance, and they arranged all of the supplies, dividing them up. Once they were set, they lit one of the torches and started to walk northeast, to the other entrance to the cave.

NCIZ, New Earth, Month 1, Year 8

“Any other details we haven't thought of?” Thomas looked around the room at his traveling companions. They were, in fact, a motley crew. Jon, the geographer, was an intense older man who wore glasses, and was balding. Thomas worried a little about whether he'd be OK on the trip. Chuck was another worry. He sort of reminded him of a version of that famous filmmaker who used to do liberal exposé films back on Earth. Chuck was quite heavy and bearded, and obstreperous at times. Georgia, his wife, was a good moderating influence on him, though. Leonard was what Thomas would think of as a real geeky type. He was thin, had long, stringy brown hair, and could hardly speak a sentence without several words Thomas could not understand. Johanna, the anthropologist, seemed a bit of a mystery. She was thin and wiry, with long hair and glasses, and she said very little.

“Well, Tom, if we haven't thought of them, who is going to talk about them?” Jeffrey asked, playfully.

Thomas frowned. “I'm just trying to tie up loose ends, here, Jeff, making sure we have everything we need.”

Georgia smiled, and said calmly, “Thomas, Jeff, I think we have everything we need. We're just about finished packing everything up. Our first few stops are all in relatively civilized parts of the Independent Zone. I'm sure we can get what we need if we find we need something else. We've got a good supply of money and items we can barter. We'll be fine.”

Thomas nodded. She was right, of course. He was just nervous. It was going to be a long trip, taking several years out of his life. He wanted as much as possible to go well. The meeting broke up, and they all parted and went their separate ways, until Firstday, SecondMonth. That was the day they would leave, at first light.

ICS, New Earth, Month 1, Year 8

“Don't tell me she didn't say where she was going!”

“Mom, she didn't tell me. I have no idea what direction she was headed.”

“You know where she used to explore—where would she go?”

“Mom, she explored everything all around the settlement. She knew every inch of land within 20 miles of here. How would I know where she went?”

Beatrice was surrounded by a group of very agitated adults, sitting in the living room of Susanna's house. Susanna's father, a powerful pastor, had been pacing. He was livid with rage.

“I know this all was Leticia's idea. Susanna would never have left without some kind of instigation.”

Beatrice looked at her mother, who at first appeared as if she was going to defend Leticia, or, more accurately, herself, but then she didn't.

“Yes, Reverend, Leticia was always a troublemaker. I imagine it was her idea.”

“Mom, that's not fair!”

Yolanda glared at Beatrice. “Shhhh. Be quiet now. We adults have to figure out what to do. She told me she was going south, and visiting Lake Timothy. We could go search in that direction.”

Stanley said, “No, I think we should search in the opposite direction.”

“There isn't going to be a search,” the Reverend said.

“What do you mean?” Stanley looked angry.

“They will all reap what they sow. We need to focus on those that are here, like your daughter Beatrice, who I hear is a very good girl.” He looked at Beatrice cloyingly. Beatrice managed a thin smile, and realized that Leticia had, indeed, successfully escaped from the trap.

Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 8

“Shhhhhh. Be quiet!” Kurt whispered very loudly to Terrance, who was walking through the brush with a lot of noise. Leticia could hear it all the way back where she was, and she winced. They had almost run into someone who was camping along the river, and they were relatively close to a settlement. Kurt had insisted on taking the lead, and wanted Terrance close behind. Susanna was in the middle, and Leticia was acting as rear guard.

They had been traveling now for six days. They had been long days, yet Leticia felt more rested than she had when they started out. They had chosen to travel for as long as possible during the daylight, so they would often try and walk for as long as twenty hours at a time, with some rests. When they stopped, they would rest for the entire night period. They had moved far fairly quickly, and were about half of the way from where they started to the border of the ICS. Luckily, their settlement was on the eastern side of the ICS. The ICS itself was more than two thousand miles wide.

There had been no indication whatsoever of any kind of pursuit. There was an outpost settlement that they had passed just after getting off of the ridge, and Leticia had taken a huge risk by walking down to it during a night period. She had sat next to the police shed, to listen to what they were saying. There was no mention of runaway teenagers from their settlement, or any sort of search for missing people.

They now felt that their only worry was going to be simply running into people who might want to report teenagers who were traveling without adult supervision. They had decided on a strategy that might help them evade trouble, especially now that they knew that there had been no alert out for them. They would play two young married couples who were on their way to start a new outpost settlement. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility, and most likely people would fall for it. But they hadn't yet had need of it, since they avoided people and settlements as much as possible.

As they came down from a hill, they came into view of the place where the Nicea River and the Chalcedon River came together. The sun had begun its very slow descent into the west, and they had been walking for close to twenty-one hours. Leticia moved ahead to where Kurt was, and suggested a halt for the day.

“This seems like a nice place for a stop. We can see everything around, there doesn't seem to be anyone close by. I think we can stop for the night here.”

Kurt nodded. “Sure, I think it's a good time. I'm pretty beat. I wish Terrance would be quieter!”

Leticia put her hand on Kurt's shoulder. “Give him a break. He doesn't have the experience you have, and he's really tired. We're all really tired.”

Susanna went up to Kurt, and together, they went to a small group of trees at a short distance, to set up their tent. Leticia went up to Terrance, who was sitting on a rock, looking dejected.

“Don't worry about Kurt—he's just a bit too bossy—and he does worry about us being caught.”

“Do you think I want to be caught?” His features screwed up as if he was about to cry, but didn't want to. “We have to get out of here, I can't live here, and I'll die if I stay. I don't understand why Kurt is so mean to me.”

Leticia sighed. Kurt tolerated Leticia, barely, but he seemed to have no time or patience for Terrance. She didn't really understand what it was about, and she'd worried a little bit about it over the past couple of days. But it really didn't matter. In another week, they would be out of the ICS, and could, if they wanted to, go their separate ways. Apparently, Kurt was trying to convince Susanna to stay in New America. Leticia wanted to have as little to do with New America as she possibly could. New America was a country that allowed something like the ICS

to exist. The Independent Zone was her goal, even though she knew nothing about it. Independent sounded really good to her.

“Well, try not to worry about it too much. It will work out fine.” Leticia put her hand on Terrance's arm, and got up to find a spot for her tent.

After she had set up her tent, and had begun to find a place for the fire, Kurt walked up to her and said, “You take first watch, Terrance second. Susanna and I will take third and fourth.”

Leticia was annoyed. “Um, don't you want to ask me and Terrance what watches we might prefer before you simply decide unilaterally? You aren't the leader, Kurt.”

“Well, from my perspective, it's just easier for me to decide, than for us to have another darned meeting about what to do.”

“Kurt, it might be easier, but that doesn't mean that's what we should do. You are not the leader. Anyway, I can't take first watch, because we had already decided the dinner rotations, and it's my turn to cook dinner. Or did you completely forget about that?”

Kurt rolled his eyes, and stomped off toward Terrance. He turned back, and said “OK, you take second watch.”

Leticia decided that sooner rather than later was a good time to straighten this out. It wasn't that she wanted to be leader instead of Kurt. It's that she wanted them to make decisions collaboratively, instead of having Kurt act as though he was the leader. She walked toward Susanna, who was just getting out of the tent she shared with Kurt.

“Susanna, can we talk for a minute?” Leticia and Susanna had broached this subject before. Susanna had said she would try to talk with Kurt about this situation, but nothing had changed.

“Sure, Leticia, what's up?” Susanna stood up fully, and looked toward Leticia.

“Kurt is being bossy again, and I think it's time for the four of us to have a meeting, and make some clear decisions about things. Is that OK with you?”

Susanna nodded, looking sad. “Yeah, it's OK. Honestly, Kurt is starting to really bug me with the way he's been acting since we left. I don't really know what to do. But having the meeting is a good idea.”

Susanna and Leticia walked back toward the center of the camp, where Terrance was gathering stones to build the fire circle, and Kurt was standing over him, telling him what to do.

Leticia said, "Kurt, Terrance, we're going to have a meeting now, to talk over issues about decision making."

Kurt looked up, with anger on his face. "I'm getting this fire circle set up; we don't have time for a meeting."

Susanna looked at Kurt, clearly annoyed. "Kurt, it looks like Terrance is setting up the fire circle. We have plenty of time. Let's all just sit down, OK?"

Terrance stopped what he was doing, and sat cross-legged on the ground, pretty much where he had been. Leticia and Susanna sat down across from him, and they waited for Kurt to join them.

"I have no interest in a meeting, and I don't think it will at all be useful. I'm going to do first watch, since no one else seems interested."

Susanna rose. "Kurt, you are being an idiot. Sit down right now, and let's talk about this. We still have at least a week until we get to the border with New America, and then probably two weeks after that before we make it to the Independent Zone. We have a long way ahead of us. It makes sense for us to work out how we are going to make decisions, and how we will divide the work."

"I'm not going to the Independent Zone. I'm staying in New America, and I thought you were staying with me."

"Alright, Kurt, let's not talk about that now, let's just figure out how best to handle the next week, OK?"

"No, I want to know, are you, or are you not, staying in New America with me?" Kurt looked at Susanna with his blue, piercing eyes.

Susanna's face started to harden in a way that Leticia had never seen before. She combed her long blond hair away from her face with her fingers. "I'll stay with you in New America if I want to stay with you. But the way you have been acting in the last week is suggesting to me that I might not want to stay with you."

Kurt looked stung, and stepped back a couple of steps. He then turned on his heel and stormed away from the campsite. He quickly came back, and went into the tent he shared with Susanna. The three of them were stunned enough that they just watched the tent. After a while of movement, he came out of the tent with his pack.

“I’ve had it with the three of you. You don’t know how to follow orders, you seem to think that it’s better to come to idiotic consensus. I wanted to leave the ICS, because I wanted the freedom to do whatever I pleased. I didn’t leave the ICS to join a bunch of *Casitians*. And you, Susanna, have been a complete disappointment, in *every* way.” He turned away from them, toward the river, and walked off. Susanna got up, and went into the tent.

Over the past few years, the word “Casitian” had become a swear word in the ICS, and all over New America. It was a word that suggested that people were lazy and immoral, but in reality it was used to harass people into conforming to the norms of society. Leticia had been called that word countless times by her classmates.

Leticia looked at Terrance. “Well, let’s get this circle set up so I can cook dinner, shall we?”

Terrance smiled, got up, and grabbed a stone. “I have to admit, I won’t miss him.”

Leticia started to move some stones into a tight circle. “Neither will I, but I think it will be different for Susanna.”

Leticia decided to give Susanna time until she’d finished cooking dinner to be in her tent, but Susanna came out of her tent well before then. She looked like she had cried, but had reached some sort of peace. She sat next to Leticia, who was cutting some tato root and pseudopeppers for the stir fry. Terrance had managed to get to the river and catch a few gumbys, which were four-legged aquatic animals that looked a lot like an old earth toy, but tasted kind of like fish. They would have a really nice, hearty dinner. There were also a few cone nuts left from a few days ago. They’d found a small group of cone nut trees, which were pretty unusual. Cone nuts were very sweet, and had a taste reminiscent of chocolate. They also had picked the deep purple grapeberries, which would make a wonderful dessert with the cone nuts.

“How’re you doing?” Leticia asked Susanna.

“I’m OK. He is such a jerk, and I think the thing I most hate is that I didn’t see that sooner.”

Leticia shrugged. “Well, he did seem nice enough at school...”

“There were things that I should have seen, really. Maybe he’s always been a jerk, and I just didn’t let myself see it.”

“I don’t know, Susanna, he must have some redeeming qualities. Anyway, we’ll be OK without him, and he’ll be OK without us. I’m just sorry that it didn’t work out for you.”

“Don't be. So how's dinner going? Can I help?”

NCIZ, New Earth, Month 2, Year 8

The wagon was rocking back and forth a little too much for Thomas's stomach. The two horses pulling the wagon didn't seem especially sure-footed. It could hardly be their fault—the road was badly rutted, and sometimes almost completely washed out. Their guide had told them that after this next settlement, the road to the river got better. Thomas was looking forward to that.

They had been traveling for a slow two weeks, or that's how it seemed to Thomas. Jeffrey and Thomas's home settlement, New Calgary, was settled by a mix of Canadian and US citizens in the foothills of a large mountain range. It was a well-developed inland settlement—one of the largest in the North Central IZ. New Calgary, and the half-dozen settlements near it, had created a large, well developed economy of their own.

The first stops after leaving home were all well-populated settlements that were fairly well advanced. Thomas and Jeffrey had spent time with a number of public health, medical, and alternative medical practitioners, and had shared what they knew. Many of those they spoke with had already had some experience with the antibiotic properties of plants in their area. Thomas learned more about other plants, and took many samples that he either had to carefully dry, or make into an infusion, for later testing when he got back home, whenever that would be. He felt sometimes like a naturalist. So many of the native plants weren't catalogued, their relationships to one another unknown. He felt like he had a lifetime's worth of work to do.

Once they left the immediate area around New Calgary, most of the other settlements they had passed through were pretty marginal. The settlements ranged in size and character. So far, they were traveling between settlements made up of people from the United States on Earth. But they were all strikingly different. Thomas's favorite settlement so far, called “Burning Man,” was made up of a large group of artistic, creative, and counter-cultural types. They were certainly

making an interesting community. Thomas did wonder why they chose to come here, given that they would have been welcome on an Earth made more Casitian.

Thomas's least favorite by far was “New Reno.” It was like a mythical Wild West gambling town, with men riding horses and carrying guns, an active group of brothels, some with girls far too young, and huge casinos that people came to from miles and miles around. The medical people at New Reno were too busy sewing up stab wounds and burying people who had gunfights to worry much about plants with medicinal value, although they did pay special attention when they heard about the powerful analgesic in spider flower infusion.

Their original plan to go to New Aard had changed. They had gotten information from other travelers that New Aard was advanced in using plants for their medicinal needs. It sounded like they might have gotten even further than Thomas and Jeffrey had. In addition, New Aard was not welcoming what would have been, on Earth, “Western” influence—it took very special dispensation to travel there, and Thomas didn’t think they would get permission. So they decided to skip New Aard entirely for now. They had decided to go west and then south, and cross into southern New America, before going into the South Central Independent Zone. They would then travel north from there, back into New America, across the Independent Christian State, up north to the settlements above ICS, then back home.

There were a lot of settlements in the North Central Independent Zone along the river that was called the Mississippi. It was a broad river that flowed from the northern lake, called Lake Superior, to the southern lake, called Lake Maracaibo. Thomas expected that they would spend quite a while along this river. It was a good thing—he liked rivers, and was looking forward to traveling on the river.

But before then, they were in for a slog. Between their home settlement and the river was a vast expanse of plains, with not much in the way of interesting landmarks. Thomas's point of view was that this was the completely boring part of the trip.

“Can we take a break?” Jeffrey asked their guide, who was a grizzled man, with gray hair and arthritic joints. Thomas wondered how old he was. The man called the horses to a halt.

“Alright, take a break, not too long—we need to get to Albertville by dark—and that's not many hours from now.”

Thomas got off of the wagon, and went to find a semi-hidden place to relieve himself. Luckily, there were a few trees around that provided convenient concealment. Albertville was

next. He'd heard some things about Albertville. He'd heard that it was very closed off, insular, not welcoming. It had been started by a single family from Ohio. It had only one inn, and virtually no commerce. Their guide didn't like Albertville much, but it was on the only route to the river settlements. Their guide's home was Dubuque, which was one of the more northern settlements along the Mississippi. Many of the settlements had named themselves after well-known cities that were on the Mississippi of Earth. There even was a settlement down south called New Orleans, in a space where two great rivers met—between the Nile River from New Aard and the Mississippi river from the South Central Independent Zone.

Their guide, named Gunther, said that it would take them another two weeks to get from Albertville to Dubuque. There were about five settlements along the way, all increasingly large and developed.

They got back in the wagon after a short break and a snack. In a few hours, they reached Albertville, just as the sun was beginning to get its orange tinge in the blue-green sky. The town looked terrible. The prefab houses were in serious disrepair, and some were already demolished. There looked to be only a few newly and poorly built buildings. It was eerily quiet.

The rutted road they had been traveling on became a flat, dirt road: the main road into town. The town was completely empty. The guide turned a corner, and stopped the wagon in front of a large prefab building with a sign “Inn” scrawled in paint. It was deserted. Gunther got out of the wagon, went up to the door of the inn, and opened it. It came off the hinges in his hands and dropped to the ground, creating a cloud of dust. It was dark inside. Jon got out of the wagon, walked to the door, and peered in.

“It's empty, there's no one here.”

Gunther scratched his head. “I was out here just about a mont' ago. There were some people here, really.”

Everyone else got out of the wagon. Thomas said, “Maybe we should look around. See if anyone is left.”

Thomas went toward what looked to him like the main intersection, which had some large buildings, one of which looked to be some sort of central administration building. It was similarly empty, as was every building he looked into. Chuck got his cameras out and started to walk around, getting footage outside and inside of buildings.

They eventually gathered next to the wagon to talk about what to do.

Chuck said, "Obviously, we can't keep going to the next town; it's too far away. I guess we might as well camp here."

It'sa creepy here, idn't it?" Gunther spat. "I'd rather camp outside o' town, be honest."

Jeffrey said, "Well, actually, I think that's a good idea. We don't know what happened, and we should be careful."

Gunther pointed to a hill toward the southwest that looked like it had some trees. "We can get there by full dark."

Thomas nodded. They all got back into the wagon, and Gunther took them to their camping place for the night.

In their tent, Jeffrey and Thomas were discussing what they thought happened. Jeffrey thought that perhaps they got sick, and tried to go somewhere to get help, and never came back.

Thomas said, "Well, maybe they just got sick of being so isolated, and went to settlements closer to the river."

"But they were supposed to be a very insular family, not welcoming much of anyone."

"Well, who knows, I imagine the people of Graceland know what happened. It wouldn't be a surprise, really, smaller settlements dying, and merging with larger ones."

They settled into their sleeping bags, and as Thomas drifted off to sleep, he wondered what the settlement called "Graceland" was going to be like. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Independent Christian State, New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 8

"I don't see anyone. It seems quiet out there." Leticia, Terrance and Suzanna had gotten up to a small hill overlooking the Chalcedon River. Leticia knew that the border of the ICS and New America was where the Chalcedon and Trinity rivers met. She hadn't seen anyone on the rivers, or near the rivers. There was a settlement on the other side of the Trinity River, but they had decided to avoid it by crossing the river to the south of it, just in case. They had done fine traveling in the wilderness. Leticia was really enjoying it. She was enjoying learning about the many new plants they were coming across, and enjoying getting to know the territory.

They had only been traveling for an hour or so that day, so they figured they would be able to cross into New America that day. It made all of them much happier that they were going to be, finally, out of the ICS. They started their walk down toward the Trinity River. They would need to find a way to get across it.

They made it down to the bank of the river, where there was a small beach full of large pebbles. The river appeared to be quite broad, and quite deep. Swimming it seemed not to be a great option, but it would do if they had to. Leticia looked around, and wondered whether they should build a small raft.

“Looking to cross the river?”

A voice came from out of nowhere. Then, all of a sudden, a small boat appeared from behind some trees next to the riverbank. In the boat was a slight, small woman, who looked to be pretty old, older than Leticia's mother, certainly.

“I saw you when you were on that hill.” She pointed back to where they had been standing a while ago.

“I know, I know, you don't want to answer me, because you are worried that I'll turn you in.” She laughed. “I live on the other side, and I help people cross from that godforsaken state all of the time. It'll only cost you twenty dollars.

Leticia had thirty, and she knew Susanna had more. She looked at the woman, who seemed nice enough. “Why help us?”

“Well, I make a bit of extra money this way. And I help people leave that place. It's an awful place, I know. I escaped my husband a year ago.”

“You take the risk to help people? What if they catch you?”

“No one cares, really. They tell you over and over again that no one can leave, and they lie, and tell stories about people going to prison and all. But they just let people go. Think about it. They'd rather people who really wanted to leave, left.”

Leticia nodded. It made sense. “OK, we'll come with you. Can you drop us off on the bank south of that settlement?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You're avoiding civilization?”

Leticia nodded. “Yes, until we get to the Independent Zone.”

She shook her head. “OK, that's fine by me, but you don't need to worry. And the IZ ain't no place for three nice young people like you, I guarantee you that. But anyway, come on in the boat.”

They gathered up their belongings, and entered the boat with the woman.

“Name's Muriel.”

“I'm Leticia, this is Susanna and Terrance.”

“Nice to meet you all.”

The boat drifted away from the bank, and downstream. Muriel paddled a little bit, but mostly just steered the boat toward the far shore. After a time, they arrived at another small beach on the far shore, where she let them get out. They did a quick negotiation about money—Terrance had come empty handed, so Susanna and Leticia split the twenty dollar cost, and giving the money to Muriel.

“Thank you Muriel, you've been a real help.”

“Well, dears, you've helped me too, in more ways than one. Travel blessings on you.”

Leticia reached out to Muriel, who gave her a clasped arm hug, which she also gave to Susanna and Terrance.

Leticia said, “Blessings on you, as well. Thank you again.”

They parted ways, and Leticia looked back, seeing Muriel paddle her boat back upstream, to her home.

NCIZ, New Earth, Month 2, Year 8

Thomas groaned. “OK, we've been here for two days, and I'm *sick* of Elvis. Can we leave tomorrow?”

Jeffrey smiled. “Come on, Tom. First off, we've been able to help a lot of people. Second, well, I like staying in Elvis's bedroom. Isn't that cool? And besides, Chuck is getting great footage, Georgia is writing up a storm, and Johanna is learning a lot. But the plan is to leave tomorrow anyway.”

Thomas had never had any patience for Jeffrey's love affair with the dead rock star, and he never understood it, either. Luckily, Jeffrey had been to the Graceland on Earth years before

they had met. Thomas did have to hand it to the people who settled Graceland. Somehow, they managed to have an incredible amount of Elvis memorabilia, although he truly doubted any of its authenticity. But that didn't seem to matter to either Jeffrey or to anyone else in Graceland.

The team had, in any case, solved the Albertville mystery. Albertville had been settled by a family of three generations. The older generation was the one that was the most insular, and uninterested in anything outside of the family. An infectious disease had struck the settlement, and everyone in the older had generation died. Those that were younger decided to disband the settlement, and move elsewhere.

“I wish we'd gotten there earlier,” Jeffrey said.

“We would have prevented the deaths, but only postponed the inevitable, Jeff,” Thomas answered.

Jeffrey nodded. “I guess that's true. But I hate to see people die unnecessarily.”

They did leave Graceland the next day, and travel on the road to the river was much improved. Gunther said that they would make it to Dubuque in a week, just at the beginning of ThirdMonth. They would stay in Dubuque for a while. Leonard, the techie, planned to establish a network along the river settlements, and it would take a while to get everything set up before they traveled on. They also had supplies to purchase for the trip, and would need a new guide. Gunther only did trips between New Calgary and Dubuque—they would need to find a river guide to take them down the Mississippi.

New America, New Earth, Month 3, Year 8

The bridge was huge, surprisingly large. It reminded Leticia of bridges she'd seen back on Earth. She wouldn't have thought there would be anything on New Earth like it, but here it was, right in front of her. The bridge spanned the broad expanse of the Mississippi River, and the settlements of New Richmond and Dubuque were on the New American and IZ sides, respectively. They had walked into New Richmond, joining the small but steady stream of people walking across the bridge into the IZ, with a few wagons and trucks passing by them. There seemed to be a small checkpoint, but they didn't turn anyone back. Leticia did notice

vehicles moving in the opposite direction, passing from the IZ side into New America, but no people walking.

As they walked across the bridge and reached the checkpoint, they could see several men in camouflage, holding rifles. This scared her a bit, but as she watched people go up to the gate, and then be passed through, she realized that there didn't seem to be much to worry about.

“State your reason for leaving New America,” the soldier asked the woman ahead of her.

“My cousin is in Dubuque, and I'm going to live with her.”

“Name, please.”

“Joan Graves.”

The soldier looked down at a clip board, with a sheaf of papers. He flipped up some pages, and ran his finger down what looked like a list of names.

“OK, fine, you're fine, please move on.”

Leticia at first thought she'd fake a name, but she realized there was no reason to.

“State your reason for leaving New America.”

“I have an aunt who lives in Dubuque. I'm going to live with her.”

“Name please.”

“Leticia Green.”

After looking at the list, he told her to move on. Susanna and Terrance similarly got through the checkpoint.

Leticia was relieved, and excited. They were now in the IZ! They could do whatever they wanted, however they wanted. She knew she wanted to travel more, and she was happy that she was finally free of her mother, and of the ICS. She could live as she pleased.

They walked into Dubuque, and asked at a small general store about a cheap place to stay. The man behind the counter told them about a small inn about four blocks away. Leticia also asked about a river guide, to take them down river, one that was reasonable in price.

“My daughter does that. She's really good. I don't think she has any clients right now.”

He scribbled her name and address on a small piece of paper, and handed it to Leticia. “She'll be good.”

They walked out of the store, to the inn. They got two rooms, for a very good price.

“Why don't I go check out the river guide? You two can explore the town.” Leticia was not really all that interested in the town, although she could tell that Terrance and Susanna were.

They seemed to be in their element in this large settlement, which was much larger than their home settlement in the ICS, and, of course, much more interesting.

“How much do you think we can afford to spend? I had originally brought 30 NA dollars—and we spent 10 of that on the river crossing, and five more on the rooms. That only leaves me with fifteen, and I don't want to use it all.”

“Well, why don't we just stay here for a while?” Susanna asked. Why go down the river? This seems like a great place.”

“I want to explore—I want to see what's out there in the IZ before I decide where to stay.”

Terrance seemed to agree with Suzanna. “I need a break from traveling. I think I'm going to look for a job here.”

Leticia was disappointed. She had hoped that they would stay together. But Leticia had the exploratory itch. She wanted to see as much of New Earth as she could.

“OK, well, I guess I understand. I'll go check out the guide anyway.” She didn't know how she would manage to pay the guide, if Susanna didn't help. She grabbed a couple of things from her bag, and started to walk out the door. “I'll be back in a while. Let's have dinner together, OK?”

Susanna nodded. Leticia walked out of the room, and down the stairs, into the street. She was assaulted by the noise and business of the settlement. She figured that it was at least four or five times the size of their settlement, which had about ten thousand people. The settlement seemed very crowded to her. She looked at the map they had found of the settlement, and wound her way toward the address of the river guide, which looked to be only a block from the river.

North Central Independent Zone, New Earth, Month 3, Year 8

“Yes, well, I can take you as far as New Orleans. I've been doing this for a few years, and I know the river settlements well. I just got a larger capacity barge as well. We'll still need to camp on the river when there are no settlements, but during the day, it will be a comfortable ride.” Keitha, the river guide, was speaking to Thomas, who had been given instructions from the rest of the group about what they wanted.

“There are seven of us, with a fair bit of equipment. Can you handle it alone? We need help with food and camping logistics as well.”

Keitha nodded. “Yes. I need to hire one assistant, given the duration of the trip. It will take me some time to prepare everything. We'll leave in three days, at first light. I do need a deposit, so I can purchase the things we'll need.”

Thomas nodded. “How much?”

“Twenty-five percent of the final cost, which will be eight thousand IZ units, so I need two thousand.”

Thomas nodded, and pulled out his wallet. They had raised a lot of money for this journey, between the money that each of them had contributed, and the settlement's contribution. He took out two one-thousand notes, and handed them to Keitha, who looked a bit surprised.

“Well, these are large bills. I don't often see bills this big, honestly.” Keitha smiled.

“We've been well funded. Thanks, Keitha.”

“Where are you staying?”

“At the Bear's Den Inn, on Dodge Street.”

“OK, I'll be in touch. I'll likely come by tomorrow to discuss some of the logistics.”

Thomas nodded. They shook hands, and he turned and left the courtyard. As he was walking through the gate, he saw a very young, tall, muscular woman with a medium-dark complexion walking toward the gate. She looked travel-weary, but Thomas thought he saw excitement in her eyes. Thomas detected a bit of worry, perhaps, in her face.

“Hi there. Does Keitha live here?”

Thomas nodded. “Yes, indeed she does. She's in that courtyard.”

The woman nodded and smiled. “Thanks.” She walked through the gate.

Thomas walked back to the inn, feeling like he knew he would see this woman again soon.

North Central Independent Zone, New Earth, Month 3, Year 8

Leticia passed the tall thin man, with a feeling of familiarity. But she knew she'd never seen him before. He seemed nice enough. She walked into the courtyard, to find a stocky woman

of medium height, pale skin, very obvious muscles and dark hair, writing on a pad of paper. She stood a while, the woman not yet noticing her presence.

“Uh, Keitha?” she said tentatively.

Keitha looked up in surprise. “May I help you?”

“Your father told me about your river guide business, and I was wondering if you are taking any trips down the river soon. I just arrived in Dubuque, and I want to explore. But I don't have much money...”

The woman seemed to be assessing her.

“How much camping have you done?”

“A lot—I just traveled from the Independent Christian State in New America.”

The woman looked surprised. “You traveled all of that way by yourself? Walking?”

Leticia all of a sudden felt very proud of her accomplishment. “No, there were two others. But yes, we walked, found food, and camped. We traveled during the day times, and rested all of the night.”

Leticia could tell that Keitha was impressed.

“Why did you leave?”

Leticia decided honesty was best. “I didn't want to get married, or join the Mission Society. Those were my only options.”

Keitha smiled. “I'd heard the ICS was a crazy place, but that's really nuts. Well, welcome to the IZ.”

Leticia smiled. “Thanks. But now I want to explore it, and find a place I can call home.”

Keitha looked at Leticia again, as if making a decision. “OK, how about this. I was going to hire someone I had worked with before, but I like your look and you have a lot more experience than anyone else I know. I'll hire you as an assistant. We'll try this out just for the first leg of the journey down the Mississippi—to Bellevue—the next settlement down the river. If that works, you can come with me as far as you want. But, this is the thing, I'll only be paying you twenty IZ units a day, and, of course, food and lodging are included.”

Leticia made a quick calculation. They'd had to exchange their NA dollars into IZ units, and the current exchange rate seemed to be about two IZ units to each NA dollar. So she'd be making ten dollars a day, which seemed, to her, to be a fortune. She didn't want to sound completely enthused, though.

“Sure, that will do fine, thank you. When do we start?” She realized a bit of excitement was creeping into her voice.

“We start today, actually.” Keitha looked down at her pad. “If you wait here for about an hour, we're going to need to go to town and pick up a lot of supplies. The trip starts in three days, at first light. I think it would be best for you to stay here, though, we'll have some short sleep periods in the next two days. I've got a spare bed in my office.”

“That will work fine. I should go get my stuff, and come back—I'll be back soon.”

“That sounds good.” Keitha got up, and walked toward the back of the house, where the door to the office was and pointed. Leticia followed. “Here's the office. You can put your stuff in that far corner.”

Leticia nodded. “Thanks. I'll be right back.” She turned and walked back toward the gate, then ran back to the inn, and bounded up the stairs. She was ecstatic. She had a way down the river, and she was going to be paid for it! She opened the door to the room she shared with Susanna, who was sitting on the bed, looking pensive.

“Susanna! I got a job helping a river guide go down the river! I'm so happy.”

Susanna looked up, seeming to have been drawn out from being deep in thought. “That's great, Leticia. I got a job, too.”

Leticia was surprised. “Wow, doing what?”

“I got a job waiting tables downstairs in the restaurant.”

Leticia thought that seemed, well, not up to Susanne's ability, but, if she wanted to do it... “Is that what you want?”

“It's great pay. Three units an hour, plus tips. Plus free room and board.”

Leticia whistled. “That's good pay. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It's just a first step. Terrance found a job, too, at a bookstore.”

Leticia remembered that she'd wanted to stop at a bookstore before she left. “Where?”

“On White Street and 14th. It's a cute little store.”

Leticia realized she probably didn't have time to get there before she went back to Keitha's place now, but perhaps later today, or tomorrow.

“I gotta pack up and go, right away.” She started to gather her things, and to put them into her pack.

Susanna said, “So will I see you soon again? When are you coming back?”

Leticia stopped packing for a moment. "I don't know, Susanna. It might be a long time. I might choose to stay somewhere else. But I'll come back and visit sometime." She went to Susanna, and they hugged. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too. It's hard to imagine not having you around."

"I wish you wanted to come with me."

"This seems like a good place to stay for a while. Not forever, but..."

Leticia nodded. "I understand. I still have the travel bug, I guess." She went back to packing. When she was done, she hefted her pack and started to walk toward the door. "Tell Terrance I said goodbye. I'll try to get to the bookstore before I leave."

Susanna nodded, and Leticia walked out the door, down the stairs, and back to Keitha's place by the river.

Chapter 4: Greenwood Leaves

In the end, all humans want power. Power over others, and over their circumstances. It is the ultimate aphrodisiac. — JIir Nern Kluft (1st age)

New America, New Earth, Month 4, Year 8

The message he'd received from them was cryptic, but Dennis couldn't ignore it. He needed to follow up on any promise of power, and the promise of precious metals was irresistible. If he could be the source of a supply of these metals, Dennis would have the power and influence he needed. Dennis was eager to find out what these people had in mind.

He got out of his four-wheel drive vehicle, and walked the final mile to the rendezvous point at the top of a small peak about fifty miles from New Columbia. It seemed an oddly isolated place for a meeting of this sort, but he figured they wanted secrecy.

He reached the rocky peak, and didn't see anyone else there, so he sat to wait. In a few minutes, he felt a cool breeze, which seemed odd to him in the stillness of the hot day. He heard a sound that he couldn't identify, and then from some trees a bit downslope, he saw two men walking up toward him. They were both tall, slim, and had very short hair. Their coloring and features reminded him of Casitians for a moment, but they didn't have the manner or dress of Casitians.

He got up. "Hello. I imagine you are..."

"Hello Dennis. My name is John, and this is Mark."

Dennis noted they had very strange accents, accents he'd never heard before. They were most definitely not Casitians.

"Where are you from? Where do you live? I haven't seen you around New Columbia."

"We travel a lot."

"I see." Dennis was wary.

The one whose name was Mark was hefting a medium-sized box, John pointed to it.

"In here are five pounds of titanium, five pounds of palladium, four pounds of gallium, two pounds of gold and seven pounds of silver, all in small, one ounce bars. There are also some

plans for advanced manufacturing technology that will be helpful given your lack of some materials. In this other box are bags with a number of important rare earth elements.”

“Titanium? Palladium? Gold? Rare earth elements? Where did you get those? No one has been able to find any of this on New Earth!”

“We have our sources. Let's just say we brought them with us.”

“Ah, that was smart of you to add them to your cargo allowance. No one else thought of that.”

John looked at Dennis enigmatically. Dennis was definitely suspicious, but he wanted what was in their hands more than he cared about the truth of how they had come to have these things.

“We are giving these to you for free. And there is much, much more of all of this and other things you'll need.”

“What do you want from me in return?”

“For now, we want nothing. We want you in power in New America. That's all. When we need something, we'll let you know.”

“Why? Why me? And how could you want nothing now?”

“You'll be in the best position to provide us with what we need. But don't worry, it won't affect your power. We don't want it. We have other things in mind.”

Dennis wondered what those things were. But he didn't really care. All he wanted was to be in charge.

North Central Independent Zone, New Earth, Month 4, Year 8

Leticia sat in the stern of the river barge they were traveling on, holding the rudder. She looked up, and saw Thomas grinning at her as he walked toward the back of the boat. Leticia and Thomas had already become fast friends, even after only a few days on the river. It was funny to Leticia—Jeffrey wanted to act like her father, and Thomas just wanted to be her friend. Most importantly, though, Keitha thought that Leticia was a good worker, and decided to keep her on for the entire trip down to New Orleans. Leticia liked Keitha a lot, and also liked the entire group traveling with Thomas and Jeffrey. They all seemed to get along fine, although Leticia thought

that sometimes Thomas would get a bit too stressed out by things. Lately, she had been making it her mission to make him lighten up, which he seemed not to mind.

They'd left Dubuque a week ago, and had passed through Bellevue, and were headed south toward Moline, one of the larger settlements on the Mississippi. Keitha said that it would take about two weeks to get to Moline. They got into a routine, traveling on the river, stopping at each settlement along the way. Most often at night they would camp, or, if they were lucky, they found an inn. Sometimes people would invite them to stay in their modest homes. Since the major reason for their trip was to share information about native plants, Jeffery and Thomas had to find the medical practitioners of whatever sort in each settlement. At the same time, Leonard was busy taking notes about where to place widenet antennas, and talking to folks about how the new widenet would work. Johanna was doing interviews with a few willing individuals about life on the river, and Georgia and Chuck were busy filming various activities. It was hectic, and Leticia was enjoying every minute.

She worked hard assisting Keitha with equipment and logistics. She did most of the cooking, when it was needed. She was responsible for gathering or buying food when they stopped. She had a lot of time to herself, though, while the others were talking with people in the settlements, or when they were just cruising downstream. The further away she got from the Independent Christian State, the more relaxed and happy she felt. It had finally sunk in that she was free, and could live her life as she pleased.

What she had seen of this Independent Zone so far had been educational. She was astounded by the range of settlements that she'd gotten to visit, as well as the ones she had heard about from Thomas. She thought about where she might want to settle eventually. Thomas and Jeffrey's home town of New Calgary sounded very attractive to Leticia, but even though she knew she wanted to settle down at some point, she wanted to see as much of the new world as she could before then.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, finally," Thomas said. He had commented to her that sometimes she seemed sad or on guard.

"Yeah, I guess it has finally sunk in that I'm really gone from that horrible place, really finally free. I don't have to worry about my mother forcing me to get married or anything."

"It's about time! Do you know how many miles from the ICS we are now? Hundreds!"

Leticia smiled and said, “I know, I know—but sometimes when I wake up in the morning I'm afraid that this was all just a dream, you know? But finally, I woke up realizing that it really is real. You have no idea what it was like to live there—a total nightmare.”

Thomas nodded. “You've told me. I have to admit it's hard to believe, but I do believe you. Have you thought more about that letter?”

Leticia had been thinking about writing a letter to her mother. Apparently, mail along this route to Dubuque was quite reliable, and it was very likely that the letter would be delivered.

“I don't really know what to say to her—'Goodbye and I hope to never see you again'?”

Thomas shook his head emphatically. “No, Leticia. Your mother is probably worried about you. Just tell her that you are doing fine and are happy, and leave it at that. Just reassure her that you are OK.”

Leticia looked at Thomas. “I don't even think she cares really about me. But maybe you're right. I'll write her a short note, and drop it off at the next settlement.”

“If you want, you can tell her to write you in New Orleans. I've heard that post offices most places will hold mail for people to pick up.”

“OK, that's worth a try. I know you are trying to be helpful, Thomas.”

Leticia started to compose the letter in her head. What would she say, exactly? Part of her did really hope that she'd never see her mother again.

ICS, New America, New Earth, Month 1, Year 9

Beatrice relaxed into Craig's arms, and looked up at the sky.

“I wonder where Leticia is, and how far she has gotten.”

“I'm sure she's fine. Do you envy her?”

Beatrice laughed, and looked up at Craig. “Of course I do! But it's not so much that she gets to see more of New Earth—it's that she gets to meet people who have made different choices than my parents did.”

Craig nodded. “We'll be OK, Bea. We'll have the ICS marriage everyone will envy, and then we'll say we're going off to start a new settlement, and sneak out. Maybe we'll even run into Leticia someday.”

“I know, I know, I'll have a chance to see all of that. I'm glad that we feel the same, Craig. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Dlejon, Rec'jeter'she, Month 1, Year 9

Mira looked a bit exasperated to Douglas. “They will be short trips, Dad, and anyway, I'm an adult now! And it's an important part of my training.”

Douglas sighed. “Yes, Mira, I know that. I guess I'm still not used to the fact that you're growing up. I'm glad that you've decided to get medical training. And I know that Theresa will be a great mentor, and will take care of you on this trip. I just can't help worrying. Forgive me.”

Mira jumped up, and hugged Douglas. “Dad, I'll be fine. And I'm so looking forward to learning more about other parts of New America, and telling people about what we've learned about the plants here. We can really help.”

The Dlejonese had spent years cataloguing and studying the wide range of plants on New Earth, and understanding their medicinal properties. From what they could tell so far, either individual plants, or combinations of them, could treat most of the diseases that they had brought with them. There were a few illnesses that had cropped up that they hadn't yet been able to find treatments for, which sometimes worried them. But in general, the people of Dlejon were healthy.

Douglas was proud of Mira. He lost his regret that she had come along—she was doing very well here, and the community could really use her growing talents as a doctor.

“So tell me more, Mira. Where are you headed?”

“The first trip is to the Lakota community, west of here across the river Ul'tretor.”

“Ah, yes, we've had a bit of contact with Wachiwi, the chief of the tribe.”

“Theresa knows that they have already done some of their own studies of the native plants, so we're looking forward to exchange of information more than anything. The second trip is to go to the South Central Independent Zone. That's going to be longer, and we'll be doing a lot of dissemination of the information about medicinal plants.”

“You'll need to be careful. I understand that some of the northernmost settlements of the SIZ are talking a lot with the New Americans.”

“We'll be careful. Remember, Dad, we're just a big settlement of hippies.” Mira smiled.

St. Louis, North Central Independent Zone, Month 1, Year 9

“So you're saying that you think that it's those strange amino acids that bind up all of the free radicals?” Leticia and Jeffrey were sitting at a table on the pier in St. Louis, one of the larger settlements along the Mississippi.

“Yes, I do. I wished we'd had access to more equipment to do mass spectroscopy and NMR, but it was clear from the electrophoretic analysis we did that these different amino acids are getting incorporated into our proteins. It appears that at least two or three of them are similar enough to ones that we have but aren't present here. It also seems to be that proteins with these amino acids function quite normally. But there seem to be some additional characteristics—like this antioxidant behavior, and some others.”

Leticia was fascinated by all of this. During her spare time, she had spent time reading books Jeffery and Thomas had about epidemiology and medicine, and both of them had been teaching her about the medicinal properties of the native plants. In the process she'd learned a lot of medicine, and had decided to train as a doctor. She realized that it suited her, and that she could also be of help to many.

Both Jeffrey and Thomas were encouraging. All the way up in Dubuque they had heard rumors of a new medical school in the South Central Independent Zone, and the further south they got, the more they heard about it. Leticia was excited. She knew there were other ways to get trained on New Earth, but a real medical school sounded like a good idea.

“I was reading your report about the combinatorial antibiotic effects of the grapeberries and greenwood leaves. It's amazing that the combination of the two has about five times the antibiotic effect than either one alone. I don't really understand what you meant in the conclusion—how do you think the grapeberries potentiate the greenwood leaves?”

“Well, we think it's the greenwood leaves that have the real antibiotic effect—but the grapeberries are very rich with enzymes for some reason, and we wonder whether the enzymes help release whatever is antibiotic in the greenwood leaves. But of course this is all speculation

—we just don't have the equipment to figure it out. We're not sure we ever will. Our job is mostly to be naturalists and empirical researchers for a while. The real analysis is going to have to wait a long time.”

Leticia heard Keitha and Thomas talking as they approached. Leticia had to switch modes from student to assistant guide. There was a lot to do, since it was just about time to leave St. Louis and move down the river to Memphis. Because of the size of the settlement, they had stayed here for a few days, and besides, they had all felt they needed a break. But they knew it was time to get moving again, and keep going down to the next destination.

New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 9

Dennis left the meeting with the New American power brokers he had begun to gather, and he was excited and satisfied. He got into his car for the drive to his new house. He had most people who were important in New America on his side, now, since he had been providing them with precious metals and plans for new technology. Those things had helped them to build their wealth and power immensely, which had helped Dennis build his wealth and power, too. Several people had already started new businesses manufacturing such things as chips and circuit boards with the materials and plans Dennis had provided, and were profiting from it.

He was also aware that people were beginning to notice who was “in” and who was “out.” He was being careful to leave “out” those currently close to Gerard. Dennis was glad that he'd finally broken the ties with Gerard. Gerard had been stunned at Dennis' decision to leave. Gerard had probably assumed he had Dennis in his left pocket. But Dennis had been slowly building his own power base from almost the moment he stepped off the colony ship onto New Earth soil. With the help of John and Mark, Dennis had consolidated his power base, and Gerard would find himself without support.

Dennis arrived at his house, one of the most magnificent on the edge of New Columbia, the capital of New America. It had been designed by the hottest architect in the country—a specialist in the newest neo-classical architecture. He had spent a lot of money to buy it. It came up for sale because the previous owner had decided to move further into the country. The house was large, with huge columns in the front, and even a carriage house.

He walked into his house, and for a moment felt its emptiness. He had gotten all of the furniture in the right style: imposing, dark wood, with curvy lines and stern upholstery. A part of him missed being with Gerard, but he knew that leaving Gerard had been the best thing for him. He brushed his loneliness aside, and resolved to find someone who could complement him.

New Islamabad, New Aard, Month 2, Year 9

“I have a hard time believing you.” The sheik spoke in Arabic to the two visitors, who called themselves Hassan and Rafi.

Hassan said, “Why? Here are the metals and resources you need, right here. You can start to manufacture vaccines quite soon. Your people are dying. Don't you want the vaccines?”

“Of course we want to manufacture vaccines! But I want to know ahead of time what it is you will want from us. I don't even know who you are, or where you are from. What settlement are you from? Who are your families?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does! If you are not willing to tell me more, then please leave me. I have enough business to attend to, without mysterious people with what seem to be unbelievable promises.”

The sheik turned to his aide and said, “Please escort these men out.”

Twenty meetings, with almost the exact same dialogue, went on in numerous settlements of New Aard. The results were the same. The men who called themselves Hassan and Rafi walked out holding exactly what they came in with. No one wanted it.

New Aard, Month 2, Year 9

Abdul could see the sun come into his tent through his closed eyes. Reluctantly, he opened them and looked around his tent. It was small, and his varied personal possessions littered the floor. Although he had slept through most of the last dark period, he was still exhausted. And it would be another long day of travel today.

It had been a long haul. Abdul had bided his time, slowly putting together a small group of liberal-minded people within New Aard who were willing to take the big risk of breaking away from the mullahs, to form a community far to the south, where no one had yet settled. In the end, a group of 75 people traveled south with him, far more than he had ever expected. They had traveled separately or in very small groups, to make sure they weren't followed or captured. Unfortunately, their plan had been unveiled when a group of married women who had decided to leave their husbands were discovered trying to leave. It had been a close call, but in the end, they were allowed to escape. That's basically how Abdul looked at it. He imagined that it would have been impossible for them to have made it out otherwise.

Abdul didn't want to push his luck. Finally, just about everyone had made it to the rendezvous point, and they had to push south. They would travel close to the river for about 1500 kilometers, then over a small group of mountains to a part of New Aard that was unsettled, close to the South Central Independent Zone. They would settle right across the river from the small Baha'i territory. Abdul had planned it this way, so that if, for some reason, the mullahs of New Aard decided to not allow this settlement, and tried to invade it, they could flee across the river and be safe.

He rolled out of his sleeping bag and got up, got dressed, and left his tent. Standing in front of his tent, as if waiting was his longtime friend Olam.

“Hi Olam. I'm getting the feeling you were waiting for me.”

Olam grinned. “Asiya arrived yesterday, in the dark.”

Asiya was Olam's fiancée. Olam had been worried that they would have to leave before Asiya could make it to this point.

Abdul clapped Olam on the back, and smiled. “That's such great news Olam. We need to start packing up and get going.”

At that moment, Abdul realized that there was a lot of activity in the camp. “What time is it?”

“Third hour.”

“Third hour! Why did you let me sleep?”

“Abdul, calm down. I knew you could get your things together quickly, and you have been working so hard for all of us. You needed your rest.” We'll all be ready to leave by fifth hour, I'm sure.

Abdul sighed. “OK, Olam. But we have far to go today. How many are missing?”

“Seven, in total, mostly women, including Najla, Khadija, and Diane, the ones who were caught before we left. I will be surprised if any others make it out. But we'll leave the coded message anyway.”

“Thanks, Olam. I guess I should get packing.” Abdul turned, and went back in his tent to gather his belongings. Abdul realized that it would be another long haul, but soon, soon, he could settle down and relax.

New Orleans, NCIZ, New Earth, Month 4, Year 10

Leticia watched Keitha's barge leave the dock, to go back up the Mississippi. Keitha was headed back to Dubuque, having brought Jeffrey and Thomas's team down the river. The team had spent three weeks in New Orleans, talking to people, gathering information, and making their plans. There had been a very informative and surprisingly friendly meeting at the New Aard Embassy in New Orleans, and there was a promise of future information sharing.

Leticia had been sorry to leave Keitha, but she wanted to go to San Antonio, a large settlement in the South Central IZ. Very early on, Jeffrey and Thomas had invited her to accompany them into the South Central IZ, and had really insisted once they learned that there was a new medical training facility there. Leticia had been glad to find out about that facility—and Jeffrey and Thomas were also quite excited to share their knowledge with the physicians there.

It was going to be a long trip, almost as long as they'd already traveled. First, they needed to go downriver to New San Francisco, a settlement among a group in the SCIZ called “New California.” They would be, for a short time, in a stretch of river with New America on one side and New Aard on the other. They had plans to stop at the few New America settlements along the river, sharing information they had found. Next there was an overland trip north to San Antonio.

Going into New America made Leticia a bit nervous, but she realized that her fear wasn't really reasonable. She knew that no one was going to be interested in dragging her back up to the ICS. After all, she had been gone for almost 3 years now.

She heard footsteps behind her, and turned to see Thomas. He sat next to her on the dock. “Penny for your thoughts.”

“I’m a little sad to see Keitha go. I really enjoyed working under her. And I was thinking about New America and the ICS.”

Thomas nodded. “I’ve been thinking a bit about New America, too. I can’t understand what we keep hearing about it. Their epidemics are getting better, faster than anywhere else. It sounds strange. New America was founded by people who intensely disliked, and actively opposed, the Casitians. There were few doctors or scientists among them. I’d bet that the vast majority of scientists and doctors that emigrated to New Earth ended up in the Independent Zones. The fact that New America is doing better is puzzling.

Anyway, they still might want our knowledge, and maybe we can learn more about what’s happening there. I’m expecting that we can find at least a few medical people in New America. Anyway, it’s time to go—our new guide says the barge is all packed up.”

They got up from the edge of the dock, and walked further down the pier to where their barge was tied. Leticia had been glad that Thomas and Jeffrey were happy to let her stay a student, instead of having to help with the logistics of the trip. That gave her a lot of time to keep reading. She’d gotten some chemistry and physics books from a bookstore, and had been sobered in realizing how badly she had been educated during her time in the ICS. She had a lot of catching up to do.

Outside of New Columbia, New America, New Earth, Month 4 Year 10

“I’m missing something. You are trying to sell me advanced computer components?” Timothy was skeptical.

“Yes, I have a source.”

“What source? From these specs, these are not stock from someone’s colony ship cargo store.”

“No, no, I told you, they are newly manufactured.”

Timothy had let this man into his office, even though he thought he was a shyster, but he was curious about what he had. Now he was sure he was a shyster. Timothy’s son Joseph was in

the office today, and Timothy thought this might be a good lesson for him. Joseph had just turned 32 years old, in New Earth years, and he had high hopes that Joseph would follow him into the business; he seemed interested and engaged. And his son was very good at electronics—he had been making all sorts of things when they were back on Earth.

“Look, sir. I don’t care what you are telling me. These components cannot exist. Believe me, I know.”

The man laughed, and took out something that looked like a circuit board wrapped in an anti-static bag.

“Here. Look at this.” He handed the bag to Timothy. Timothy took the bag, opened it, and slid the small board from its bag. It was a circuit board, alright. It looked newly manufactured, and had some components on it that were unfamiliar. It also had stamped on one side “NewAmerica Electronics.” It looked to match the specs he had on the sheet in front of him.

He handed it to his son, who looked it over and said, “Dad, this is definitely new manufacture.”

This was disturbing to Timothy. Given his position in New America as a wealthy industrialist, he had heard rumors about new raw materials being available in New America, but every time he tried to find out how to get his hands on some, he hit dead ends. It was almost as if his influence was preventing him from obtaining anything. Now he had absolute proof that these raw materials existed, and that someone could get their hands on them, and they were using them to manufacture electronics.

He needed to follow this up the food chain.

“OK, I’m interested. I’d like to buy a lot of these, but I need to have a conversation with your boss first.”

After a few days of negotiation, and dogged determination to get to the top of the food chain, he finally got a call from Dennis Hickler. He knew that Dennis was a serious power broker in New America, and had recently broken from the President. Somehow, Timothy was not surprised that he was the original source. He went to meet Dennis at his house.

“Please, have a seat. What’s your poison?”

“Scotch.”

“Straight up?”

Timothy nodded.

“Kurt, please get Mr. Christopher a glass of my best single malt. And pour one for me as well.”

A slight teenage boy scurried out of the room.

“I understand you are interested in getting your hands on some Nickel and Platinum.”

“Yes. Without some precious metals, we are limited in the kinds of steel we can produce. I’d like to expand that capacity.”

Hickler nodded. “I see, I see. Well, I believe I can help you out there.”

The teenage boy named Kurt came back into the room with a silver platter containing and two cut glass tumblers. He handed one to Timothy, and the other to Hickler.

Hickler raised the glass. “To a new business relationship.”

Timothy nodded, and took a sip. He immediately knew this scotch. It was his favorite, one he could only have on extremely special occasions. He’d done well for himself on Earth, but even then, a bottle of this scotch was something he treated himself to once a year. The 16-year-old Balvenie Rose 1st release was rare. He had seen a couple of bottles at auction last year, and he couldn’t afford one.

“You have good taste in Scotch.”

Hickler nodded. “I can get you a bottle of this.”

“I’m listening.”

“I have made my acquaintance with some travelers who have precious metals and rare earth elements. My current theory is that they are with a group who secretly brought many tons of these items on the colony ships. It doesn’t matter, really. I have control of the sole source, and I’m happy to sell you whatever you need, at a reasonable cost.”

“Such as?”

“15 units per ounce of Nickel, for instance.”

“I’m missing something here. That’s very high, by Earth standards, of course, but considering how little of this material could possibly be on this planet, that cost is, well, almost free. What’s the catch?”

“I’m working to depose Hopkinson from the presidency. I need support. I know you are friends.”

“You are mistaken. We have never been friends. I advise him. That’s all.”

“Well, then, this particular cost shouldn’t bother you.”

“No, not particularly.”

Hickler stood up, and Timothy drained his glass, slowly, and also stood. They shook hands.

“Let me know what you’d like to order, and I’ll have it fulfilled right away. And I’ll send you a bottle of the 16 Balvenie Rose, on me.” Dennis was smiling in a way that made Timothy’s skin crawl. He nodded, and left the office. He noticed the teenager looking at him, as if to evaluate what he would do.

Casiti, 2 Wend 782

Marianne sat paralyzed while Ja’el was gathering her things from their dwelling. It had been a brutal few days for Marianne, even though she’d known it was coming for months. Spring had arrived on Casiti, and with it, a new season of change. Ja’el had been clear with Marianne when they first arrived on Casiti almost a year ago, that she would be staying with Marianne only through the following winter.

And here it was, the end of the following winter. Marianne hadn’t really let Ja’el know how she felt. She understood Ja’el’s desire to move back into the regular rhythm, especially now that the crisis was long over, and she was back home. Ja’el was moving to a community in the next valley over, the community she grew up in. Marianne would be driving her there tomorrow morning.

“Marianne, do you know where I put my toolbox?”

Marianne got up, and went into the small ante-room next to the greenhouse, and picked up the toolbox to bring to Ja’el.

“Here it is, love. It was near the greenhouse.”

“Thanks.” Ja’el didn’t even look up.

Ja’el and Marianne had shared only words of necessity of late. Marianne couldn’t quite understand why Ja’el had been so quiet - it seemed uncharacteristic of her. Perhaps she was picking up Marianne’s distress, although Marianne was trying her best to hide it. It was getting

late, and Marianne's stomach started to rumble. She'd planned a fairly elaborate final meal for them tonight, and got up to start preparing it.

As she finished preparing dinner, Ja'el said, "Well, I guess I'm packed. What's cooking? It smells heavenly."

"I learned that kwelis goes really well with sweet potatoes, so I made a casserole. And we're finally getting some eggs now, so I made a pepper zucchini soufflé. And there are some great greens in the greenhouse, so we'll have a salad."

"Sounds wonderful; I have been spoiled by your cooking all this time, Marianne."

Marianne looked up, and Ja'el was looking away, as if she was looking for something. Marianne set the table.

"It's ready."

They ate in relative silence. Ja'el complimented her on the food, and made small talk. Marianne didn't say much. She didn't have much to say except to ask Ja'el to stay, which she wouldn't do.

"So, Marianne, what have you thought of your first year on Casiti? Is it what you expected, or hoped for?"

Marianne decided to answer the question directly, and honestly. "Ja'el, it's been neither. I've been glad to have been able to work with a wide variety of Casitians to help them understand Terrans better. I find it promising that Casiti has decided to consider the idea of immigrants from Earth, and I'm looking forward to those conversations continuing. The trade talks between Earth and Casiti have been going well, and that has been quite gratifying. But culturally, I thought I was a lot more like you than I seem to be."

Ja'el looked down at her plate for a while, and then looked directly at Marianne. There were tears in her eyes. "You don't want me to leave, do you?"

"Of course not. But I would never ask that of you, Ja'el."

"I have to go. I'm Casitian."

Chapter 5: In the Horsehair Grass

Casitians have learned that nonviolence is the only route to lasting harmony among humans. It is a supreme effort, but without it, we remain bound to a cycle that will inevitably end in our species' demise.—Ul'tretor (21)

New Columbia, New America, Month 1 Year 11

“Gerard, there is nothing I can do. Your polio is progressing rapidly, and there are no treatments I have that will help.”

“You are telling me I am going to die?”

“I’m sorry to say this, but every other case I’ve seen at this stage has been fatal. You are in God’s hands, now.”

Gerard lay in bed, where he had been for the last week. He had lost control of his lower body, and he was beginning to have trouble breathing. He knew that he didn't have much time left. Sean Joseph, who had become his personal physician, looked down at him with sympathy.

“I’ll be back to see you tomorrow, Gerard.” He looked sadly at Gerard, turned, and left the room. Gerard watched his departing back, both angry and sad at how things were turning out.

Everything was falling apart. Everything he had worked so hard for was crumbling in front of his eyes. New America was doing well, mostly. All of a sudden there seemed to be a lot of wealth and power in New America, but people were turning away from him. He had lost all of his advisors, and he could no longer demand any attention from anyone. It was as if he didn't exist anymore.

Gerard drifted into an uneasy sleep, where he dreamed of his father, sitting in his tattered recliner, with a beer in his hand, television on in front of him. “So, you think you did so great, did you? Turned out bad, just like I knew it would. You never had the smarts or ability, did you? Stupid boy.” Dennis walked in, looked at Gerard, and spat at him, then walked away. Gerard stumbled through buildings searching for something, unable to find it.

He woke up, sweaty and gasping. He realized there was one more thing he could do. He hated Robert Hurler, governor of the ICS. But he hated Dennis more for completely betraying him. He was going to hand power to Robert Hurler.

“Jason,” he gasped.

Jason, his lover and personal attendant, got up from his chair, and came next to the bed.

“Jason, I need to dictate a statement that I want read, and spread widely.”

Jason went to get paper and pen, moved the chair next to the bed, and sat down, ready to dictate.

“My fellow New Americans. We are in dire times. And I, your President, am dying...”

Nytt Grier Nro, Cfro 40, 1157/Eastern Wilderness, New Earth, Month 1, Year 11

“Ngellin, you have first watch.”

He bowed. “Yes Fourth Chief.”

Ngellin moved to the perimeter of the camp. Watch was sort of a silly thing, he thought, because there were absolutely no people out here. And no dangerous animals, either. They could all be sleeping soundly in their tents if it weren't for silly Kinder military rules.

The one good thing about doing first watch is that it gave him a chance to see the sunset. He'd seen it for the first time yesterday, their first day on this planet. It was spectacular, much more spectacular than any sunset on Hilcyon Ngellin had ever seen. It made him wish for his paints.

Well, no hope for that. His paints were light years away, in a place he wasn't even sure he wanted to return to. He hated his home planet, actually. Having a tiny glimpse of life on this planet during the study for the invasion made him plan to desert - to leave the instant he was able to.

He watched the sunset in peace, sitting on a small boulder, getting absorbed in the pinks, blues, and purples of the sky.

“Ngellin.” He jumped, and turned around.

“Lren! Don't scare me like that.”

“You are supposed to be on watch.”

“Watch from what? There's nobody here.”

Lren sat on the ground next to him. “I know. It's silly isn't it? This sunset is amazing.”

“It is.” They sat in companionable silence for a while.

“You are leaving, aren’t you, Ngellin?”

“Yes. I am. Will you...?”

“No, your secret is safe with me. Besides, I might join you.”

New Columbia, New America, Month 1, Year 11

Kurt walked into the room, with the paper in his hand. Kurt had been living with Dennis for two years, and it was a better life than he could have expected to live otherwise. But it had gotten old.

He had already begun to regret his long-ago decision to stay in New America. It had seemed so full of promise, so ready to fulfill his dreams of wealth and power. He had come to see that realizing those dreams, as Dennis had, didn't necessarily lead to happiness.

Once he left Susanna, Terrance and Leticia, he had headed directly to the capital, where he thought that he would have the best chance of understanding how the government worked, and how to find the right people. He found Dennis by accident. Well, no—Dennis found him. Dennis thought he would make a good aide. Kurt had, at first, looked up to Dennis, and would do just about anything for him. Eventually, that included sharing Dennis's bed, which Kurt had liked. Kurt was now Dennis's lover and right hand man.

But over time, Kurt had begun to realize how self-centered Dennis was. Anything he did, he did for himself, and for his own benefit. Dennis was fabulously wealthy, and very powerful, but he had become that way because of these men he called John and Mark. Kurt was deeply suspicious of John and Mark. They looked alarmingly like Casitians and had odd accents and strange behavior. They didn't seem to act or speak like Casitians, though, which was puzzling to Kurt.

“What's that in your hand?” Dennis's grating voice yanked Kurt out of his reverie.

“You'll love this. It's a proclamation from Gerard.” He handed the paper to Dennis, who looked it over. As he read it, Dennis smiled, and then started to laugh.

“This is too funny. Gerard thinks that he is taking something from me. Little does he know that Robert Hurler is in my back pocket. I'll be President quite soon.”

At that moment, John and Mark walked into the room. They seemed to just show up, if by magic. He'd asked Dennis about that, but Dennis didn't seem to care, and, in fact, told Kurt never to tell anyone about John and Mark.

John said, "Dennis, it seems that power in New America will be yours."

"Yes, it seems that way. I'll be in contact with Robert Hurler, and let him know that I will be taking the Presidency. I don't imagine anyone will mind." Dennis smiled.

Mark looked at John, then spoke. "Dennis."

Dennis looked shocked. "Uh, yes?"

Kurt realized that he had never heard Mark speak before.

"Dennis, it is time for us to explain what we want from you."

Mark's accent was strange, like John's.

Dennis answered, "What is that?" What John and Mark could ask for scared Kurt.

"You need to identify all people, both boys and girls, from the ages of 30 to 38 New Earth Years, who are strong and healthy."

"Why do you...?"

"You need not ask. And you need not know. Just give us names, and where they are settled. They will not be harmed, we promise. We will supply New America with all of the metals it needs, and we will continue giving you advanced technology. New America will soon dominate New Earth."

Dennis looked thoughtful, then smiled. "That's all?"

John nodded. "For now."

"That's easy."

John and Mark left the room.

Kurt said, "I'll be right back."

He walked quickly out of the room, and then ran to a room upstairs with a back window. Out of the window, he could see the figures of John and Mark walking away from the house, across the yard toward a line of trees in the back. They stopped, seemed to climb into an invisible door, and disappear. A gust of wind kicked up where they had been. Kurt then thought he knew exactly who they were.

Independent Christian State, New America, Month 2, Year 11

Beatrice was asleep in her bed, and was having a dream about Leticia, when a sound woke her up. She sat up, looking around at the dark. She saw a figure in the door, and before she could speak, some sort of netting wrapped itself around her, binding her tight. She couldn't see or hear, make a sound, or move at all.

She was picked up roughly, and felt herself being carried, but she could see nothing. After a while of bumping and movement, she felt herself being dropped on a padded surface. There was a long time of quiet, which gave her some time to think about what was happening. She remembered her mother crying hysterically after reading a letter in the mail. She'd asked her about it, but her mother wouldn't tell her.

She didn't know whether this was related, but it made sense. Ever since Leticia left, her mother had treated Beatrice like a precious piece of china. She was controlling, and wanted to know everything Beatrice did. She hardly ever let Beatrice spend time with her friends, except, luckily, Craig. It made sense to her that somehow her mother knew that something was going to happen, and that made her mother upset.

But at this point Beatrice had no idea what was happening. There were a few movements now and again, but mostly quiet. She fell asleep, but then was awoken when she was again roughly picked up and carried. She was again dropped, this time onto a surface that was not very padded. She was sure she would be bruised.

All of a sudden the netting loosened, and fell off. She opened her eyes, but there wasn't a lot of light. She was in a huge room with very high ceilings, no windows or doors, and there were hundreds of kids—all about her age, mostly in their pajamas. All around her were a group like her who had just arrived, and were taking off their netting. Others were sitting in varied places all over the room, talking, walking around, or sleeping.

She got up, and went to someone who was beyond her group. “Where are we?”

He looked up at her, and shrugged his shoulders. “I've been here for longer than you, and all I know is that we're in this room, and more people keep being dropped here. That's all I can say. If you're hungry, there is something over there in the far corner that might possibly be called food, but it tastes like, well, cow turds. And the bathrooms are over on the other side.”

Beatrice wasn't hungry, but she did need a bathroom. On her way over, she looked all around. The only thing she could think of was that it reminded her of the large cargo hold of one of the colony ships, but that didn't make any sense to her.

As she came out of the bathroom, she saw Craig, and ran over to him.

“Craig!” They hugged and kissed. “I'm so glad you are here!”

“Beatrice—you are the first person I've seen that I recognize. I wish I knew where we were.”

They walked over toward the large tables with small brown, squares on it. Craig said, “These fill your stomach, but they taste bland and chalky.”

“Where are we, do you think?”

Craig shook his head. “I have no idea, Beatrice. I wish I did.”

New Columbia, New America, New Earth, Month 2, Year 11

Timothy was desperate. He had bidden his son Joseph good night last night, and had woken up in the morning without a son. All of his son's belongings were in his room, but he was nowhere to be found. Neither his wife nor either of his younger daughters had seen or heard anything. Timothy knew his son wouldn't just disappear like that.

He'd talked to a number of people on his street who had also had their teen-aged children disappear last night. It was such a strange thing. They had all gotten that silly letter from the “Office of Volunteer Corps” about a volunteer opportunity for children from the ages of 30 to 38, but everyone had ignored it. Joseph wasn't interested in going to the hinterlands.

He was on his way to talk with Dennis Hickler. He figured if anyone knew anything, Dennis Hickler would. As he was walking toward Hickler's house, he saw that teenager, Kurt, whom he'd met there. He had a small pack on his back, and looked to be in a hurry. He ran over toward him. Kurt was looking down, and hadn't seen Timothy yet.

“Hey, Kurt.” He looked up, and backed up a little, looking scared.

“I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Look, I'm in a hurry, OK?”

“Where are you going?”

“Dubuque. Getting out of here.

“Look, I need to understand something. My son disappeared last night.”

“Yeah, yours and a lot of people’s.”

“You know about this?”

“Where do you think we got all those metals from? The Casitians took your kid. Don’t expect to see him again.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about? The Casitians?”

“Two guys, named ‘John’ and ‘Mark,’ have been providing all of the materials and technology to Dennis so he could get rich and influential. In return for all that, Dennis gave them the names of all of the teenagers in New America and the ICS. They aren’t from here. I saw them leave in a cloaked shuttle. And now they are gone.”

Timothy was speechless.

“Look, I gotta get out of here. I’m sorry about your son.”

Kurt walked past Timothy, and started running toward the train station. Timothy watched him go, and realized that nothing added up. He didn’t much like Casitian culture, but he’d come to know them well when he worked with them to modify his plants on Earth. They would never do such a thing. He knew that for certain.

Jerome, New America Month 2, Year 11

“Thanks, but, really, no thanks. We don’t need it. Our rates of new polio and other diseases have gone down dramatically.”

Thomas said, “Don’t tell me, you’ve got the vaccines.”

Thomas was sitting across the imposing desk of a doctor who was the head of a very small clinical practice in Jerome. Jerome was a large settlement in the south of New America. They had 3 doctors and a few nurses, for a population of over 30,000. The doctor was an older man, with graying hair and thin lips that were pulled taught.

“Yes, we finally got our vaccine production facility going in New Columbia.”

“Can you please get me in contact with...”

“No, no, I’m sorry, these are New America exclusive vaccines. I am not authorized to give them to anyone who is not a New America citizen. Look, I have a lot of patients to see.”

It was clearly a dismissal. Thomas got up and left the office. As he was walking out of the clinic, a nurse was furtively looking at him from her desk in the waiting room.

He walked up to her, and she whispered, “There is something I need to tell you.”

He whispered back, “Meet me at the Jerome Hotel lobby at second hour tomorrow.”

She nodded, and turned back to her work.

All of his meetings in New America had been the same. New America's epidemics were under control, and vaccines were being manufactured in the northern part of New America.

But Thomas found it hard to believe that someone in New America, or anywhere on New Earth, could manufacture vaccines in such a short time period. He had known for years now that advanced manufacturing was going to be extremely difficult because of the lack of precious metals. He had no way of knowing how it had been done.

The next day, Thomas and Jeffrey sat waiting for the nurse in the lobby of their hotel. They started to talk about what they’d found.

“It’s mighty strange, Jeffrey. This whole thing doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I agree. You want to know something else kind of strange?”

“What?”

“Have you seen very many teenagers?”

Thomas thought for a minute. “Hmm, now that you say it, I haven't seen any.”

“Right. When we were at the first settlement, it seemed odd. I had even passed a school that was in session, and I saw plenty of pre-teens, but no teenagers. None.”

At that moment, the nurse walked into the lobby, looked quickly to her left and her right, and walked up to Thomas and Jeffrey.

“Can we talk in your room, please?”

Jeffrey got up, and motioned to the stairs. They walked up the stairs to the room they were staying in, opened the door, then closed it behind them.

“So what is it you have to tell us?”

“All of our teenagers have disappeared.”

Thomas looked at Jeffrey, who said, “What do you mean, disappeared? Died? Ran away?”

“No, no, simply disappeared. Not all at once, but over the course of about a month. We were warned...”

“Warned?”

She nodded. I have a son, he's 34. There was a letter in my mailbox which told me that vaccines were available in New America, and a that new prosperity would be starting. But all teenagers between 30 and 38 would be asked to join a new volunteer corps. I didn't like the idea, but I assumed the word 'volunteer' meant that my son would have a choice. Anyway, he wasn't interested, but it didn't seem to matter.”

“Did someone take him away?”

“I don't know. One morning, I woke up, and he was simply gone. None of his stuff, just him. Gone. I talked with other parents, who had similar experiences. Their children just disappeared without a trace.”

Hol'venif, Casiti, 2 Hevl, 782

Marianne had put all of her energy into her garden this year. These days, there seemed to be less call for her expertise and advice about Terrans and Casitians, so she plunged herself, rather uncharacteristically, into growing food. It was absorbing and engaging, and took her mind off of Ja'el, and her future.

When she had moments to think, she was sure that she was leaving Casiti permanently before next winter. She had spent some time with a woman named Yulse'lor, who she liked a lot—they had much in common, surprisingly, and they had talked a little about becoming companions. But Marianne couldn't see herself staying another winter.

Oddly, every time she tried to picture what her life might be like on Earth, whether she'd go back to the Bay Area, or somewhere else, the picture wouldn't come. Instead images of her sister and nieces, and what she imagined New Earth was becoming, would be there in her mind. She shook it off every time as anxiety about what was happening there. She knew she could never see them again.

She bent over her raised beds, and kept fertilizing the beets and potatoes.

Independent Christian State, Month 2, Year 11

Yolanda sat in her living room, staring at the wall. She'd been that way for days, after Beatrice's disappearance. She held the letter in her hand, which she'd read over and over again. Beatrice had been taken by the Mission Society to do God's work in other places on New Earth that needed to hear the word of the Lord. She wished she'd had some warning, or some time to tell Beatrice how much she loved her. First Leticia left, and now Beatrice was gone.

Some small part of Yolanda knew that something was wrong, but she didn't let herself feel that. Some small part of her knew that Leticia was actually the safe one, and had escaped before this all had happened. Yolanda hoped that someday she would be able to see both of her daughters again.

San Antonio, Month 2, Year 11

Leticia sometimes could hardly believe her luck. She was sitting in a classroom again, but this time, it was one she liked a lot.

“This new combination of horsetail grass roots, grapeberries, and cone nut oil seems to be working some against new polio infections. So far, 65% of those with defined new polio have completely recovered on this combination. We don't know whether we can reach 100% recovery rate, but many are trying different kinds of combinations. And horsetail grass roots alone seem to be fighting influenza infections, but not as well as we'd like.”

Their teacher was in front of the room, and had been showing slides of the newest studies on the treatment of the new polio epidemic. One of the students raised their hand. The teacher pointed to him. “I've heard a rumor that new polio and the other epidemics have been controlled in New America, and they have vaccines.”

“Yes, we've heard that, but we have been unable to get any supplies of these vaccines. But our vaccine studies are coming slowly. We have begun to have access to some components

we need to make our own vaccines, and we hope to ramp up vaccine production in the next few years.”

Leticia stole a look at Mira, sitting a few seats away, the beautiful woman she'd met a few days ago at orientation. She was just so different from everyone else here. She was confident and outspoken. She was from a community called Dlejon. Mira claimed that wasn't a Casitian word, but Leticia knew better. She wondered what that community was like. Perhaps sometime she would get to find out.

“OK, class is over. You have a lot of homework, people—I want to see everyone's epidemiological analysis of Influenza Virus tomorrow!”

A collective groan went up in the class. Leticia loved medical school, but it was a lot of work. She was already behind in anatomy and physiology, and the class on acupuncture was going to kill her. They needed doctors desperately, yet the founders of the school were determined to teach the students not only western medicine, but epidemiology, Chinese medicine, other health traditions, and, of course, the new science of the use of local plants. She felt proud that she knew Jeffrey and Thomas, who had contributed key knowledge to that science. They were doing the whole education in four New Earth years, half of the time of normal medical school back on Earth. Leticia wondered if she would make it through. But everyone felt that way, so she definitely had company.

This school had started the second year of settlement—but it had taken a few years to really get going. This class, the ninth and largest, had almost one hundred students, mostly from the North and South Central Independent Zones. She was one of the first students of the school to come from New America.

As they all got up to go to the next class, Leticia walked up to Mira.

“Hi Mira, how are you today?”

Mira looked at Leticia and smiled broadly. “I'm doing OK, but this homework is going to kill me. I can't keep up!”

“Maybe we could work together on the epidemiology report—the prof said it would be OK to work in teams.”

Mira looked a bit surprised, as if she hadn't imagined Leticia would ask. “I'd love that, Leticia, that's a great idea. How about we meet in the upper lounge after dinner?”

“See you there.” It made Leticia's heart dance to think of getting to spend more time with Mira.

Chapter 6: Burger and Fries, Please

We are small in number, and our planet poor. We must be strong, and make our mentors proud.—Jlir Nern Kluft (1st age)

Dubuque, North Central Independent Zone, Month 3, Year 11

Kurt walked into the restaurant, looking for dinner. He'd had a hard day at work in his new job working for the local widenet provider. He was glad to have gotten that job, and he had a lot to learn.

His first month in Dubuque had been an education. No one wanted to hear what he had to say about his suspicions about the Casitians being here. No one believed him, and he thought that even if they did, this lot wouldn't care.

When it had been time to emigrate to New Earth, Kurt had been happy to come with his family. He thought that the ICS would be good for him. He lost that illusion quickly, which is why he left the ICS. But in New America, at least, people had hated the Casitians. He hated the Casitians. Kurt could only imagine Dennis conspiring with them because he was blinded by his own ambition, and didn't really know who they were.

After unsuccessfully trying to get people to listen, Kurt decided he might as well get a job. He had been somewhat of a geeky kid back on Earth before his parents migrated to New Earth, and he was happy to be working on the widenet. The widenet had spread all across and down the North Central Independent Zone, as far east as the settlement of Bonjour, which was on the river bordering the unsettled lands to the east, and down as New Orleans, the southernmost settlement in the NIZ. Charlie had Kurt working hard—installing and configuring computers in the cafe, in government offices, and beginning to install widenet antennas in individual houses.

The ironic thing about his job was that Charlie had been able to order some electronic parts from New America that Kurt knew were manufactured using the raw materials provided by the Casitians. But Kurt mostly ignored that irony.

“Kurt?” He heard a familiar voice, and looked up to see Susanna looking at him. He smiled, tentatively. He had assumed Susanna hadn't stayed in Dubuque.

“Hi Susanna! How are you? It's good to see you.”

Susanna looked doubtful.

Kurt said, “Really, it is. I was a complete jerk back then. I should never have been the way I was. I’m sorry.”

Susanna smiled. “I have to admit I’d pretty much forgotten about you. What brings you here?”

“Dinner?” Kurt grinned. “It looks like you’re working...”

“I’m the manager—I can take a bit of time off. Here, let me find us a table toward the back.”

They walked toward the back, and Susanna whispered to a waitress, and pointed to one of the small tables. They went to sit down at that table, and the waitress brought a menu, and put it in front of Kurt.

“Have whatever you want—it’s on me.” She looked up toward the waitress. “Illia, I’ll just have a coffee, and a slice of Joe’s grapeberry pie.”

Kurt looked at the menu quickly. “A burger and tato root fries, and just some water, please.”

The waitress took the menu, and walked toward the kitchen.

“So you manage this place?”

“Yes. We arrived here and I decided that I’d had enough travel for a while. So I stayed, and found the first job I could, which was waitressing here. I moved up to manager after a few months. It’s a job, it pays well, but I’m getting ready to move on. I’m tired of standing still.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“Leticia got attached to a river guide, and went off down the river. I got an email from her just a few days ago. She’s in medical school in the SIZ now. Terrance is still here—he worked at a bookstore for a while, but now he’s working in the local government—I’ve forgotten what he’s doing, I haven’t seen him in a year or so. So what have you been up to?”

“Well, I ended up in New Columbia, and got involved with this guy, Dennis, who was a real wheeler dealer—he used to be lovers with President Hopkinson, believe it or not. He wanted power for himself, really. Selfish prick. I lived with him for a while, but ... then I left.”

Susanna looked at Kurt with a puzzled face. “Wait—is that Dennis Hickler—the new President?”

“Yes, that one.”

“And you were involved? Like you were lovers?”

Kurt spoke manner-of-factly. “Yeah, Susanna. I'm gay. I was doing my best to ignore that while I was in the ICS, and that's why I was such a jerk toward Terrance, and all of you. I really thought that I could suppress it, or ignore it. And I thought New America could fulfill my silly dreams of wealth and happiness or something. I was so wrong, on so many counts. I hope you can forgive me.”

Susanna laughed. “Yes, Kurt, I can forgive you. I knew you had a sweet side, but you just hid it so well, back then. So what are you doing now?”

“Well, for now, I'm working with Charlie, the widenet provider. But I actually have something I need to tell you.”

Susanna looked puzzled. “Need to tell me? I don't understand, you weren't looking for me...”

“I know—I need to explain why I left Dennis.” He described exactly what had happened over the course of the months he lived with Dennis, and his suspicions about John and Mark, and the things that John and Mark had given Dennis that could not have originated on New Earth, and the vaccine production and electronics production in New Earth.

Susanna listened, then shook her head. “It doesn't make sense, Kurt. Think about it. I know you hate the Casitians, although now that you say you're gay, I can't...”

“Leave that out of this, please?”

“OK, OK. Anyway, Kurt, the Casitians cannot lie. They don't do duplicity. Even you, who hate them, should know that. They would never do what you are saying. And why teenagers? It just doesn't add up. I believe you, really I do. But those people aren't Casitians!”

“Well, if they aren't Casitians, who can they possibly be?”

New Columbia, New Earth, Month 3, Year 11

Dennis looked at John and Mark. “So, you should be happy. I'm in power over all of New America, and you have your teenagers.”

John said, “Yes, Dennis we are happy. We are interested in helping you move your power beyond New America, into the Southern Independent Zone.”

Dennis had been thinking a lot about that. He was almost getting bored by how well things were going in New America. There had been a few complaints from the parents of the teenagers, but mostly everyone had been happy to be done with the epidemics. Everyone had a job; there was plenty of building and new industry. New America was thriving, thanks to Dennis.

“What did you have in mind?”

“You should start offering vaccines and precious metals, and some of the other goodies we have given you to the border towns first. Then let the news spread, and offer settlements protection and citizenship in New America. You'll soon have settlements begging to join.”

“That sounds like a wonderful plan.”

Southern New Aard, Month 3, Year 11

“You need a vacation.” Olam looked sternly at Abdul. They were sitting in the prefab that had served as the central administration building of the new settlement for almost a year. The settlement across the river had completed all of their building projects, so they were able to obtain it. It was one of the last prefabs standing. The new administration building was almost complete.

“It's fine, I'm fine, really.”

“You need a vacation! Get out of here. Go take your old tent, and go to the lake, like you have been threatening for the last month! You have been working nonstop since we left, and that was more than two years ago. The settlement is fine, we're all fine. We're building up a storm, we're trading with the Baha'i across the river, and we have even managed, thanks to you, a friendly relationship with the settlement up north of us across the mountains. They are tolerating our existence, we are living well, and everyone is happy. I even got a honeymoon. You can get a vacation!”

Abdul nodded. “OK, OK, I'll go. You are right, everything is working well, and you'll be fine in my absence. I'll be leaving tomorrow morning.”

Olam smiled. “That's good to hear. You'll enjoy it, I'm sure.” Olam waved, and left the prefab.

Abdul had been training Olam to replace him ever since the beginning. His goal had long been to get the settlement up and running, then retire to become Imam of the new mosque they had created. He already was the part-time Imam and spiritual head of this community. It was time for him to let Olam govern, and for him to turn to do Allah's work.

They had accomplished much. Their settlement had grown from the 70 or so people at the beginning, to 300 people now, with people coming out of the northern parts of New Aard. All manner of people, from Sunni Saudi Arabians, to people from the old territories of Palestine, to Shia Iranians, had come down to the southern part of New Aard to start a new life in a progressive Islamic community. Women especially were coming in large numbers, sometimes convincing their husbands to come, sometimes leaving them. And many young people, as well.

The last meeting he had with the leader of the community north of them, across the small mountain range, had been especially cordial. This leader had apparently communicated directly with the capital about the progressive community, and the capital had given him clear orders to be friendly. At first, it puzzled Abdul. But then he realized that they were, in a sense, a pressure valve. It was a way for the mullahs up north to keep their power intact. He started to clean off his desk in preparation for his vacation.

Mississippi River, Month 1, Year 12

Kurt and Suzanne were sitting on the edge of the quickly moving river barge, traveling down the wide Mississippi river. They had left this morning, and would be in San Antonio in five days. They would get off this barge at New San Francisco, and take one of the new trains to San Antonio.

Kurt was happy that he had gotten to spend time with Suzanne again. Suzanne had gotten tired of his apologizing so much, and they had dropped into a quiet, amiable relationship.

"I can't quite believe I let both you and Leticia talk me into traveling down to San Antonio with you."

"C'mon, Suzanne! It will be fun. Never know who you will meet there."

"Well, yes. It's already fun. I haven't been traveling in a while, and Leticia wanted me to travel with her. It will be good to see her again. And besides, there is now lots of time for you to

tell me what happened between the time you left, and when you got back to Dubuque. Nothing happened for me except I got promoted and got some raises—I've been living and working in the same place since we got here. Is that boring?"

"No, Suzanne, I can understand that."

"Well, you did all that stuff in New Columbia, and Leticia saw the world *and* she's in medical school."

"Suzanne, have you thought that maybe you're stable and sane, rather than unstable and crazy?" She grinned.

"Anyway, the story, man!"

Kurt told her of his travels into New America, getting his first job at this small electronics plant, and having a visiting Dennis Hickler hire him on the spot as his assistant. He talked about sharing Dennis's bed, and how much of a problematic character Dennis turned out to be. He was glad to have decided to settle in Dubuque. He'd had enough of New America, even though he wished things could be different.

"I want to talk with Terrance, ask his forgiveness."

"Good luck. That one harbors a grudge against you, my friend."

Kurt sighed, and felt bad. He had been so unkind, and he didn't know a way to undo what he'd done.

San Antonio, South Central Independent Zone, Month 1, Year 12

"Thank you for that report, gentlemen. It was quite informative, and sobering. It fits with the information we have received from other sources. It does appear that the presence of precious metals and the missing teenagers are linked."

The mayor of San Antonio was a stocky woman, with dark brown hair, streaked with gray. Her office seemed very down home, with a large quilt on the wall, and stuffed animals on the couches.

"You've gotten that information from other sources?"

“Yes, a man named Timothy Christopher, who used to live in New America, met with me about a week ago. He gave me a lot of information on the whole thing. He lost his son, apparently.”

“Can you give us information on how to reach him?”

“Certainly.” She fished around her desk for a book, and wrote down an address on a piece of paper.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you very much.”

Jeffrey left the mayor's office, feeling like there were too many puzzle pieces that didn't fit. Perhaps somehow they could find an understanding of it. He walked back toward the medical school, to where he was supposed to meet Leticia.

When she saw him, Leticia ran to Thomas, and gave him a big hug. “Thomas! It is so great to see you!”

Thomas smiled as they broke the embrace. “How's medical school?”

Leticia smiled, “It's really, really hard, and really great.”

“Well, I'm happy for you. Have you made some friends?”

Leticia blushed, then tried to hide the blush. Thomas caught it. “Aha! You've made more than a friend, haven't you?”

“Yes, Thomas, I have. Her name is Mira. She's from Dlejon. She's amazing. She is smart...”

“It's OK, you don't need to wax on. I'm sure she is. When do I get to meet her?”

“Well, tomorrow night, Kurt, Terrance, Susanne, and I are having a bit of a reunion party, and you are invited. They also apparently have some interesting news, but they wouldn't tell me what it was yet. We're going to a restaurant on Alamo Avenue, called 'Taco Maybe.' Meet us there at 28th hour?”

“That sounds great. I've got several meetings to go to, Leticia. There is a lot going on. I'll see you then.”

San Antonio, SCIZ, Month 1, Year 12

Kurt, Susanna, Leticia, Mira, Thomas, and Jeffrey were seated around a table at 'Taco Maybe'—a busy restaurant in San Antonio. They had chosen a table in the back, to get some privacy, but the restaurant was so loud, people wouldn't be able to overhear them anyway.

Leticia had heard Kurt's story, and had put it together with Thomas and Jeffrey's story. It was strange, for sure.

Leticia said, “OK, let me review the facts. Kurt says that there are two people who look a lot like Casitians that are providing precious metals and other resources to New America. Thomas and Jeffrey have learned that the vaccine production in New America could not have been done with materials available on New Earth. They also confirm Kurt’s story from that guy Timothy, whom Kurt also met, who has very detailed information on the materials and metals that have shown up in New America. But Casitians working with New Americans just doesn't add up. Timothy was adamant that this wasn’t done by Casitians. And Kurt, you said they didn't actually have the same accent.”

Kurt argued, “No, they didn't. But I really still think they are Casitians. Dennis was power-hungry, he would sell his soul to the Casitians to gain power in New America.”

Leticia wasn’t convinced. “But what about the missing teenagers? It makes no sense whatsoever.”

Thomas said, “I agree, it doesn't make any sense at all. But the problem is, Hickler's power is spreading. I've already heard of settlements on the northern edge of the SCIZ joining New America.”

Susanna said, “Well, we have to do something! We can't let this keep going. What can we do? Warn people?”

“We can ask the Casitians what's going on.”

Everyone turned to look at Mira, who had been completely quiet up till this point.

Kurt said, “What? We can't contact them!”

“Yes, we can. It's a long story, and my father would kill me if he knew I was telling you...”

Thomas said, “Your father?”

“He's the leader of Dlejon. The Casitians wanted to give us a communications device, so that if, sometime in the far future, New Earth humans wanted to reconnect with the galactic community, they could. We accepted.”

Kurt said, “Yeah, OK, but why should the Casitians tell you anything?”

Mira said, “They don't lie, Kurt. They would tell us if they were involved, or who might be.”

Kurt shook his head, doubtfully. “I don't really believe you, but I guess that's better than nothing. I guess if it isn't them, maybe they can help. But I still think it's them.”

Thomas said, “So, it's time for a trip to Dlejon, eh? I'm sorry that we will have to pull Leticia and Mira from medical school, but this seems important.”

“It's OK, Thomas, we can always come back.”

Suzanna said, “Y'all have fun. I'm going back to Dubuque.”

Kurt said, “What about that cute guy Geoffrey you met?”

“Turns out he's on his way to Dubuque, too. I'm hitching a ride with his friends on their barge.” She smiled.

Southern New Aard, Month 1, Year 12

Olam just looked at Ahmed, stunned. “You saw what?”

“Troops.”

“Troops? How many?”

“How should I know? I'm not a soldier. A lot. More than I could count, that's for sure.”

“On the eastern slope? Not the northern slope?”

“I was on patrol on the eastern range, Olam, you know that. These troops are not from New Aard, but are from the eastern territories.”

“I don't know who had settled out there—maybe Abdul does.”

Ahmed was dusty, and still clearly out of breath from his fast trek down the hills to town. Olam looked at him, unsure of what to do.

“We need to speak with Abdul. Come with me.”

They left the administration building, and went straight to the mosque, looking for Abdul. They found him in one of the small classrooms, teaching a group of young men and women the Koran.

Abdul looked up, to see Olam and Ahmed. “Hello, Olam, it has been a while since you've visited the mosque for prayer.”

Olam looked around the room, seeing the students, and didn't want to alarm them.

“I'm sorry Abdul, I wish I had time to discuss my spiritual state with you. However, we have much more pressing problems. We need your help.”

Abdul turned back to the students. “That's all for today—remember the assignment for tomorrow—that packet of poems by Hafiz I gave you to read. You'll like them, I promise.” He smiled.

After the students had trickled out of the room, Abdul motioned Olam and Ahmed to sit. “So, my friends, what is so urgent?”

They remained standing. Olam turned to Ahmed, who said, “Abdul, I was on patrol this morning, on the eastern range, as I usually am on the third of the month. I saw what I thought might be a dust storm on the horizon, but I got out my binoculars, and I saw a large mass of troops on their way to the hills. I don't know how large, but I couldn't count. I didn't wait long, I just ran here.”

“The eastern slope?”

Ahmed nodded.

Abdul said, “As I recall, there aren't any settlements to the east at all. That seems very strange. You must evacuate the settlement, now! I will stay behind.”

“Yes, we will evacuate, but Abdul, you can't stay behind!”

“I will be fine. I can handle it. I will meet you across the river when all is done.”

Olam wondered whether or not this was meant as a metaphorical statement. “Abdul ... OK, you'll be stubborn, anyway. We'll start the evacuation.”

Olam and Ahmed left the mosque, to put in motion evacuation plans that they had thought they would never need. Olam estimated that they had less than five hours to get everyone across the river. They had to act fast.

Abdul watched them leave, and made his own, internal preparations. He didn't know what he was going to face, but he feared the worst.

He walked out of the mosque after many hours, and could see the dust settling from the road leading to the river. He expected that his people were safe on the other side now. Just as he turned to go back into the mosque, he could see the troops arriving at the far end of town. He walked slowly back into the mosque, and sat down in his customary place, with his eyes closed.

He heard voices, and the scuffling of many shoes, and looked up to see a large group of men enter with weapons drawn. He then heard a shout in a language he could not understand, and the men surrounded him. One struck him so forcefully that he was forced from his sitting position and sent sprawling onto the floor. He could only see the floor tiles that were in front of his eyes.

“Where are they all? Tell me!”

“I don’t know where they are. They left me here alone.”

Another one struck him in the head, and he started to get dizzy.

“Tell me the truth, this time!” Abdul had imagined this scene just a little bit differently, but he knew that it was possible that it would turn out this way. Even in his pain, he could register that the accent of his captor was strange. He realized that it didn’t matter if they knew where his people were.

“They are across the river, in the Independent Zone.”

He felt another kick to his stomach, then his body erupted in pain when a kick was aimed at his groin. He heard lowered voices in that language he did not understand. Then, a sentence that he could easily translate, “Kill him.”

Abdul heard shuffling, and a small metallic snap, which was the last thing he was aware of.

Chapter 7: The Accursed

We must be the model for all humans in the Galaxy. All of them. — Erit'ala (775)

Hol'venif, Casiti, 50 Gont, 782

A chime woke Marianne. She didn't think it was morning quite yet, and as she opened her eyes, she realized that it was still dark out. Fall Harvest was at its peak, and she'd worked hard yesterday bringing in and preserving some of the harvest from her garden.

She got up from her bed and sat at her desk. “Thanks, display alert.”

A dulcet voice spoke in Casitian, “Activities on Rec'jeter'she have reached the threshold level for attention.”

Marianne sighed. She had been afraid of this moment. They had promised that they would never contact people on New Earth. But the Casitians didn't want to leave the New Earth people completely on their own, so they had planted many listening devices all over the settled areas, which beamed data constantly to an unmanned satellite that was orbiting Rec'jeter'she. AIs monitored activities, and when a certain level was reached, basically showing a crisis, they would let her know. She had been given the authority to decide what to do—she wished it was authority she didn't have.

“Thanks, display basic data from the last ten timecycles.”

She looked over the data in some dismay. Population counts were... simply weird. The population was growing in New America, at about the rate that would be expected, except that over one New Earth month, the population of New America shrank by a large number, and only on one age range. The populations of the other areas were not growing anywhere nearly as fast. Could there be epidemics? There was definite evidence of troop movement, especially in the far southeast. Troops? The closer she looked at the data, the stranger it was. Satellite images of buildings in New America showed radically fast growth—faster than any other area of New Earth.

It was certainly strange, but she couldn't quite figure out why the AIs had sounded an alert.

“Thanks, please explain alert.”

“The analysis of random samples suggests the presence of some elements on New Earth does not match their availability.”

“You are saying some elements have appeared but shouldn’t be there?”

“That is correct. These specific metals and rare earth elements appeared about four New Earth years ago.”

“Please explain.”

“Given these elements being present so suddenly, troop movement that cannot be explained by movements of the current population, and the unusual development trends in New America, there is a very high probability of foreign influence on Rec’jeter’she.”

Marianne was stunned. “Who could it possibly be? All galactic species know that Rec’jeter’she is off limits.”

“There is no data to know definitively. More investigation must commence.”

Marianne sighed. She’d have to go.

“Thanks, please send a message to the AIs at Illsenor station to begin activation for human habitation.” They had left an unmanned station in the New Earth system. The star was called Illsenor by the Casitians. They had imaged at some point in the far future that perhaps the people of New Earth would want to rejoin the galactic community.

“Thanks, what is the soonest I can arrive at Illsenor station?”

“Approximately eight days. Should I order a shuttle?”

“Thanks, yes. And send the following message to Erit’ala, Silandra and Ja’el, and David, Laura and Joel, wherever they are. Include the data packet. ‘Things on New Earth seem to suggest foreign intervention. We need to investigate. I suggest a meeting at Illsenor station, to discuss options.’ And send a message to Diana on Earth: ‘I’m on my way to New Earth. Things are weird there. I don’t know what exactly I will find, but I will keep you informed. We’ll be keeping this secret for a while, but as bad as it is getting I’m imagining people on Earth will want to know, sooner or later.’”

She sent a message to her friend Torf’ki, asking if he would gift all of the food she’d harvested and preserved. She wouldn’t need it. As she started to pack her things, she knew that she would be not be coming back to Casiti after this. Being on Casiti had been surprisingly difficult for Marianne. She had assumed that she would fit in, but it hadn’t quite worked out that way. Casiti had a culture was different from what she’d expected. Ja’el and Marianne had an

amicable parting, but Marianne could never really understand why they had to part, and Ja'el could not really understand why Marianne had trouble with that particular aspect of the way things were done on Casiti.

Another chime sounded, and Marianne looked up to see Ja'el's face. She smiled.

“Blessings, Ja'el. Thanks for calling so soon.”

“The data you sent was sobering. I will definitely come with you. I suggest we take Yulse'lor. She's been studying the Rec'jeter'she immigrants. She has some interesting insights that might be helpful. I also suggest that we bring Gila'ndor, who is very knowledgeable about all of the galactic species.”

Marianne nodded, “I've been in contact with Yulse... 'lor, and I agree, she has some interesting insights. It would be great to have her along. I'll contact Gila'ndor.” Marianne omitted what Ja'el probably already knew, that Marianne and Yulse had discussed the possibility of becoming companions for the upcoming winter.

“You've arranged a shuttle to Illsenor station?”

Marianne nodded.

“We'll meet at the space center in the morning.”

Kinder Transport Ship, Month 2, Year 12

It was impossible to tell time in the huge room. Beatrice had decided that her sleep cycles were as good a way as any. After about ten cycles, no more teenagers arrived in their room. They counted themselves, and there were 1728 of them.

Many of them were strangers to one another. They had started to gather in small groups, mostly by settlement area. There were about 80 of them from the ICS, and Beatrice knew a few of them in addition to Craig. One of the strangest things they had learned was that those who were not in the ICS had been told they were joining some sort of teen volunteer corps. Most of those from the ICS could only remember tearful parents without reason. Some said their parents were told they were required to become part of the Mission Society.

The tables with the food would periodically drop into the floor, and come back filled with new food cubes. At a point where Beatrice thought that another 15 sleep cycles had passed, a large projection of a man appeared on one wall, and he started to speak.

“I am First Chief Jgadi.” Beatrice thought he had a very strange accent.

“You have noticed that all of your needs are taken care of. There is ample food, plenty of water for drinking and washing. I do imagine, though, that you are bored.”

A laugh erupted in the room.

“You don't need to know where you are, or why you are here, right now. But you do need to organize yourselves, in the way we are organized.”

Craig looked at Beatrice. “But who are they? He looks kind of Casitian, but he talks differently, and he's bald. I don't think I remember ever seeing a completely bald Casitian.”

The man started speaking again. “There will be a competition. The rules will be projected after I finish speaking. The winner of this competition will be your Second Chief, and he will answer only to me. He will divide up the group into 12 groups, and he will choose a Third Chief for each of those 12 groups. Each of those Third Chiefs will divide their group into 12 groups, and choose a Fourth Chief from each group.”

“You must obey your Chiefs completely. Punishment for disobeying your Chief starts with no food rations, and gets more serious as the seriousness and frequency of the offense increases.”

He stopped speaking, and the rules were projected, for all to read. Beatrice could hardly believe her eyes. Only men could compete to become chiefs. The competition was one of strength, endurance, and, from her perspective, brutality. The game was basically kick boxing, and the only rule was that the winner had to knock the loser out.

It sounded horrible. Something from those old movies from the 80s about apocalyptic Earth she'd watched once with Leticia. She looked at Craig. “Are you going to compete?”

He shook his head. “No, Beatrice. I can't. I hate to fight. I hate it.”

The man who was speaking came back. “One more thing. Every man must compete. If they do not, their Fourth chief will determine a suitable punishment.”

Some amount of chaos ensued. There were arguments about whether or not the group would follow the orders. A girl climbed up on one of the tables, and shouted, “We don't have to follow this nonsense. Why should we have to fight?”

A tall boy got up on the table next to her. “She's right. We don't need to fight. Why don't we divide up into groups, and democratically elect representatives. We can let those representatives talk to this big chief guy.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the room. No one seemed to be arguing, or agreeing they should fight. They started to move around, to divide themselves into reasonably-sized groups. As this was happening, the projected man spoke again. “You have no choice. For every timespan you delay, there will be a punishment.”

The tall boy got back on a table again. “Folks, look, how are they going to punish us? We don't have to listen to them.”

The wall where the projection had been went blank, and people continued to divide up the groups. They had about 50 groups, with about 30 or 35 each. They decided that the 50 representatives would choose one representative to talk with the First Chief.

It took some time, but eventually they had one representative, a likeable girl named Hilda. She had been helpful and friendly, and had started a number of activities to keep people busy and entertained before the edict of the First Chief.

Beatrice was among a group of the representatives talking at one side of the room, and Hilda was with them. All of a sudden, a door opened up, and several men walked in and grabbed Hilda. Beatrice and a few others tried to follow them, but they were prevented, and the door closed.

In what seemed only a few minutes, the door opened again, and two men carrying Hilda walked in, dropped her on the floor, and left. Beatrice ran over to Hilda, who was motionless. Someone kneeled down, and tried to wake Hilda up, to no avail. They listened to her heart.

“She's dead.”

The First chief was on the screen again. “More delays mean more punishment. Commence the competition at once.”

There was utter silence.

Illsenor station, 60 Gont, 782/Month 3, Year 12

Marianne was pacing in the joining room, waiting for the others to arrive. David, Joel, Laura and K'flef had been visiting a planet on the far side of Orion's arm, and had not been especially happy to end up at New Earth, but they realized they were needed. Silandra had come out from Casiti with Marianne and Ja'el along with Yulse'lor, Gila'ndor and a number of other Casitians who they thought could help.

During the trip to the station she and the others had studied all of the data. The devices planted on New Earth had worked well, and there was an enormous amount of data for the AIs to process. The basic trends and analysis were clear, as well as the current dilemma. They had finally been able to tap the new "widenet," and had learned much from it.

People started to drift into the joining room. Silandra, Ja'el and Kal'or walked in first, followed by Yulse'lor and Gila'ndor, then Joel and Laura, and finally David and K'flef. There were some happy greetings—Marianne hadn't seen David, Joel, or Laura in years. She was happy to see them, and happy they were here to help.

"Blessings on all. I'm glad that we are all here. We have a lot of work to do."

Joel spoke first, "The data is kind of scary, Marianne. We need a lot more information, and fast."

Marianne nodded. Silandra said, "We will send an array of three satellites. In addition, we will re-tune the listening and watching devices to more easily pick up what might be foreign activities."

Marianne said, "Contact with some on New Earth might be a good idea. We should send a shuttle down as soon as possible. I imagine those in Dlejon would be the best folks to talk with first, although they might not know what's going on."

Silandra nodded. "They have the communications device. They know they can use it to contact us. What they don't know is that it works both ways."

Marianne looked at Silandra, "Works both ways? You never told me that—and you didn't tell them, either, did you?"

Silandra shook her head. "We didn't think they needed to know."

South Central Independent Zone, Month 3, Year 12

Olam and Ahmed had been running for days, and Olam was exhausted. Once they had evacuated the community to the east side of the river, the decision had been made to continue the evacuation, including the community of Baha'i, and go all the way upriver to New San Francisco. Olam and Ahmed had volunteered to be in a small forward contingent, warning communities along the way. Olam was looking forward to letting New San Francisco know about the invasion—he assumed they would be able to help.

Olam had held in his grief for Abdul, who he was sure had perished at the hands of whoever was invading. He knew that Abdul would have done what he could to protect them, and Olam knew he had suffered greatly for it. He looked forward to a time when he could grieve properly.

They really didn't know much about the invasion force except that it was large. Olam had gotten a glimpse of them at one point when he and Ahmed had climbed a mountain just north of the Baha'i territory. Olam was a little better at estimating the size of a crowd—he thought there were probably twenty thousand troops.

This puzzled him. Abdul had said there were no settlers east of them. So where did those troops come from? At one point they had traveled far enough north along the river to be right across it from Jal'alam, the southernmost “real” settlement in New Aard. Olam crossed the river to warn them, and suggested that they evacuate north. The leader of the settlement was doubtful, but promised to post a sentry high in the hills south of Jal'alam, so they could have enough warning if an invasion came north to them.

As they kept running and crested a hill, Olam could see the large settlement of New California below them. Finally, their running was over. Hopefully, they could rest, and those in charge would listen to what they had to say.

Dlejon, New Earth, Month 3, Year 12

Douglas looked at Mira with dismay. “You told them?”

“Dad, no one else knows.”

“It was Dlejon's secret to keep, Mira. I know that what you have heard sounds disturbing, but it is not enough for us to make contact with the Casitians. And now, non-Dlejonese know our secret. This was not wise.”

Mira sighed. “Dad, I don't understand! We have clear information that someone outside of New Earth is doing things—making teenagers disappear, giving New America all of these new resources. We can't just sit idle and do nothing!”

“Mira, we are going to do just that. We can't interfere.”

They heard an insistent knock on the door. Joan poked her head into his office.

“Douglas, I'm sorry to bother you, but...”

“What's the problem?”

“Miriam asked that you come to her office, immediately.”

Douglas furrowed his brow. “*Miriam?*”

“Yes, Miriam.”

Douglas looked at Mira. “This is certainly odd. I haven't spoken with Miriam in months.”

“Dad, who is Miriam?”

“Miriam is the designated keeper of the communications device. Her 'office' is actually quite a distance outside of the settlement. I can't imagine why she would want me to come out there. But out there I must go. I'll be back in a few hours.”

“Dad, bring me.”

“No, Mira, you have already done enough damage.”

Douglas left his office, and took one of the electric overland vehicles to Miriam's office. Her office was a small, nondescript dwelling about 50 miles northwest of the main settlement of Dlejon, inside protected wilderness land. While he drove, he had time to ponder all that Mira had said, and wonder what he was going to do about the situation. Their mandate had been clear—only use the one-way device to send a message to the galactic community when the New Earth population was united in the desire to rejoin the galactic community. He had made a solemn promise, one he took very seriously.

He reached the dwelling, got out of his vehicle, and knocked on Miriam's door.

“Come in, Douglas.”

He walked in to see in the center of the room a holographic projection of Marianne Michaelson.

Miriam said, "I think you'd better sit down, Douglas. You look a little weak."

He found a chair, and sat down. The image didn't move for a while.

"Hello Douglas, I hope you are well."

"Where are you?"

There was a short delay. "At Illsenor station. Douglas, we have a lot to talk about."

"Well, Marianne, I have a lot to tell you."

Miriam looked at Douglas with increasing concern as he began to tell the tale brought to him by Mira.

Illsenor station, 60 Gont, 782/Month 3, Year 12

Joel was in charge of the satellites orbiting New Earth. They finally had made it into orbit, and he was beginning the testing process. Two of the satellites would be trained at the ground, one he placed in geostationary orbit above the southeastern part of the settled lands, one was in north-south orbit, and was going to spend a lot of time following action along the large river they called the Mississippi. The third satellite was in orbit around the equator. That satellite was the one Joel was working with at the moment. It would be focused on looking for spacecraft.

Once testing was complete, he would be putting AIs to work on pre-programmed monitoring routines. All this was fairly straightforward to Joel. He'd learned a lot about galactic space technology in the time since he left Earth.

A chime sounded. "Signal detected."

"Signal? What kind?" He asked his AI

"Communications beacon, from orbit to land."

"Point all cameras toward the source of that beacon."

After a delay, an image began to form. It was a big ship. It looked about one half the size of the colony ships. The AIs zoomed in on the ship automatically. The image came into focus, and Joel panned back and forth, to record as much of the ship as could be seen. Just as he was ready to do another pan, the image dissolved into static, and he was faced with a blank screen.

"What happened?"

"The satellite was destroyed."

Illsenor station, 61 Gont, 782/Month 3, Year 12

Marianne sat at the table, recalling her conversation with Douglas.

“So, it's all very confusing. Kurt, the one who actually saw these men called ‘John’ and ‘Mark’ is sure that they were human. He said they even looked Casitian, although he did say they had a different accent. He was sure that they took off in a cloaked shuttle.”

Joel piped in. “The image that was taken before the satellite was destroyed was not identified by the AIs. It was strange—the AI didn’t say that it could not identify the ship—it said it *would* not.”

Marianne looked at Joel. “That sounds weird, Joel. Perhaps the Tud'scla managed to escape their isolation, and they are up to their old tricks of kidnapping humans? But there seem to be massive numbers of troops of humans moving in southeastern New Earth, more than could possibly be accounted for by the population. I don't understand how the Tud'scla would have made contact with those on New Earth, and where all of these human troops came from. And who are ‘John’ and ‘Mark’, who seem to be the source of the foreign metals and materials?”

Marianne looked at Ja'el, who had an odd look on her face. She then looked at Yulse'lor, Gila'ndor and the rest of the Casitians, who all had similar, odd looks. They looked a lot like looks of regret and consternation to Marianne.

“What's going on?”

Ja'el sighed. “I hoped we would never need to explain this. I left something out of the story I told you a long time ago. The majority of humans who had been enslaved by the Tud'scla settled on Casiti. The rest, who were allied with the Tud'scla, were given yet another planet, called 'Hilcyon'. They were separated by force from the Tud'scla when the Tud'scla were banned. We call them 'Za'aref'. It is Casitian for 'accursed'. They call themselves 'The Kinder'. The ships here are definitely not Tud'scla design, but are similar to ships we've seen of Za'aref design.”

Marianne was stunned. “What? They were allied... with the Tud'scla?”

Ja'el nodded, “Yes, they were war-like, they had organized themselves like the Tud'scla, and they would have stayed with them if the Sejo hadn't ordered the Tud'scla isolated as a species.”

“You, you never told me this! Why didn't you tell us?”

“We didn't think you needed to know.”

Yulse'lor said, “Marianne, we are in great danger here. We have already started evacuation planning. We need to leave this station in the next cycle. It's quite possible that the ship that destroyed the satellite would come to find this station, and I'm sure that ship has offensive weapons that can destroy it. We don't have any defense mechanisms here. We need to leave.”

“We should contact the Sejo immediately! When can the galactic community come to the rescue?”

Ja'el and Silandra looked at each other, as if weighing something. Silandra finally spoke. “Marianne, unless there is clear evidence of the presence of actual members of the Tud'scla species, this is a matter not for the Sejo and the galactic community, but for the Caraj, and the human community. And the Caraj has given us very clear indications that we will not get involved.”

“What? Thousands of people could die, or be enslaved. How could the Caraj just let this happen? We have to do something.”

Marianne looked at her Terran compatriots, who looked as shocked as she felt, and then looked at the Casitians in the room, who all of a sudden seemed foreign. “You don't really care, do you?”

Silandra said gently, “It's not that we don't care—but we cannot come in contact with the Za'aref. Any contact we have with them increases the chance that the Sejo will begin to see all humans as problematic, and ban the entire species. We cannot let that happen.”

Joel said, “Can't we get the galactic community...”

“They see this as a conflict within our species. Any conflict within a species is a bad thing. They will not come to our aid.”

Marianne said, “I don't want to leave. I want to be on New Earth. Leticia is down there, and this planet was my decision, my making. I'm responsible for it. I can't just leave.”

Joel spoke. “Marianne, it's suicide. It is going to be a horrible mess down there.”

“I know, but I'm staying.”

Silandra spoke again. “Marianne, we have to place a lock on the wormhole. Once we leave, it will prevent any new ships from coming into the system, and it will prevent anyone

from leaving. At least that way no more Za'aref can come here. At some point in the future, someone from Casiti will return.”

Marianne nodded. “I guess I'd better be going, since it will take me some hours to get down to New Earth.”

Marianne got up and left the room. She was feeling a wide variety of feelings—anger at the inaction of the Casitians, sadness at what had happened with Ja'el, and fear about what she would find when she landed.

As she was gathering her things, and asking her AI for specific items she would need, there was a chime. “Come in.”

Ja'el pushed the door aside, and walked in. She closed it behind her.

Marianne stopped what she was doing, and turned to face Ja'el.

“You are angry with me.”

“Yes. Why can't you help?”

“Marianne, we cannot—the Caraj has given us strict instructions to stay out of this conflict. Listen to me. Don't stay here. Come back to Casiti with us. The lock on the wormhole will mean that all of this will work itself out. It will take many, many years. You don't need to be here.”

“What about my sister, and nieces, and the Dlejonese? What about everyone else?”

“They will all have to figure this out on their own.”

“I can't leave them, even if it means my own safety. Ja'el, I'm sorry. Don't you care about these people? They are humans! Just like us! They are part of our species, like 'The Kinder,' too. We can't just abandon them!”

“We must. We have no choice, Marianne. We cannot risk the status of humans with the Galactic Community.”

“You mean the status of Casitians, don't you?”

“Marianne, you aren't seeing the larger issues—we Casitians hold the place for all humans in the galactic community. We cannot be tainted by the Za'aref.”

Marianne hung her head, and moved one of her folded shirts from her bed to the duffel bag.

“Ja'el, sometimes I really don't understand Casitians, even though we were companions. And I didn't really do so well on Casiti, did I? And I still don't understand why we couldn't stay

companions. I miss you, Ja'el." She looked up at Ja'el, feeling the tears in her eyes. Ja'el had an odd look on her face.

"Marianne, we did not have a completely a regular companionship."

"What do you mean?"

"It was sanctioned, officially."

"You're telling me it was part of your *job*?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Marianne was stunned, and silenced. "I see. I guess I have even more to be angry about."

She turned away from Ja'el, hoping that she would leave. Ja'el said, "Marianne, don't ever doubt that I loved you." She heard Ja'el open the door, and leave. She felt tears dripping on her hand as she folded another shirt to pack.

Later, on her way to the shuttle, David and Joel caught up with her. David looked concerned.

"Are you really sure, Marianne? We have no idea how long it will take before the Caraj decides to send a ship. You could be stuck here for a long time. I might never see you again."

"Don't you see why I have to go? I'll miss you, but I have to... "

"Marianne, I feel as responsible as you do for New Earth, but..."

David put his hand on Marianne's arm. "Marianne, really, please, don't put yourself in danger."

Marianne shook her head. "I'm sorry, David. I don't feel like I have a choice. Will you both do something for me, please?"

Joel nodded. "Anything

"Go back to Earth. Tell this story. Everyone there needs to know."

David looked at Joel, and they both nodded.

Joel said, "Yes, Marianne, we'll tell the story. We have to tell the story."

She had plenty of time to ponder this situation, and her life, as the shuttle made its way toward New Earth. After five hours, the shuttle was about to make its final approach and Marianne could see the planet fill the windows. She thought about how beautiful it was. She realized that she'd spent so much time planning and thinking about New Earth, but this was her first time actually seeing the planet.

She had come from the station in full cloak, running quiet, so that she wouldn't be detected. The trip had been entirely on autopilot. She was the only person going down to New Earth, and she had never learned how to fly a shuttle.

“We are about to enter the atmosphere. Prepare for turbulence.” The dulcet AI voice was soothing, in its way. The shuttle reoriented, and they moved into reentry. The turbulence was actually minimal, and once they had gotten through the atmosphere, and were flying at high altitude, the AI said, “We are flying toward Dlejon. Payloads are now released.” Marianne heard five small thumps in sequence. She looked outside, and saw small, black spheres floating down away from the shuttle.

“Thanks, what are the payloads?”

“Unknown. No record of what they contain exists.”

Marianne had theories about what they were, and hoped they were useful nanotechnology parting gifts from the Casitians.

Southern New Aard, Month 3, Year 12

“Look, there is a whole planet for us to get lost in. Let's just start this now, let's just go.” A muscle-bound man squatted in the tent, facing another man. Both were bald, clean shaven and of medium complexion.

“You're crazy, Ngellin. They will miss us, and they will find us, if not soon, eventually, when the immigration starts for real.”

“Haven't you heard, Lren?”

“Heard what?”

“No one else is coming.”

One of them, the one called Lren, sat up.

“What do you mean? How can that be?”

“I heard Second Chief Rmorter talking with Third Chief Jlec. Apparently, some Breft arrived and closed the wormhole. More ships aren't coming, Lren. And we are a small group in comparison to the population here. We can't win. You and I should escape, and just fade in to the landscape.”

Lren asked, “Which direction?”

The one called Ngellin looked at a small device in his palm. “We should go away from the conflict that is coming, toward the setting ninth moon.”

“Isn't it strange, Ngellin, to be on a planet with no moon? I am disoriented.”

“We have our navs, Lren. We'll be fine. Let's go.”

Lren nodded. “I can think of at least four others we should ask. Kwelt, of course, Triz, Dfolt and Mner.”

“Let's gather them together, and leave at first light tomorrow.”

Moon Station, January 3, 2019

David and Joel were sitting in a joining room on the Moon station, discussing their next steps. Joel had decided that he was the one to tell Earth the story. David was glad that Joel had volunteered for it—it wasn't something he would have looked forward to. Joel even seemed eager to get down to Earth and start spreading the word.

“So what are you going to do, David?”

“Well, I think it's time for me to spend some time on Casiti. K'flef wants to go back, and even though we won't be companions, I like hanging out with him, and I'd like to get to know Casiti a bit better.”

“Even though Marianne had such a hard time?”

“Especially because of that. I want to live there for a while, see how it really is. It's likely I'll move back to Earth eventually.”

“Laura is happy to be visiting home for a while, but once we're done here, we want to see more of the galaxy. We're going to do some more traveling.”

“That sounds like fun. We did have a good time these last few years.”

“It's amazing what's out there.”

“Yeah, indeed it is.”

“Do you think we'll ever see Marianne again?”

“Joel, logic tells me no, but my heart tells me we'll see her again sooner than we think.”

Dlejon, Rec'jeter'she, Month 3 Year 12

“Please, quiet, quiet!” Douglas was shouting, and trying to be heard above the din in the room. It slowly died down.

“I'm handing the floor to Marianne, who will fill us in on everything she knows about the current situation. Marianne?”

Marianne got up, and looked around the room. Only two of the faces were familiar. She had met Douglas many years before, during the emigration phase. Leticia looked so different than when she saw her last.

“It seems we are pretty dire straits, I'll admit.” She explained everything: the Za'aref, the Caraj's inaction, the evacuation of Illsenor station, and the lock on the wormhole.

A large, bearded man got up toward the back of the room. “So you are telling me that the Casitians left us at the mercy of a bunch of nasty humans with no support whatsoever? And that there are tens of thousands of troops of them invading the southeastern settled lands?”

Marianne nodded. “Whatever happens is up to us. We do know that no more Za'aref ships can arrive. We think there is only one, but we cannot be sure. We also know that no one can leave. We don't know when the Casitians will choose to unlock the wormhole and check up on us. Probably never, as far as this generation is concerned.”

Douglas asked, “So what do you suggest?”

“We need to let everyone know what is happening. We need to find out whether or not New Aard has also fallen prey. We need to find ways to defend ourselves from the invaders.”

As people started talking and laying out plans and actions, Marianne looked around the room at everyone, and realized that this had been the best place to start, after all.

Later, she was sitting at second meal with Leticia. “I'm glad you made it out of the ICS, although I'm sure your mother was upset that you left.

“I've been worried about Beatrice. She's just the right age, you know, to get 'disappeared.' I hope that she'll be OK, wherever she is.”

San Antonio, SCIZ, New Earth, Month 3, Year 12

The mayor of San Antonio looked at Dennis Hickler, the President of New America, and she knew he was about to lie to her. What Hickler didn't know was that just yesterday, she'd had a meeting with Marianne Michaelson, who had told her the entire story. Marianne had asked her not to let Hickler know yet that she was here, and not tell him what she knew.

“Mr. President, I appreciate your visit, don't get me wrong. I know that several settlements to the north have chosen to join New America. I'm not interested in adding San Antonio to that list.”

“I understand, Madam Mayor, that you want to remain neutral. But you yourself know how well things are going in New America. The epidemics are gone, industry is growing, and our population is becoming affluent...”

“Will all due respect, President Hickler, I know what is happening in New America, but we came to New Earth to be independent, and independent we will stay. Besides, as I imagine you've noticed, the epidemics seem to have disappeared spontaneously. So we don't need your vaccines. If you want to talk trade, I'm happy to talk trade. But threatening me won't get you anywhere.”

Hickler looked uncertain. “I'm not threatening you, Madam Mayor, although some are—there seems to be a bit of trouble to your southeast, isn't there? We can protect you from that.”

“We don't need your protection, thank you.”

“So what is it that you want?”

“We have things to offer, as do you. Enter into trade with us, as friends, or leave us alone. We can take care of ourselves.”

Chapter 8: New Miners

All humans must return to our nature. Humans are fierce fighters, men are stronger than women, and all humans need a mighty leader.—First Chief Glendr, 6th era.

New San Francisco, New Earth, Month 3, Year 12

Marianne had arrived with a small contingent of travelers to New San Francisco. The roads in the Independent Zones had gotten quite good, and it had been a two-day drive to arrive in New San Francisco. As they approached the settlement, they watched hundreds of evacuees leave New San Francisco on the other side of the road.

They were actually on their way eventually to New Islamabad, in New Aard. But they thought a stop at New San Francisco would be good for fact-finding. The troops from the southeast were massing on the river, but hadn't started to cross yet. It was a small river, and wouldn't slow the troops down much, when they chose to cross. They had also received word that troops of another sort were beginning to move toward them from the north, from New America. They would soon be attacked from two sides.

People in New San Francisco had learned that projectile weapons no longer worked. New SF had a small stockpile that had been brought with gun club, and when they had first tried to use those, they wouldn't fire. They didn't know what kinds of weapons the troops on the other side had, but Marianne was confident that the Casitian “gifts” would de-activate them.

Marianne stood on top of the tallest building in New SF, and looked at the massing troops with powerful binoculars. She was accompanied by a man named Olam, who had escaped these troops in New Aard.

“You are sure New Aard has not joined them?”

“Yes, ma'am, I am sure. The last meeting I had in Jal'alam, before the evacuation, the sheik there had mentioned a strange meeting with men promising precious metals. The sheik told me that he had been told that these men had traveled all over New Aard, and that he should not believe them. So he turned them away. This sounds a lot like the men that you described from New America, doesn't it?”

Marianne nodded. “We need to speak to the leadership of New Aard. Can you accompany me?”

Olam blanched. “I am hardly a worthy escort, ma'am...”

“Please call me Marianne.”

“...Marianne. I was a defector, a progressive Muslim who could not live within the fundamentalist society. They would not want to see me again. Besides, my wife and child have already left for San Antonio, and I must follow them.”

“What other suggestions would you make?”

“There is a New Aard embassy in New Orleans. You should start there.”

Marianne nodded. “OK, Olam. Thanks.”

New York, Earth, February 10, 2019

It seemed almost surreal to Joel, walking from the train he had taken from JFK spaceport, on his way to the subway to go to Diana's apartment. He hadn't been in New York City for a long time. In fact, his last visit had been many years before the Casitians had arrived. Different reactions were competing for space in his head—the massive changes in the city since he'd been here last, and just being back on Earth at all, after having spent so many years traveling around the galaxy. It was easy to find his way to the right subway, guided by the AI in his new phone. He finally walked up the stairs at the West 4th street station, to emerge in a completely familiar setting. It was almost as if nothing had changed in the 20 years since he'd been here.

He'd lived in The Village for a summer during college, working with an NYU professor who was studying the connection between tornadoes and global climate change. At the time, it was a contentious field. He'd stayed with a friend of his, who lived just a block from Washington Square Park, so it felt like he was back in his old stomping grounds.

As he walked toward Diana's building, he noticed things that were indeed different—small indications of change and galactic influence. Everything was spotlessly clean, there were no panhandlers, and it was eerily quiet. The few cars that drove by were silent, and there were no sirens.

As he walked down West 4th street toward MacDougal, where Diana had her apartment, he could pick out other small changes—new traffic lights, lights and transponders embedded in the streets and sidewalks, and the shapes and colors of taxis, which made it clear that this was, in fact, a new New York City.

He finally reached Diana's building, and the inner door opened for him automatically. He walked up the two flights of stairs, and saw Diana's smiling face poking out from her doorway. She walked up to him, and gave him a hug.

“God, Joel, it's so good to see you.” She held him at arm's length, to look over him.

“You are looking good, my friend. Come in, come in. You must have important news to come all the way back to Earth to deliver it.”

They walked inside the apartment, and Joel put down his bag.

“Let me introduce you to my girlfriend, Janie.”

Joel looked at Janie, who looked like a reliable, sturdy companion for Diana. She had dark brown hair, with a shock of gray in the middle.

Janie walked up to Joel and gave him a hug without hesitation.

“You look famished. Diana, we need to feed this boy.”

Joel, in fact, was famished, and was happy to sit down over what looked like a wonderful meal. He had plenty to tell them, and it seemed like good food would help.

After telling the whole tale, Diana looked sad. “So we may never see Marianne again?”

“It looks that way. From the kinds of things that the Casitians have been saying about those Za'aref, I don't think that they ever want to open that wormhole again.”

Far Southeastern New Aard, Month 1, Year 13

Ngellin turned on his sleeping mat, slowly waking up. He shook out the cobwebs and got up. Ngellin's small band of rebels had turned into a larger trickle out of the mass of troops. Most of them had found their place in smaller communities in New Aard. Some had gone away far to the southeast, to make their own new settlements. He imagined that now that everyone understood the realities, that there would be little reason to continue fighting.

Then he remembered First Chief Glendr. He was a determined fighter, and was sure that his goal, which was the unification of all humankind under the Kinder, or “righteous ones,” was pure, and obtainable. Ngellin imagined that this current situation was simply a minor setback in the eyes of Glendr.

Ngellin had never felt he fit in—he'd never wanted a chiefdom. He would rather have been watching Hilcyon's moons, or even painting them, than fighting. He'd had no choice—he drew a low number in the draft, and had been on the second ship to this place.

He liked the planet—it was gentler than Hilcyon, much warmer and wetter, with much more abundant food. He missed the nine moons, but there was plenty here to keep his interest. In all that he heard about the people, he knew he could find a place to call home, eventually. He was intensely curious about the other humans, and expected that he would make his way toward them soon, leaving this group behind.

New York, Earth, February 20, 2019

Joel sat uncomfortably in the couch that was designed to be informal and relaxing, or at least to seem that way for the audience. He was being interviewed by Joh Appel, who was the newest and hottest host of the “Today” show. Joel felt some amazement at its continued existence.

Of course, there was no longer any such thing as a “TV network”—but the show kept going on the net, and had millions of viewers. Joel, Diana, and Janie had chosen this as the best first venue for getting the word out. They had planned many other interviews.

The face of the producer was in a screen facing both Joel and Joh, and she signaled when the live netcast was about to start.

“I'm here today with Joel Martin. You should all be quite familiar him with as one of the folks who helped us through the Casitian crisis. He has been away from Earth for a number of years, and is back to tell us some disturbing news.”

The “Casitian Crisis” was what people on Earth now called the few years between first contact with the Casitians and the final departure of emigrants to New Earth. Things had settled

down on Earth, and people had, for the most part, gotten back into more standard rhythms of life, even though things were different.

“Joel, please tell us the latest about New Earth.”

Joel nodded his head. “Certainly. Yes, this story is disturbing.” Joel then told the detailed story as he knew it, about the Za'aref, the wormholes, what had happened on New Earth, and the actions of the Casitians.

“So Joel, let me get this right—the Casitians *locked* the wormhole to New Earth? No one can get in or out? They left the people on New Earth at the mercy of those Za'aref? They didn't try to help?”

Joel nodded sadly. “Yes, Joh, that's what happened.”

Joel knew that this would cause a backlash against the Casitians, but he himself had come to feel betrayed by them, and it wasn't going to surprise him if most other Earth humans felt the same way.

Kinder Transport Ship, Month 4, Year 12 /Cfro 20 1151

Beatrice ran to Craig, who had just returned from his meeting with the First Chief. He looked ashen, and shaken.

“Are you OK?”

He looked up at Beatrice, shaking his head, and walked to the corner of the room, where he and Beatrice had been given a large space, now that Craig was Second Chief.

He sat for a while, silently, while people started to gather around their space, waiting for any information he had.

Craig, it turned out, was a very good fighter. He hated fighting because he had been forced for many years to fight with his father, who had been a championship ultimate fighter. Because of those years of training, he easily beat every opponent that faced him.

He looked up at Beatrice. “We are in deep trouble, Beatrice.” He got up from the space, walked toward the tables, and jumped up on one.

“Please, your attention, please!” Quiet settled in the large room. “I spoke with the First Chief. I have information to share. We are no longer on New Earth. In fact, we are no longer even anywhere near New Earth.” Murmurs and chaos had erupted.

“Please, please be quiet!” The murmurs died down.

“We are on a ship, heading for a mining operation. We will be working in that mining operation.”

Beatrice looked around her. People were looking at Craig with disbelief and shock. Beatrice couldn't imagine how this could be.

“I have been told that if we work here for a while, and work well, we will be allowed to join the population on the planet here eventually. And we may be able to return home someday. But First Chief didn't tell me how long that would be, or what 'working well' meant. We have to cooperate. I need to announce my Third Chiefs, which I will do very soon. We will take it from there.”

Casitian Cruise Transport, May 10, 2019

Joel and Laura were on their way again, traveling the galaxy. They'd hitched a ride with a Casitian tour of amazing sights. They were sitting in their quarters, relaxing after last meal.

“I feel like I left a complete uproar, but I'm glad we're gone.”

“Joel, there is nothing you could have done about the uproar.”

“I know. We told the story, and now we've left.”

Laura put her head on his shoulder. “Glad to be heading to the Cat's Eye Nebula. I hear their hotel in space is amazing. Good thing we learned Casitian. I doubt they speak English.”

Joel laughed, then sobered. “Somehow I doubt that anyone in the galaxy will be speaking English anytime soon.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Joel thought about the weeks they had spent on Earth, about the talk shows and interviews, and about how much their news had tapped a current of anger Joel had no idea was there. The Za'aref were lionized as heroes, even though they were known to have invaded and kidnapped thousands of teenagers from New Earth. And the Casitians were villainized. Kurt could understand the anger toward the Casitians, but he

could not understand why people were idolizing the Za'aref, or, as everyone now called them, "The Kinder".

Joel and Laura had decided to travel for another few years, then settle back down on Earth. They both had multiple standing job offers, which felt like nice security. They could imagine a quiet life on Earth.

Chapter 9: Acts of Courage and Cowardice

In my travels I have come to know that all humans, even if they reject it, have, at one point or another, felt the deep peace of the all.—Jal'end'a (781)

Casiti, 140 Gont 782

The insistent chime was annoying. Erit'ala had just fallen asleep, and her companion stirred beside her. She rose, walked to her work area, and whispered, “Display, thanks, the alert.”

It was a recorded message from Gret'lor, the human representative to the Sejo. She was stunned.

“Erit'ala, I am sorry to disturb you, but the Sejo has learned of some very disturbing events, and I need more information from the Caraj. The Keeelo say that there was some unusual activity at the Illsenor wormhole, which resulted in an unauthorized lock on the wormhole. This activity included first, two very large ships going through about one year ago, then a pause, then one of those ships leaving, and another arriving, then leaving and locking the wormhole. The lock has been identified by the Keeelo as of Casitian origin.”

“I know of no Casitian ships going to New Earth last year. But I need more information, and I imagine you might have it.”

The message ended. The news was sobering. First, it suggested that a ship left the system, presumably full of humans from New Earth. Erit'ala felt a moment of sadness for those humans. There was nothing they would be able to do about it, and the Casitians could not enter Za'aref space to retrieve them. Asking the galactic community to intervene on the behalf of those people would be tantamount to asking the Sejo to suspend human citizenship, and the Casitians could not afford that. Erit'ala was afraid that reporting what they knew to the Sejo would have exactly the same result.

She composed her message to Gret'lor carefully. She told him what she knew, that Marianne had stayed, that the lock prevented any more comings and goings to Rec'jeter'she. She did the best she could, and hoped that it would be enough.

Kinder ship, Month 1, Year 13/Cfro 21 1151

Craig had just returned from another meeting with the First Chief, and he sat down hard on their sleeping mat, folding his frame into himself. Beatrice knew when he was feeling the stress of his position—she could see it in his body and in his face.

“Honey, what happened?”

He looked up at her, his eyes dark, with pools of tears.

“We're arriving soon at the Asteroid. The First Chief was giving me the lowdown on what will happen next.”

“And...”

“We'll be assigned quarters as a group, with individuals having to share large dorm spaces, but couples will get small quarters of their own.”

That made Beatrice happy—at least she and Craig could have privacy.

“What else? Why are you so troubled?”

“We will have a production quota to meet, with sanctions if we do not meet it. We won't have much time to learn how to mine before those quotas come into play. The schedule is brutal. They have a different calendar and time, of course, but I did some calculations. It looks like we will have 16 hour shifts, with only 7 hours off. And the equivalent of one day off every 10.”

“How can they expect to keep us going under those conditions?”

“I'm not sure, Beatrice, I just don't know. It scares me. I also think that we'll never be let go.”

Southwestern New Aard, Month 2, Year 13

Ngellin and Lren were talking in Ngellin's tent.

“Yes, Lren, this is the place. We're relatively close to New Orleans...”

“And that's a good thing?”

“Yes. From what I can tell, New Orleans has become a center of sorts.”

“You scare me, Ngellin.”

“Lren, our success depends on our willingness to work with the people here.”

“I know, I know.”

Ngellin liked Lren a lot, but knew that Lren missed home. Ngellin, on the other hand loved this planet. He loved everything about it. He had no intention of ever going home, even if he got the chance.

Ngellin asked, “Have you had time to send messages to many of the Kinder here? What have you gotten back?”

“Apparently, there was a Second Chief who was trying hard to gather up deserters, but now he has deserted.”

Ngellin laughed. “And?”

“We think there are about 2,500 of us who have left. The rest seem to have been sent back to the ship.”

Ngellin whistled. “That’s quite a lot.”

“Yes. It seems that Glendr is not willing to expend too much energy in finding us. And now that most of us are growing our hair and learning the local language...”

“We’ll soon be able to simply fade into the background, won’t we?”

Lren nodded. “Especially here. The people have similar coloring.”

Ngellin nodded. “That’s another reason why this is a good place.”

Lren said, “People are looking up to you, Ngellin. Some have even asked me if you were going to make yourself Supreme Chief of the Kinder on Nytt Grier Nro.”

Ngellin said forcefully, “I am willing to lead our people, Lren, but *never* as a Chief. Never, ever. Hear that? Tell everyone!”

Lren stepped back in response. “OK, Ngellin. I get it.”

“We need leadership, Lren, but not like we’ve had it. I don’t want to have leadership like we have it at home. It is stifling and stupid.”

Lren nodded. “You won’t hear different from me, Ngellin.”

Kinder Transport Ship, Month 1, Year 13/Cfro 23 1151

Beatrice sat next to her new friend, Jasmine. They had been talking about what was coming.

“I’m worried, Beatrice. I have to admit to worrying about myself, and what will happen to me. It’s scary.”

“Yes, I understand. It feels a little better having Craig. Is there anyone you feel you can trust?”

“I can trust you.”

“You know what I mean, Jasmine.”

“No, Beatrice. None of my friends is in this room, and, well, I was a loner at school—people thought I was weird.”

“I don’t think you’re weird.”

Jasmine smiled. “Thanks. Anyway, no, I haven’t found anyone. A lot of people have coupled up, but there isn’t anyone I want to be with right now.”

Beatrice thought Jasmine reminded her a little of her sister Leticia, and wondered if she preferred girls over boys.

“Well, stick with us, we’ll do our best to protect you.”

Craig walked up and sat down next to Jasmine. Beatrice knew that he liked Jasmine a lot.

“Yup. We will. Actually, I have a job for you.”

“A job?”

“Yes. The First Chief asked me to find someone to be the ‘analyst,’ he called it.”

“Analyst?”

“I’m not sure exactly how you’ll do the job, but it’s important. You’ll be ahead of our team, the first to go into mining areas to analyze the rocks for their composition, to see if we should mine them or not.”

“Sounds like a great job.”

“It’s dangerous, but I think you can do it.”

“I’m happy to.”

“I really want to have someone I trust in that position. I know they would expect me to choose a man, but I know you can do it—you’re strong.”

Jasmine smiled. “Thanks for your confidence in me, Craig.”

They talked for a while, wondering what their future on the asteroid would hold.

New America, Month 1, year 13

President Dennis Hickler looked at the man facing him. He could see in his eyes that this was going to be tricky. He needed him as an ally, but he knew that going too far would lead to trouble. He had come to learn over time that peaceful coexistence with the surrounding communities was going to work much better than threats or conflict. He had seen that his power was greater when he gained influence not by intimidation, but by cooperation. Dennis was ambitious, but he was also smart, and willing to adjust his strategies to meet his goals.

“Mr. ... Bercyg, I do believe I can say that our army, which now numbers almost ten thousand, would be willing to help you in your efforts, depending, of course, on what you had in mind. We do want to continue the peaceful trade we have been building with our neighbors—it is providing us with needed goods and services.”

“Well, President, of course we can't say at this moment what we will be using these troops for, but it is good to know they are available to us.”

Dennis always felt strange when Bercyg called him “President” instead of “Mr. President,” or “President Hickler.” It was like being called “General” or “Sergeant” or something. And Dennis would have certainly preferred to have Bercyg call him by his first name. Dennis knew that Bercyg was doing his own dance.

Bercyg was a muscular man, with the shoulders of a soldier that has seen a lot of hand-to-hand fighting. Bercyg's head was completely clean shaven. John and Mark had very short hair, and no facial hair, but all of the other Kinder men Dennis had seen so far had their hair completely shaven.

“In addition, President, we would hope that you would return some of the favors we have given you, and send a bit of your food production our way. We still have rations that will last many years, but fresh food from the planet would be greatly appreciated.”

Dennis nodded. “Yes, of course, we would be happy to do that. How much do you need?”

Dennis was a calculating man, and realized at that moment, in a rush, that the Kinder had weaknesses. He was going to find ways to take full advantage of them.

Hilcyon Asteroid Mine—Month 1, Year 13/Cfro 23 1151

“Keep moving forward!” The amplified voice grated on Beatrice's nerves. They had arrived at the asteroid, and had left their room in an orderly fashion—in groups of 12 and 144. They had entered into a very large bay as big as an arena.

Speculation about who their captors were was rampant. Most people around her had assumed that they were Casitian, but Beatrice and Craig didn't think that made any sense. They looked similar, but seemed to speak a different language, and certainly acted differently. The First Chief had refused to answer Craig's questions about it, so Craig had stopped asking.

“Follow your Chiefs. They know where your quarters are.”

It was a bit chaotic at first, but then, slowly, the large bay emptied. They made their way to the section of the asteroid where they would stay.

As Craig's “wife”—even though it wasn't official—Beatrice got to stay with Craig. The “wives” of the chiefs were given special consideration, and the chiefs got better quarters than everyone else. This meant that many girls had been vying for the attention of those chosen to be Chiefs. Some girls had even tried to get Craig's attention.

Craig and Beatrice were at the head of their group, with the group of Third Chiefs behind them. The corridors were sparsely lit by small, yellow lights that cast a pale glow into the dark spaces between. There was a thin layer of water on the floor, which would be slippery if it weren't for the gravelly surface of the floor. Beatrice could hear a steady drip somewhere, which seemed to follow them as they walked.

They finally arrived in a section labeled with letters in an alphabet Beatrice didn't recognize.

Craig said, “This is our section, and the section of Third Chief Jonathon.”

The rest of the Third Chiefs and their groups kept walking down to other sections. They walked in, and down a last corridor. The corridor ended in a large room, with lots of furniture. There were chairs and couches, and assorted boxes and objects that looked like books and games. The Chiefs then arranged everyone and found the rooms that people were assigned to. Craig showed Beatrice to their joint apartment—it had a small bedroom, with what looked like a comfortable bed, and a larger living room, with a small kitchen alcove. She also found they had their own bathroom, which even had a shower, although it looked strange and unfamiliar.

“Well, this isn't so bad, although I'm sure we have the best of it.”

Craig nodded. “Yes, we do. We'll make do. Unfortunately, work starts tomorrow. I need to gather the group of chiefs, and let them know what to expect.”

Craig walked out of their apartment, and she heard his voice amplified over a speaker system.

“All Third Chiefs please meet in the common room at 10th hour. There are clocks in each room. You have some time to get settled. You'll find sheets and towels in the rooms, and there are clothes of many sizes in the cabinets of the common room.”

Craig came back into the room.

“Come lie down with me, Craig, for just a little bit.”

Craig didn't argue, and the two of them lay on their bed, holding each other.

New Orleans, New Earth, Month 1, Year 13

It seemed odd to Marianne to be sitting with Douglas at a sidewalk café in New Orleans on New Earth, sipping coffee with chicory and munching on a beignet as if nothing was wrong. In some ways, nothing was, at least not here. Their short trip into New Aard had been fruitful. It was true that the Za'aref had visited New Aard, but they had been completely rebuffed. The leadership of New Aard was far from happy to see Marianne, but given the circumstances, they were conciliatory.

“Well, I think that things are coming to some kind of peaceful... stability, don't you?”

Marianne nodded. “Yeah, it does seem that way. Everyone has realized that cooperation is better than conflict. The troops from the Za'aref seem to have left, and people have also come to respect the wishes of some, like New Aard, to remain distant from other communities.”

Douglas nodded. “You haven't yet explained to me the whole thing with nanotechnology...”

“When I was coming down from the Casitian ship, it became clear to me that they had placed several payloads on the shuttle. They'd not told me about them. You probably remember the nanotechnology that was released on earth to help clean things up, and, finally, to inactivate projectile weapons?”

Douglas nodded.

“The same kinds of nanotechnology must have been released from my shuttle. Cured the epidemics, and prevented violence by guns or other weapons.”

Marianne was glad for the parting gifts of the Casitians. There had already been too much death and conflict—it was good that it was coming to an end.

Douglas changed the subject. “So, Marianne, what's next for you? I know I have a community to return to on Dlejon. You are, of course, most welcome to settle there.”

“Yes, Dlejon seems to be a good place to settle. I know that the Dlejonese will be involved in New Earth development, and I want to be a part of bringing people together as much as possible. It seems like Dlejon is a good place to do that.”

“When do you think the Casitians will return?”

“I don't know, Douglas. Honestly, I don't expect to see them in our lifetimes. They seemed really clear that they wanted to get as far away as possible from the Za'aref, or any other negative influence. We are on our own, probably for a very long time.”

Dlejon did seem a nice place to settle. She mentally prepared to make her way back there, and find her place. But before that, she felt that she had a bridge to mend: she needed to visit Yolanda.

Kinder War Ship Month 1, Year 13/Cfro 35 1151

First Chief Glendr paced, a few minutes before his status meeting with his Second Chiefs. He was glad for a spacious office—pacing had always been the way he figured things out.

To get this job, he had challenged the previous First Chief, Proygy. It was too bad Proygy had a bad heart condition, and died during the fight, without succumbing to Glendr's weapon. Glendr had no intention of being challenged or deposed. Glendr intended to return to Hilcyon victorious, and take the Kinder Supreme Leadership when Vondryn died. But now, he was stymied.

The door to his office slid open and three men, all tall and broad-shouldered, walked into the room, and stood around the large conference table. There was only one seat. Glendr joined them at the end of the table, and sat in the seat.

“Status reports, please.”

The first man he looked at was Second Chief Jercyn. Jercyn sported a very small tuft of hair below his lower lip. It always irritated Glendr—it felt like a way to show Jercyn's contempt for the norms of Hilcyon society. Jercyn was also unusually light-skinned for a Kinder. Sometimes, there were children who ended up unusually light- or dark-skinned. But they were rare. He leaned a bit, his fists on the table.

“First Chief Glendr, we have, as of yet, been unable to break the encryption on the wormhole lock. It appears to be of a very high order, and we don't have the computing power to break it.”

“Have you considered other strategies?”

“Yes, First Chief, but so far, nothing has proven likely to break the lock that the Breft left.”

The wormhole had been closed by the Breft or “Casitians” as they liked to call themselves. The Breft were supreme cowards. Of course they ran, and of course they closed the wormhole behind them. Glendr was frustrated by this situation.

“You said you thought that you could break it within the year, Jercyn! Was that a lie?”

Jercyn looked very uncomfortable, and shifted back and forth. Glendr could see sweat beads forming on his forehead. “No, First Chief. It was an estimate. I think now it was an underestimate.”

“Be careful, Jercyn. There are others who might be interested in your position should you fail to deliver.”

Glendr took his attention entirely away from Jercyn, and looked at Second Chief Retyl. “Retyl, what bad news do you bring me?”

Retyl, if it were at all possible, looked even more uncomfortable than Jercyn—as if he wanted to run away from the table. He stood at a bit of a distance from the table, not touching it.

“First Chief Glendr, as you ordered, we have removed our forces from ground for the time being. However, it seems we have lost 12–15% of them. They have either disappeared into the wilderness, or joined the other side.”

“And how did you let that happen, Retyl? You clearly did not choose the right Chiefs to keep everyone in line!”

Retyl almost looked defiant, but then Glendr could see him think the better of it. He finally said, weakly with his head down, “First Chief, I bow to your greater wisdom. I am willing to go down to the surface and lead the efforts of bringing the deserters to justice.”

Glendr knew that Retyl had no such plans. He knew that Retyl planned to disappear himself. He wondered how he had ended up surrounded by such weaklings. Glendr was not going to give him the chance to desert. The First Chief knew about one of Retyl's Third Chiefs who would be more than happy to take Retyl's place.

Glendr then turned his attention to the last man, Second Chief Bercyg. Glendr had great hopes for Bercyg. Bercyg was strong, loyal, and, most importantly, ambitious. Bercyg knew that long-term loyalty to Glendr was his ticket to higher, better things.

“First Chief Glendr - I have very good news.”

Glendr nodded. “Go ahead, please.”

“Our alliance with the group that calls itself New America is still strong. The man who is now Supreme Chief, or 'President' as he calls it, is firmly in control, and he has gathered around him a group of loyal, hard working men. We will have New America as an ally in whatever efforts we wish to engage in. And, further, the first shipments of fresh food from the surface have begun. I know that you enjoyed your breakfast this morning.”

Glendr nodded again, smiling. “Yes, indeed I did Bercyg. This is very good news. Has this 'President' raised an army yet?”

Bercyg said, “Yes, First Chief, he has. From what I understand, he has approximately ten thousand troops at his disposal.”

Glendr frowned, and he could see Bercyg's face shift. “Ten thousand? That's all? We have lost two thousand at least, and there is no way we can conquer this planet with so few troops. We need more!”

Bercyg began to look uncomfortable himself. “First Chief, it is simply a limitation of population. New America is the only country that is our ally, and they have a small population. And fifteen thousand strong young people are now at our disposal back on Hilcyon—so they are unavailable to us here. It will take more time to raise a bigger army.”

“They are using conscription?”

Bercyg shook his head. “No, First Chief, they are not.”

“This would be a good test of how cooperative they could be, isn't it? Tell 'President' Hickler to initiate a conscription program.”

Bercyg's face went white. “First Chief...”

“I want no excuses! None! All of you, don't you have work to do? Go do it!”

As the men left the room, Glendr had the distinct feeling that he was seeing little creatures scurrying out of sight.

Casiti, 5 Paqn 782

Erit'ala, Silandra and Ja'el sat together with cups of fuge. They were all in a very somber mood. Erit'ala had been delivered some devastating news, and she had to share it with everyone. Silandra and Ja'el didn't know the details of her news, but she could tell from their demeanor that they knew it was serious.

Erit'ala spoke first. “The Sejo has decided on a full inquest.”

Ja'el asked, “What does this mean?”

“It means that all humans materially involved have to show up at the Sejo council in one Casitian year for the inquest.”

“What could happen?”

“From what I've read, the pending action could include probation or possible restriction for the human species from the galactic community.”

“They wouldn't...”

“I can't see how they could, but the fact that they wish a full inquest is troubling.”

Silandra, who had been quiet thus far, spoke. “Erit'ala, what can we do?”

“We need to prepare our case. I'm about to send messages to everyone, including Joel and Laura, David, K'flef, Yulse'lor, and Gila'ndor. We'll need the help of many people to work this out.”

Ja'el said, “I'll get some space in the galactic center reserved for us, and assign housing near there for the Terrans.”

Erit'ala nodded. “Thank you, Ja'el, that sounds like a good idea. I guess the best thing we can do right now is to get started on our defense. We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

Hilcyon Asteroid Mine, Month 3, Year 13/Mrontl 10 1151

Craig climbed the stairs to the First Chief's office. He wasn't looking forward to this meeting. After landing on the asteroid and getting settled in, the teenagers from New Earth were a uniformly unhappy lot. Craig did the best he could, as did his Chiefs, to provide what was needed and soothe raw nerves, but the first few weeks of actual mining work had been hellish. They had managed to meet 2/3 of their production goal, which Craig thought was quite good, considering none of them had ever mined before. Jasmine had been invaluable. She had quickly learned what tunnels would help them meet their goals, and which ones wouldn't. That had been the only way they were able to come close to their production goals. The next period had been better, but it was difficult to figure out how things were going to smooth out.

He knocked on the door. The gruff voice of their new First Chief, Krellen, made it clear that Craig should come in. Craig opened the door, and walked into the grimy office. He noticed pieces of mining equipment strewn about, and other odd assorted things. There was a layer of dust, the same dust that got into everything in the asteroid. You could even taste it in the food. He obviously didn't even attempt to clean any of it off of anything.

Words started to come out of the First Chief's mouth, then the translation plug Craig had in his ear started to kick in.

"I just got the production reports today." Krellen looked up, right at him, piercingly.

Craig waited.

"One-half goal." Craig was puzzled.

"Sir, we produced at least twice this period what we produced last period—how can that be half of the goal, if we were almost at 2/3 goal last period?"

"Goal has changed. The production goal goes up every period for 10 periods."

"No, you can't do that—we can't possibly produce twice what we did this period—then keep producing more—we don't have enough people, and we don't know enough yet."

Krellen chuckled. "No, it's not that. You are too soft. You let people take sick days, you *talk* to people who aren't producing, instead of punishing them. Punishment is all people really understand."

“You are asking me to do something that I will not do.”

Krellen laughed even louder. “I know. You are dismissed. Go.”

Craig stood there for a moment, puzzled by Krellen's behavior. He turned around, and opened the office door. As he opened it, he saw a man he recognized. He'd met him at a meeting once. He was a Third Chief of a well-established mining group. He had something grey and cylindrical in his hand that moved quickly. Craig felt a piercing pain in his midsection, and everything went black.

Casiti, 7 Paqn 782

David and Ger'lier were wrestling on David's bed. He liked wrestling with Ger'lier—it was great foreplay. Ger'lier had managed to get him in a headlock, with his leg around David's torso. He was licking David's ear.

“OK, I give up! You win.”

“What do I get?”

“Whatever you want.” Ger'lier let go, and Ger'lier shifted David so that he faced him. Just as he was about to kiss him, they heard the insistent chime of an urgent message from David's AI.

“Crap.” Ger'lier let him get up to pick up the message.

“Display message, please.”

It was a video message from Erit'ala.

“I'm sorry to disturb you, David. I need you to come to the Galactic Center within the next few days. Expect to stay a while. The Sejo has requested a formal inquest into the situation on Rec'jeter'she. We need to appear before them in one Casitian year.” There the message ended.

“Oh, shit.”

“You said that in English! What's the problem?”

David switched back to Casitian. “I don't need to deal with it right now. Where were we?”

Hilcyon Asteroid Mine, Month 3, Year 13/Mrontl 11 1151

Jasmine brought Beatrice some tea. She had been sitting on the bed she shared with Craig. She had been sitting there motionless ever since she returned from seeing Craig's body.

"Beatrice, here, have some tea."

Jasmine worried about Beatrice. She hadn't moved for hours. But she looked up at Jasmine, and had a small smile on her face. She took the tea.

"Thanks. You are a good friend."

"Do you know what happened?"

"I haven't been told. All I was told was he was dead, and that I'd be assigned to a new husband in a few days."

That had become standard. Jasmine had managed to escape the fate of being assigned to a husband by being willing to work in very dangerous conditions. Otherwise, all women were subject to that arrangement. Some of the women who came with them on the ship had been assigned to Kinder men. Jasmine had heard about horrible things happening to them, including being forced upon and beaten. The women who had attached themselves to the New Earth men were in much better shape.

She was afraid for Beatrice, but she didn't say anything to her about her fears.

"You'll be OK. I'll look after you."

Beatrice smiled a very sad smile. "Thanks, Jasmine."

Hilcyon Asteroid Mine, Month 1, Year 14/Wtler 27 1152

Beatrice woke up to the clang of the morning alarm. Mornings were the worst. It was when she woke up in the morning when she remembered everything. Being taken from New Earth, being on a ship for weeks, ending up here in this horrible place, and then, worse yet, losing Craig, and New Earth people having been largely broken up as a group. She had been

assigned to be the wife of a Kinder man named Pkygy, who had been here long before they arrived.

He was a very kindly man, quiet and respectful, and he hadn't forced himself on her—he seemed content to let her cook and clean for him, although even that seemed to make him uncomfortable. From him Beatrice had finally heard the entire story—who their captors were, where they were, how this all had happened. Beatrice hadn't really figured him out yet—he had been so different from the other Kinder men she'd met so far. She even realized that she was beginning to appreciate his presence, even though it had only been a couple of months since Craig was killed.

Beatrice was learning the language, and could understand more and more before the translation device kicked in. She figured that in a few weeks, she'd be able to turn it off.

She got up off of their uncomfortable sleeping pallet. Pkygy was washing up. She had learned he liked a certain kind of food for breakfast—it was a strange-looking gruel that she had finally figured out how to make to his liking, although he would just as often be up making it for himself, and making her toast from the bread she had learned to bake. She went to the side of their small quarters that held the single-burner stove and small sink, and began to prepare breakfast.

“Beatrice, we need to talk about something.”

She turned around slightly and looked at him. “What is it Pkygy?”

“We are rewarded if we have children—more children mean more miners. More miners mean more production. More production means more points for our group. More points for our group mean bigger quarters, more food, more supplies, you know.”

Beatrice shook her head. “Pkygy, it's not that I wouldn't want ever to, well, you know, make love with you. It's that I can't bring a child into this—to be a miner all their lives? Or worse still, die like so many children that have died here? We were told that if we worked hard, in a few years we could go back to New Earth. Almost no one ever leaves this place, do they? I can't do that to a child. I'm sorry.”

Pkygy nodded. “I understand—and I agree. But...”

“But?”

“Second Chief Zlgyzo threatened me. You see, you aren't my first wife. My first wife died about 3 years ago, but we never had a child. He said that if I did not get you with child within the next year, he would send me to the prison asteroid, and give you a new husband.”

Beatrice had heard about the prison asteroid. It was, apparently, worse than this one. She had a hard time imagining anything worse than this. And the idea of being assigned to a man that might end up being more traditionally Kinder...

“What can we do Pkygy? Can't we fight this?”

“Fight? How? I hate this as much as you. I was born on Hilcyon, but you've heard the story of how I ended up here—publishing dangerous writing.”

“This system only works because people cooperate. We need to find a way to stop cooperating. But that requires a lot of people. We need to find people, and then when we have a critical mass—we can stop cooperating.”

“Beatrice, we might die doing this.”

Beatrice nodded. “I can't deny that. But I think I might rather die than keep living this way.”

Pkygy nodded sadly. “How do we start?”

Chapter 10: Change is Possible

One cannot argue with a sword. It is a sword that conquers all.—Dver Wrdnyz, historian, Hilcyon (3rd era)

Southwestern New Aard, New Earth, Month 3, Year 14

“Settle down, everyone, please!”

Ngellin was having a hard time being heard over the din that Grezl had created. What an idiot! He needed to stop this craziness right now, before it went any further. He found a plastic carton, and he banged it with a rock. That made a difference; people became quiet.

“Look. Let’s be clear. This is not Kinder Home. We all left for a reason. We left because we hated the way that we were forced to come make war, and we wanted to be free.”

A cheer started.

“And...” He raised his voice higher. “And...” Finally, there was quiet again. He continued, “We will not return to chiefdoms. I have a suggestion.” He was surprised that he hadn’t created an uproar again.

“We do need to organize. Here, I have learned something about ‘elections.’ We are spread in many settlements out all over this part of New Aard, and into the Independent Zone. We should have each settlement elect a representative to a council. The Kinder council will make decisions together.”

There was a little murmur in the room, and a lot of nodding heads. He liked to see nodding heads.

It took them another few days of meetings to iron out the details, but they had a plan. Soon, the Kinder of New Earth would be organized.

Hilcyon Asteroid Mine, Month 3, Year 14/Lykl 1 1152

A long time ago, Beatrice had read a spy novel that she loved so much she read it over and over again. And then she read every spy novel she could get her hands on. Those spy novels were coming in very handy right now. One of them had detailed the use of “covert cells” for revolutionary action. Beatrice realized that a structure like that would be perfect here. She doubted, based on what she knew of Kinder hierarchical culture, that anyone had ever tried anything like this—and she bet it would work. She realized she was betting her life on it.

She started small—with people she knew well, and people Pkygy knew well. She created a beginning cell, and then got those in her cell to start new cells. When she or Pkygy had been approached for recruitment by a few people they didn't know well, they knew that the cell structure had penetrated far enough. But she realized they needed a test—something that would allow them to see how many people were on their side, but would not put anyone in danger, or even raise much suspicion. She decided that she would send a simple command out to the cells—work an extra 10 minutes on one day. Then, once they could see their power, they could plan for an asteroid-wide shut-down.

“Pkygy, do you think we're ready?”

“I've been thinking—I think we should use our power to get some of us off of this asteroid, and spread the revolution to Kinder Home. The asteroid is just one part of the whole system. We'll need help from Kinder Home to get everyone here home anyway.”

“Do you think we could get to Hilcyon?”

“I do. I know that there are already some Second Chiefs involved in our plans. They could get a ship, and get a small group legitimately off of the asteroid. Then we could settle on Hilcyon, and keep going. I don't know that I can rest until all of Kinder Home is free.”

“But Pkygy, you don't even know what it means to be free.”

“I learned from my gamma's writing, and I've learned from you, Beatrice—I've learned what freedom is. It is something I want for all of our people.”

It took a while, and some scary moments, but one of the Second Chiefs they had recruited got a small group as official passengers on a cargo ship headed for Ghedro, the main city of Hilcyon. Pkygy had somehow managed to be assigned to a low-level plumbing position, which

was his previous occupation. It was going to be the beginning of a long period of work for both of them.

New York, Earth, January 12, 2020

Diana put the newspaper down in disgust, wishing she hadn't seen it. These last few years of Casitian influence hadn't changed much. Now that humans on Earth had found out about the Kinder, the Kinder had become almost lionized. The Casitians had been vilified for keeping the existence of the Kinder a secret.

“Don't take it too seriously, sweetheart.” Janie, Diana's lover, was sipping coffee. They had just started to spend most nights together, and Diana treasured the brief morning times they had before her hectic days began.

“It's hard to deal with. Marianne is stuck on New Earth, Joel and Silandra are defending our species in front of the Sejo, and I feel helpless.”

Janie smiled. “You are far from helpless, Diana. You've been great as the Casitian Liaison and people seem to want to draft you for World President.”

Diana raised her eyebrow. “Me, President? I'd be nuts to run for President, especially now. I'm happy to let Nicholas do it. He certainly keeps the cameras clicking.”

“Sarkozy? Come on, he's not a very serious candidate. Do you really want him to be the first President of the World?”

“Well, OK, maybe not. What about Davies? She has been the best Prime Minister Canada ever saw. She'd make a good World President.”

“Yeah, I like Libby a lot, but still I think you should be President. So do a lot of other people. You'd have full Casitian support, which is more than any other candidate could say.”

“Let's talk about this another time, shall we? I need to get to the office...” Diana got up from the small table in her breakfast nook, kissed Joanna goodbye, and started to walk out of her apartment.

She called back, “I'll come to your place tonight? We said we'd stay in and watch an old movie.”

Janie smiled, and called after her, “Sounds good. See you later.” As Diana walked out the door, she wondered how long their quiet life would last.

Hilcyon Station, Cfro 25 1152

“Pkygy Hostro Gnova and wife.” The booming voice over the loudspeaker in the shuttle waiting area brought Beatrice back to attention. She had been drifting, again, in that sad mist that sometimes came over her when she thought of Craig. Even now, all this time after his death, she still missed him desperately.

“Come, Beatrice, it's time for us to get on the shuttle.” Pkygy was always gentle, and he understood her sad moods. It was the second leg of their trip. They had been passengers on a cargo ship headed for the Hilcyon station, and after days of waiting they had finally gotten on board a shuttle that would take them to the surface. Once they landed at Plrody, the largest city on Hilcyon, they had a relatively short train ride to Ghedro, where they would be living.

The mass of people started to shuffle through the doors, and Beatrice was afraid of yet another trip with no windows, and no idea of where she was going. But when they entered the shuttle, she was surprised to see comfortable-looking chairs, and nice full windows. She could see the station they were attached to, and the large planet below. It was the first time that she'd seen anything except walls since she had been kidnapped. She didn't even know how long it had been. She knew she had been on the asteroid for about three-quarters of one of their years, but she had no idea how long that was in relation to New Earth years, or Earth years. It had felt like eons, and she thought that it was possible that she had been gone from New Earth for a long time.

They found seats, and Pkygy gracefully offered her the window seat. She thankfully took it. Her window faced away from the planet, and she could see two of the moons clearly. They were stunningly beautiful.

“Pkygy, you described the moons to me, but I had no idea...”

“Yes, aren't they beautiful? Wait till you see the other seven!”

The shuttle slowly started to move, and then accelerated, and she could see the station recede into the distance. As the shuttle swung toward the planet, the planet came fully into view. It was so different from either Earth or New Earth. There were no clouds, and no oceans. The planet was a dull orange color, with very large polar ice caps on each pole—they extended well into what she would have thought were temperate zones. As the shuttle started to enter orbit, she could see part of the night side, and the sparkling shapes she assumed were cities.

As they got closer, a voice spoke over the loudspeakers. “Preparing for re-entry. Please put your harnesses on.”

All of a sudden, shutters came down over the windows. Pkygy was showing her how to put the harness on. “The windows will open again, but this part can be a little rough.”

Beatrice could feel a deep rumble underneath her, and the shuttle shook and bucked for about 20 minutes. Then things smoothed out, and the shutters came up. Beatrice looked down at the planet surface, and, seeing the harsh reality of it, understood the Kinder people a bit better. It was clearly a harsh environment. Pkygy had told her about it, but it was so much starker when flying above it. It reminded her of the short trip her family once took to visit Utah, when she was very little.

She could see no water at all. They flew over canyons and deserts, with very small hints of green now and again. Once in a while they flew over what looked like a settlement, where there would be large green patches, and lots of buildings that looked like greenhouses. Pkygy had mentioned that because the surface was relatively cold for most of the year, many food crops were grown in the greenhouses.

“Pkygy, where do the food crops come from? This planet looks like it's never had any significant vegetation.”

Pkygy was used to her non sequiturs—questions and comments that seemed to come out of thin air—but he could follow her train of thought. It was something she really appreciated about him, and one quality Craig hadn't had.

“They were imported from the Breft planet.” He let that fact hang in the air for Beatrice to absorb.

As the shuttle slowed and was making its final approach to the space port at Plrody, Beatrice began to see what looked like small hexagonally-shaped hamlets, with about twenty or thirty dwellings, built close together, around what looked like a square. What Beatrice would have expected was for the hamlets to give way to suburbs, and then city, but what actually seemed to happen was the hamlets just got jammed closer and closer together, and were more tightly packed. The demarcations between hamlets remained obvious, even from the air. This suggested to Beatrice that there were close knit families that were insular, and self-protecting. This would be a challenge to their goals, certainly. But there were also advantages to this—it might be possible to sway whole families at once.

Independent Christian State, New Earth, Month 4, Year 14

Marianne and Leticia had traveled quite a ways from Dlejon to visit Leticia's mother Yolanda in the ICS. Leticia had been very reluctant about going back; she worried that she could get stuck in the ICS again. New America and the ICS had finally opened themselves up to dialogue and trade, and there had been a return to normal relations over the course of a few months. When travel to the ICS seemed safe and relatively easy, Marianne suggested that they go. There was a new train linking parts of the SCIZ, and travel to New San Francisco by train was fairly quick. But then they still had to do a river trip up to New Richmond—there hadn't been much in the way of development of easy north-south travel except by river. Then, from New Richmond, they got on a somewhat rickety bus for the rest of the way to Yolanda's settlement.

They all sat in Yolanda's living room: Yolanda, Leticia, Marianne and Stanley. Yolanda had been surprisingly happy to see Marianne.

“I heard you were on this planet—it was all over the widenet. I wondered if I'd get to see you.”

“It's good to see you Yolanda. You've been through so much. I'm so sorry about Beatrice. I'm sure she's still alive, I'm just not sure if we'll ever see her again.”

Yolanda hung her head in sadness, and then looked at Leticia, and a smile started to slowly come onto her face. “I'm so glad to see you, Leticia. You have grown so much. And a doctor? That is so wonderful.”

Leticia looked a bit uncomfortable, but then smiled. “Yes, mom, I'm enjoying my life in Dlejon, although I'll be moving to the Northern Independent Zone to live in New Calgary.

Marianne remembered the conversation she'd had with Leticia and her partner Mira. Mira was ready to leave her home of Dlejon, and find her place elsewhere. They had decided to take up Jeffrey and Thomas's offer for them to join in starting a new medical school in New Calgary.

As if Yolanda were reading Marianne's mind, she asked “So, are you married? Do you have a boyfriend?”

Leticia looked uncomfortable, and then looked to Marianne, somewhat pleadingly. Marianne gave Leticia as much of a “Go ahead, tell her about Mira” look as she could muster.

Leticia looked back at her mother. “I have a partner, mom. Her name is Mira, and she's also a physician. She's from Dlejon.”

Marianne could see a wide range of emotions move over Yolanda's face, but the last one was one of peaceful acceptance. “That's good, Leticia, I'm glad you've found someone to love. I know that I was hard on you when you were here, but I wanted so much for you to fit in, even though deep down I knew that you never could.”

Marianne could see everyone in the room relax. They spent the rest of the afternoon and over dinner reminiscing about Earth, talking about the realities of life in New America, and talking about the future of New Earth. Marianne had been increasingly feeling hope that there could be peaceful coexistence among the people of New Earth, and as they conversed her hope continued to grow.

New York, Earth, September 4, 2022

Here I am again, Joel thought: sitting in Diana's living room, delivering bad news. This was getting to be a bad habit.

Janie asked, “Do you think humans will get probation?”

Joel said, “It's hard to know. The Casitians don't think so, but I'm not so confident. From my perspective, they actually did make a big mistake in locking the wormhole. But of course, they spent the last year trying to figure out how to make a defense that makes them look innocent.”

They kept talking, and, in particular, talked about how to tell people on Earth.

Diana said, “I think we need to tell them before the Sejo acts. That way, if the Sejo acts in a way that will affect us, it won't be such a surprise—people need to be prepared.”

Joel nodded. “I agree. I'm happy to be interviewed by the press, again, and basically lay out what's happened so far. I hope they aren't getting too sick of me.”

Diana smiled, and put her hand on Joel's arm. “Silly boy, the press absolutely loves you. I guess you don't hear how much they miss you when you're gone. I'll make contact with the

folks I know, and we'll start from there. This is going to create a bit of a storm. How long can you stay?"

"I have to be at the council world in about 5 months. There is a ship that is scheduled to leave Sol station for the council world in 2 months. So I have about 4 weeks before I need to leave for Sol station."

"That's enough time."

Chapter 11: The Unthinkable Happens

We cannot express how much Galactic citizenship means to us. And we must do everything we can to maintain it.—Erit'ala (782)

Wuj'tren (or Upsilon Andromedae) March, 5, 2023

Joel had arrived on Wuj'tren, the third planet of the sun the Casitians called Yrel, a few days ago. Terrans had named this star Upsilon Andromedae. Joel had been awed by the planet, with its verdant but foreign landscape and its majestic, yet in some ways understated, architecture. Because it was the Galactic capital, it had representatives of all of the species in the community. He and the group from Casiti entered the building that held the Council offices and where the Council met. He was completely overwhelmed by the scale of the Council room. “Room” was hardly a reasonable term. It was huge, as large as a coliseum, tiered, with light streaming in from above. There were balconies that jutted out at various angles from the tiers of floors, and some had bridges between them where beings—whom he assumed to be aides of varied sorts would scurry from balcony to balcony. Their group was all far down below, in a small circular depression with very comfortable seats. He couldn't help the feeling that he was about to go to jail.

Eventually things settled down. He was handed a small device, which he was instructed to place inside his ear. He assumed this was the translation device. A loud, booming voice came from above. A creature he could only describe as a mix between a kangaroo and a cat seemed to be speaking from a platform in the center of the chamber.

After a small delay, he heard, “Welcome, members of the council, staff, and guests. We must begin these proceedings.”

There were small murmurs around the chambers, then silence.

“The Keeelo have brought a filing against the human species. Based upon the findings, the council will vote for continuation of human citizenship, probation, or restriction of the human species from the galactic community.”

“Will the Keeelo representative please come forward?”

A white translucent cube that Joel had not noticed started moving toward the center. He could see a little movement within it. Eventually, it stopped, close to the center.

“Please state your case.”

The strangest sounds Joel had ever heard started to emanate from the cube.

A translation came through his earpiece. “We hold the wormholes, hold them, keep them, we hold the wormholes. Those who disrespect the wormholes must not be a part, must not be us, aren't us. They disrespect the wormholes again, another time, it is enough.”

Joel was puzzled. Disrespect the wormholes again?

The cube returned to its previous position.

“The Keeelo have chosen intermediaries to argue their case. Will these intermediaries please come forward?”

A small group of squat, square beings with ribbons for hair Joel had learned were the Krumptia, walked into the center of the area close to them. They were natural bureaucrats and lawyers, and Joel had met some in his travels. That they were going to argue against the humans sobered him greatly.

“You are ready to make your case?”

“Yes, we are ready to make our case.”

“Will the human representatives please step forward?”

Erit'ala, Ja'el, and several other Casitians he didn't know, got up and moved toward the center.

“Are you ready to defend your species?”

Erit'ala nodded. “Yes, we are.”

“Do you understand the possible consequences?”

Erit'ala nodded again, sadly. “Yes, we do.”

“Then let us begin.”

New York, Earth, March 5, 2023

“Hello world! I'm Joh Appel, and I'm here with two experts who will help us figure out our future with the Casitians. First, we have John Bulmeister, Professor of Sociology from

University of Arizona. Also with us is Gina Winthrop, Professor of Psychology at the New School for Social Research, here in New York. Thank you both for being here with me today.”

“Thank you, Joh.”

“Thanks, Joh, I’m glad to be here.”

“So, first, Professor Bulmeister. What have you made of this whole issue of the Casitians versus the Kinder?”

“Well, Joh, it’s simple. The Casitians are xenophobes. They proved it while they were here, and this is the ultimate proof. Thousands of years ago, instead of uniting the Human race, they chose to separate it.”

“Professor Winthrop, your opinion?”

“Professor Bulmeister, Joh, that is a complete oversimplification of the issues here. Remember, the separation of these two groups happened after a period of two thousand years of slavery. We can’t even begin to understand what the dynamics were.”

“Professor Bulmeister, do you have an opinion as to what will happen at that Galactic Council thing?”

“Well, if I were them, I’d come down hard on the Casitians. They clearly were at fault here.”

“Clearly at fault?!?”

“Professor Winthrop?”

“The Kinder invaded New Earth. That happens to be a planet with our people on it, Professor Bulmeister!”

“The Casitians locked the wormhole, leaving our people...”

“The Kinder invaded...”

“Please, please. Don’t interrupt each other. Professor Winthrop?”

“Look, I think there is probably enough fault to go around. I don’t know what the Galactic council will do, but it can’t be good for any human beings, Casitian or Terran.”

Wuj’tren (or Upsilon Andromedae) March, 5, 2023

“So what is the basic procedure?” Joel was curious. He wasn't part of the defense group—that was made up of Casitians that knew galactic law. He was simply a witness that would be called on at some point or another. He wished Marianne was here. Joel was not at all sure that things were going to go well.

He was sitting comfortably with Silandra and a few others in a room that had been given to the human defense team. It was sumptuously appointed, with lots of food which seemed custom made for them—some of the food even came from Earth.

“The Keeelo will make their case through the Krumptia. Then we make our case. Then the Sejo will adjourn to make the decision on the verdict.”

“Do the Keeelo and human representatives on the Sejo get a vote?”

“No, they must recuse themselves, and will not be present during the deliberations. The Krumptia must also recuse themselves.”

“The Krumptia are on the Keeelo's side?”

“Well, the Krumptia and Keeelo have a very long history together, and they support each other.”

“How long will all this take?”

“The inquest will take several days, plus several more days of Sejo deliberation on the verdict. The sentencing can take years. They don't take the probation of a species lightly.”

“Is that what you expect—probation? The Keeelo seem to be asking for outright restriction.”

“I'm hoping we don't get probation, and I can't imagine the Sejo would suggest restriction.”

Joel fervently hoped not.

Wuj'tren (or Upsilon Andromedae) March, 7, 2023

Joel had listened carefully to the case that the Keeelo and Krumptia had laid out. It had been very short, and, he had to admit, devastating. Galactic law was quite particular about the qualities of a species that would assure galactic membership, and the qualities of a species that would result in restriction. In the eyes of the galactic community, qualities such as harmonious relationships between individuals of a species and groups of individuals within a species were

paramount. Armed conflict and, more particularly, the use of wormholes for armed conflict were enough to restrict a species for 1000 years. Armed conflict where one species attacked other species, as the Tud'scla did, generally resulted in permanent isolation and restriction.

Joel thought that the Krumptia were meticulous in making their case which rotated simply around two particular events: the use of the wormhole by the Za'aref to invade New Earth, and the locking of the wormhole by the Casitians to prevent the Za'aref from leaving. The Keeelo saw both of these actions as use of the wormholes for acts of violence against other members of the human species.

Joel wasn't sure what the Casitians would use as a defense—the case the Krumptia had laid out was rock-solid. The Casitians could hardly use as a defense that it was the fault of the Kinder, since the Kinder were human as well, and the actions of the Kinder clearly were considered by this body as an act of the human species. As he sat in the lounge chewing on some sort of tasty vegetable, he looked over at Silandra and Erit'ala, who were deep in conversation.

“We have decided to call Grel, the Tvierl representative as a witness—I can't imagine any other way to defend ourselves. The Tvierl understand humans better than any other species does.”

Erit'ala sighed. “I'm not sure that calling the Tvierl in is going to make much of a difference. The galactic policy is clear, the Za'aref violated it, and there isn't much we can do. But it will be good to have a species on our side.”

Joel walked over to the pair. “But the case also hinges on your decision to lock the wormhole. It seemed to be that, more than the use of the wormhole by the Za'aref, which the Keeelo objected to.”

Erit'ala shook her head vigorously. “We acted in the only way we could to limit the damage. They've got to understand that!”

The doors to the lounge opened, and one of tall robots with oblong bodies and many-jointed limbs came in. “The Sejo is re-convening—please return to the council room.”

They filed back into the council room, and Joel sat down nervously. He knew that in this next phase, he would likely be called upon to testify.

R'terin, the main Casitian running the defense team, rose, “August members of the Sejo, we now begin our defense. We understand why the Keeelo were upset by the use of the wormhole by those we call the Za'aref. The Za'aref have been separate from the rest of the

human species for a long time, and we intend to keep their influence from contaminating the vast majority of humans—those who live on Casiti and Earth. Casitians have come to an easy, companionable relationship with the people of Earth, the home world of humankind. Earth and Casiti are without warfare or conflict of any kind, and in harmony with our worlds, and with the universe. We have no reason to believe that this will not continue indefinitely, and humans should, therefore, continue to be a full member of the Galactic community.”

“I now call Erit'ala to describe the events surrounding the current crisis.”

Erit'ala got up, and sat in the witness chair. R'terin asked a series of questions, which she answered. Joel could tell that this was a very well-orchestrated dance. Some facts were left out, and some glossed over. The whole thing made him nervous.

One of the most interesting ways that this “trial” differed from ones he was used to was that there was nothing like a cross-examination. R'terin had not been allowed to ask the Krumptia or Keeelo any questions, and they likewise were not allowed to ask any of the defense witnesses anything.

After Erit'ala stepped down, R'terin stood up and turned toward Joel. “I would ask that Joel Martin, from Earth, come forward.”

Joel stood up and walked toward the witness seat. He turned around, and sat down. He could look up and see the tiers of beings of all sorts looking down at him (some of them he had to imagine looking down at him—he couldn't see any identifiable eyes.) Joel had not been coached, which worried him a little bit.

“Joel, please explain the status of the human species on Earth. Has there been any conflict?”

“No, not since the colony ships left. People have been very happy with the new technology and points of view. They have been happy with the environmental cleanup, with a more egalitarian culture, and with no poverty or hunger, and more ease. It is a good life on Earth now.”

“And this is due to the work of the Casitians?”

“Yes. We were going to hell in a hand basket before they arrived.”

“And how do you see the future? Will Earth and Casiti coexist peacefully?”

“Yes, I can't imagine why that would change. People on Earth have been very interested in visiting Casiti, and there are Casitians on Earth, and I expect that Earth will continue to be peaceful.”

“Thank you Joel. You may go back to your seat.”

Joel walked back, happy it was over for now.

Wuj'tren (or Upsilon Andromedae) March, 8, 2023

“We now call Grel, the representative of the Tvierl.”

A very tall being came forward, with no clothing on. Joel could swear he looked just like a very tall human basketball player: lanky, with long legs and arms. One would, however, never mistake him for a human being. His skin was a greenish blue hue, his eyes were all blue pupil, and he had webs between what looked like seven fingers on each hand. He walked a bit awkwardly, as if that was not his most comfortable way of traveling. Joel realized that although the Casitians had called Grel “he” in conversation, Joel couldn't see any evidence of male-like genitalia. Grel's nose was striking, too—much larger and longer than a human nose, with only one large nostril, that he seemed to open and close when he breathed. He sat in the chair, which had grown a bit to accommodate him.

“Grel, I thank you for being willing to act as our witness.”

Grel seemed to nod his head, but it was slight. He looked toward R'terin, waiting.

“You have heard these events, and the Tvierl have been advocates for humans over the years. Will you vouch for the human species?”

There was a pause—it felt to Joel that it was far too long. He could see Erit'ala move uncomfortably in her seat.

“No, we cannot at this time.”

There was a stunned silence in the room. Joel looked over to Erit'ala, who had her head in her hands. Silandra had lost all color in her face.

R'terin stolidly continued, “Please, Grel, be clear with us why this is so. The Tvierl have always supported humans—you were the ones who supported our joining the Galactic community so long ago, and have always been our ally.”

“We have supported the human presence in the Galactic community because we felt that the Casitians were fit for Galactic citizenship. And we still would be supporting continued human presence if the Casitians had chosen to act with the whole of their species in mind, not just themselves. From our perspective, their actions to lock the wormhole at New Earth, instead of finding ways to mediate the difficulties, and provide leadership for all humans, were not in keeping with the behavior of a galactic citizen. We suggest a 1000 year restriction. We expect in that time, the humans will return to us whole.”

There was a lot of conversation in the room, some hushed, some loud. Joel knew that at this point, the fate of the human species, at least for the next 1000 years, was sealed.

R'terin rang a bell, and the room became quiet. “We ask the Sejo for a recess. We have much to consider.”

“Recess granted.”

They eventually ended up back in the lounge, and sat down close to each other. R'terin stood up first, and spoke. “I talked to Grel before the trial started, and he seemed, at the time, to be sure that they would support us. I don't know what happened, but clearly they decided otherwise. I suggest that we suspend our defense.”

“Suspend our defense?” Silandra looked shocked. “That would mean that we would have to agree to being restricted for 1000 years! We must defend ourselves, and at least try to get probation.”

R'terin replied, “I think the best we can do at this point is to hope that we can soften the terms of the 1000-year restriction.”

Erit'ala said in a pained voice, “How do you soften isolation from galactic contact and loss of representation? It is the worst possible outcome—the outcome we have been working to prevent for the last three thousand years!”

A light went off in Joel's brain. Somehow, now, the behavior of the Casitians made more sense to him: the reason they guarded the wormhole from Hilcyon, the reason they kept the information about the Za'aref from Terrans and their behavior at New Earth. It was this fate that they had feared from the beginning.

Transport from Casiti to Earth, March, 20 2023

Joel was dead tired. He and Laura were finally on their way back to Earth after the debacle on the Council world. The Terran group had taken a transport from Wuj'tren to Casiti with the Casitian defense team, who basically refused to talk with them. It was almost as if the Casitians blamed them for everything—it was infuriating. And the worst thing was that it wasn't over yet. The Sejo had officially given their verdict that humans had acted in ways that were counter to galactic standards. The regular sentence for that was 1000-year restriction, but the Sejo was to deliberate to fully consider the sentence. Erit'ala had told him that it could take years. He and Laura had decided to go back to Earth to figure out what they were going to do next. Their galactic traveling days were over.

He thought that the Casitians were overreacting. He'd certainly enjoyed his jaunts around the galaxy, and he knew that galactic technology was always getting better, but it seemed that it wasn't that big a deal. He and Laura were thinking that it was time to get on with their lives, no matter what the Sejo did, and it seemed Earth was the best place for them to do that.

David was going to stay on Casiti. He liked it there, and seemed to prefer Casitian boyfriends, for reasons Joel couldn't quite understand. He was happy that David had found his place, though. And he missed Marianne more than he imagined he would. He missed her reasonableness, her steady hand, her quiet leadership.

As he drifted off to sleep, nuzzling in Laura's arms, he had a short, strange, dream of large colony ships. Then, just blissful sleep.

New Orleans, New Earth, Month 3, Year 23

This meeting had been a long time coming, Marianne thought. It had been over ten New Earth years since the Kinder deserters had begun to form collection of small settlements in the southwest corner of New Aard, as well as the southern part of the SCIZ. She had watched the developments from afar, and she was glad to finally get to meet the Kinder leader.

Marianne and the Kinder man called Ngellin sat across from each other at a table in a New Orleans Cafe. It seemed that he had gotten used to the setting.

He said, "I like New Orleans, quite a lot."

"Really? It's becoming my favorite New Earth city. Your English is very good."

Ngellin smiled. "Thanks. We learned some on the way here."

"Really? How?"

"There had been infiltrators for years, learning the lay of the land, and learning your languages. Those of us who were going to go down to the surface were required to learn one of them, and English was the one I was assigned."

Marianne thought that made sense. They could have disguised themselves as someone from New Aard, for instance, who didn't know English well.

"We'd like to learn more about you, and the Kinder, Ngellin. But I have a tough question for you."

"Please ask."

"What will happen to those teenagers who were kidnapped?"

Ngellin looked sad. "They will work in the asteroid mines."

"That sounds unpleasant."

"It is. It's where all of the criminals and dissidents go, too."

"Is there any escape?"

Ngellin shook his head. "No, Marianne. A sentence to the mines is lifelong."

Casiti, 130 Wend, 784/March 10, 2025/ Month 4, Year 24

Joel was in the room with Erit'ala and other Casitians, watching the holographic recording of Galactic Council's final sentence. The verdict had been determined two years ago when Joel had been on the Council world. He guessed the Galactic Council moved slowly during the sentencing phase.

Erit'ala had sent a message to him on Earth, telling him the sentence was in, but not telling him what it was. She had asked him to be physically present on Casiti to hear the sentence. He had to wait several days until he could get here to see it.

The Sejo council leader gave the official sentence of a 1000-Earth-year restriction. It was a short little speech. Even though the leader didn't say it, Joel knew that it included not only lack

of representation on the Sejo, and lack of involvement in the galactic economy, but complete isolation from all other species. The Keeelo would specially tune and lock the wormholes, so that no humans could use them to get into space other than that inhabited by humans. Joel understood that to mean that the wormholes would only work between the human worlds—between Earth and New Earth, Earth and Casiti, and Hilcyon and New Earth, and Hilcyon and Casiti.

It looked like there was more coming. The weirdest-looking creature Joel ever saw walked up to the front.

“I am Yuyuyuyuyu, representative of the Kwalloo. I speak for those who swim the waters of the planet the humans call Earth. They wish to make it clear that those waters are the waters they swim in. It is their home, and they should not be separated from it.”

“What are they asking?” Joel said.

“This is the logical next step, and we fully expected this in the case of restriction. They are asking that human beings be removed from Earth.”

“*What??*”

“Yes, Joel. They have that right.”

“But it's *our* planet!”

“No, it's not. It is the Dolphins' planet now, not yours.”

###

About the Author

Michelle has been a science fiction fan since she could read. She has written and published poetry and technical writing. This is the first novel of a trilogy. Michelle lives and works in Oakland, CA.

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