Carril found himself in the same spot he’d vanished from, only there was no house there. As such, he fell for a meter before crashing into a bush, the branches tearing at his exposed fur. He pulled himself from the bush, spitting and angry. “Hey! What the hell was that!? Hey!”

There was no one nearby, but he could hear noise. Singing (or, maybe just yelling) could be heard from the bottom of the hill. This was impossible. All the people from this area had been killed, or fled to the city. He straightened his uniform, drew his pistol, and stalked to the edge of the hill.

What he saw was not a squad of soldiers like he expected, but a massive party. Multicolored streamers were being flung from the windows of completely intact dwellings, and banners flew from poles that were driven into the ground at seemingly random places throughout the grassy area. As people around them danced and threw more colorful streamers around, a smaller group stood on a wooden stage, singing with strong deep voices into an overcast sky. Carril rubbed his nose as a breeze blew by, and he holstered his gun. Sitting, he watched the performance as he tried to work out what had happened. Was this a different part of the planet? Maybe he had been transported here somehow? But the land looked very similar, especially the unique hill he now sat atop. Not only that, he could clearly see the city to the south, glittering with lights and, as he could just make out, colorful streamers hanging from the tops of buildings. Yes, he was definitely in the same spot.

The singing stopped, and with the sound of thousands of pebbles rolling down a rough surface, the crowd erupted into cheering. Even if his situation was uncertain, Carril couldn’t help but smile at these alien’s jubilation. They certainly knew how to party. That is, until someone screamed and Carril noticed one of them was pointing right at him with a flat hand. “Help! A mountain Foorian!”

Carril tried to scramble back, but several of the Dearnans saw him as he dove back towards the center of the hilltop. The party had stopped, and now voices filtered up to where Carril now lay perfectly still, listening as his translator told him what was happening.

“A Foorian? They aren’t real! Whose child is that?!”

“I saw him! He was standing there, watching us…”

“Oh, you’re drunk!”

“I saw it, I swear!”

“Someone get Mediator Bruntd!”

Carril knew how some of these Dearnans thought about aliens, and hoped that he had simply startled them, and not ignited their xenophobic tendencies. Now an uneasy silence was falling over the crowd. It made Carril uncomfortable; an Atriean crowd might have decided to rush him, or chatter ceaselessly among themselves, but these Dearnans were now just waiting. Carril sat up, trying to get a peek at what was happening. Instead of learning anything, he found himself staring down the barrel of the longest rifle he’d ever seen. “Stay still, Foorian, don’t move a muscle!”

Carril did so. “Can I talk?”

“Can… hey, you’re not supposed to know our language! You speak the mountain language, right?”

“I have this box here; it translates what I’m saying. Can you lower the gun, please? I’m not going to hurt you.”

The man pointed the barrel to the left, over Carril’s shoulder, and peered into his eyes. “Wow…”

“What?”

“What are those colors? Your eyes are… Beautiful.”

Carril had to laugh at that. “I’ve been called handsome before, but never beautiful!”

The man lowered the rifle some more, stamping his feet. “Are you laughing at me?! I told you not to move!”

“No, no I didn’t mean any offence. Thank you for the compliment, though.”

The Dearnan, who Carril assumed was Mediator Bruntd, pulled the gun away and propped it up on his other arm. “You don’t sound like a Foorian, but you look like one. They’re said to have emeralds for eyes.”

“This is just how my eyes look, they’re not emeralds.”

“My name is Mediator Bruntd, and I speak for the authority of Dearna. Where did you come from? What do you want with our township?”

Carril tried to answer that question, but realized that he was just as confused as Bruntd. “Um… Before I answer that, I have a question.”

“Alright.”

Carril dropped his voice as he noticed some Dearnans creeping up the hill to watch. “How do you feel about… people who are not from your planet?”

Bruntd looked surprised, then burst into laughter. “How do I feel… Hahahaha!”

He turned slowly, his laughter echoing over the crowd. “You want to know how we feel about off-worlders!”

This drew a profound reaction from the crowd. They all let out a massive cheer, and began flinging paper streamers at Carril. “W-what?!”

Bruntd set his rifle aside and pulled Carril to his feet. “You should have told us you were an alien. Welcome! Come, enjoy the party!”

A nearly intact roll of paper got stuck in Carril’s ear, and he shook it off, catching it. He had never been more confused in his life. “…What?”

Bruntd studied Carril’s face as he rubbed the waxy paper between his fingers. The crowd had already begun moving back down into the township to continue dancing. “You really don’t know anything about our world, do you?”

“I… know some things. I just came for a visit, but I was somewhere else. There were no people.”

The large man scooped up the rifle and gestured slowly down the hill. “Come to my office, maybe we can contact someone who can help you.”

Carril just nodded, which Bruntd didn’t understand but assumed meant yes. “This way!”

They entered a large building with an elaborate cage on one side and an entire living space on the other. Bruntd hung the rifle on the wall and slowly sat in the most comically overstuffed armchair Carril had ever seen. “Ahh… All that dancing tuckered me out. Oh! I never asked your name! You do have names on your world, yes?”

“Oh, yes. My name is Carril Cohan. Pilot Carril Cohan of the Atriean military.”

“What a magnificent name! And you have three of them? Three names? How odd…”

“I have two names. Pilot is my rank, and my job. I fly… machines.”

“Oooh, like the ships the Yerins have?”

“Exactly.”

“A noble profession.”

“If you say so.”

The Dearnan reached to a nearby table and uncovered a bottle of sweet-smelling liquid. The smell made Carril a little queasy, but Bruntd seemed to like it, as he took a large draught. “Very well Carril Cohan. How is it you came to… visit our planet?”

“It’s just Carril, please. You don’t have to use my second name.”

“Noted.”

Carril glanced at his paws. He decided to be cautious. “I was exploring, I suppose. I was in an area with a lot of ruined buildings, then I met a Dearnan man who…”

It hit Carril, then. Something about one of the twists that stuck out of Bruntd’s face. It looked a lot like the Atriean symbol for the “sh” sound, and Carril had only noted that shape on one Dearnan he had met in his life. “It was you…”

“Me? I’ve never seen you before in my life!”

The sickening feeling that the bottle had given him was nothing compared to what he was feeling now. “Do you have a timepiece? A digital one?”

“Digital? Um, I have a small computer that I bought from a Yerin trader… It displays the date.”

“That will do…”

Carril was handed a bulky, last generation Yerin computer, which he wasted no time interfacing with a data slip he took from his pocket. “Ooh, what’s that?”

“It’s a… very small computer.”

Once interfaced, the data slip was able to translate what Carril was seeing on the Yerin computer.

The date was proudly displayed across the bottom of the screen. It was eleven years ago.

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[i]Three weeks on[/I]

Carril was quickly learning something about the Dearnans he lived with: it took them an extraordinary amount of time to communicate to each other. Only friends and family talked with one another openly, and if one wanted to speak with a stranger, one first had to ask a third party to arrange a meeting.

They clung to these traditions, though Carril had no idea why the Dearnans would do so with such diehard conviction. It made getting word to the city that much harder, as Dearnans liked nothing more than to drag their feet with every little task. In fact, when Bruntd asked Carril to do something that took mere hours, he had gotten slightly offended that the task didn’t take at least two days.

Carril found the jungle sapped his energy, and he spent most of his time reading. Dearnans were an interesting bunch, and their history and literature (though it sometimes read like farce thanks to their strange customs) was able to easily captivate him. However, on week three, he was restless.

He found Bruntd gazing down at the smashed fence that usually penned in a small collection of egg-laying creatures. The eggs didn’t agree with Carril, but the flesh was delectable. “Did something happen?”

“Looks like it. Ta’b won’t be happy when he finds this.”

“So, he lost the whole flock, eh?”

“No, he should have some more in his cellar… what do you think did this, Carril?”

Carril hummed. “Could be one of those… Hadffs?”

“Hada’fhs. Perhaps. They have been known to break fences for their meals.”

“Or it could be Batd.”

Bruntd turned to him and smiled. “Oh? What makes you say that?”

“Haven’t you noticed how Ta’b and Batd look at each other? I half expect them to throw punches at one another whenever they’re in the same public space.”

“Very astute! Yes, they don’t like each other. But they’d never get into a physical fight. That’s a soldier’s job.”

“Really? Now that you mention it, your people do like to be very passive aggressive towards those you don’t like.”

“Indeed we do. I will let Batd stew for a few days, then I will question him. What is it you need, my friend?”

Carril had almost forgotten why he’d sought Bruntd out, and reminded himself he was acting like a Dearnan, being so indirect. “Did you get a response? To the letter you sent?”

“Not yet, though I wouldn’t expect a response for at least-”

“-another week, yes.”

Bruntd began walking, and he steered Carril along with him. Whenever they had serious conversations, Bruntd would start walking. “Frankly, Carril, I don’t think the Foreign Affairs Head will believe your story.”

“It’s not a story. I’m really from the future.”

“And yet, you won’t tell me anything about future events!”

Carril eyed him. “Do you not believe me?”

“I… I am reserving judgement. You did appear, but it could have been some technological trick we’re not privy to.”

“Atrieans don’t have teleportation technology. Trust me.”

Bruntd sighed. “Tell me something, then! What happens, ten years down the line? You said I was there, yes?”

There was a small, oft forgotten class all cadets were made to attend in their early years of training: Temporal Studies. It focused mainly on time dilation as a result of space travel through strong gravitational fields, but there was one day a year where the class would be taught by a man from Temporal Investigations. This underfunded, tiny and mostly inactive branch of the military existed to uphold one tenant of Atriean moral law: “If and when time travel is, purposefully or accidentally discovered, its use and misuse must be strictly controlled to protect our past.”

The cadets had this hammered into their heads, but most would never need to enforce or abide by this law. Revealing details about the future to people in the past was a violation of this law, and Carril now realized he had already contaminated the past by telling this Dearnan that he would be alive eleven years from now. If he ever did get in contact with the Atriean government, he’d probably be put in stasis and reintegrated into his time. That was what had happened to the only two past offenders, both victims of freak accidents who were sent back three days, and two weeks respectively.

He pulled Bruntd into a side street. “Listen… My people have rules about this sort of thing, I’m… not supposed to tell you anything about the future. It might change things.”

“What an enlightened philosophy! Then… you’ve already changed things. I know I will live another ten years or so.”

“That’s not certain anymore. My future probably looks different than I remember it, even if it was just one fact I let slip… Anything else might change it for the worse.”

“Who’s to say you haven’t been given an opportunity? Perhaps you could change the future for the better.”

Carril was starting to get irritated with Bruntd’s habit of providing him with an opposing viewpoint. But, in this case, Carril knew he was right. What if he really could change the future for the better? It wasn’t worth thinking about, not with his future at stake. He turned. “As soon as you get that letter, tell me. I’m going for a walk.”

“Don’t sneeze to death, my friend!”

Carril smiled. “No promises.”

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[i]Four weeks on[/I]

It was another week before he got a response. He was helping a neighbor with his garden, picking clusters of deep purple berries from their stalks and depositing them into a large tub when Bruntd rushed (as fast as Dearnans could rush) to the fence and leaned over it. “Carril! Your letter is here!”

He dropped the tub and rushed over, yelling back. “Sorry, Hijj!”

“Don’t worry, Carril, the job’s nearly done!”

Bruntd chuckled as Carril ripped open the letter. “I’ve never seen someone make friends so easily! It’ll be a sad day when you leave us, Carril.”

“No offence, but I don’t belong here, I have to-”

He passed his data pad over the letter, translating it. “They think it’s a joke.”

“What?”

“They think it’s a goddamn joke! “We do not appreciate this waste of Yerin resources. Our scans of the township reveal nothing, not even Atriean life signs?!” What?!”

“Fools. They trust their machines too much.”

Carril crumpled the letter and stuffed it into his pocket. “That’s it! I’m done with this place! If a letter won’t convince them, maybe their own eyes will! Bruntd-”

“Yes! I know, I know, you’d like to travel to the city… but I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Why?”

Bruntd gestured, and the two walked back to his house. “Lately, we’ve been hearing some strange rumors… A man is stirring up the public, making some wild accusations about the Yerins… I don’t know the details but as a peacekeeper around here I was warned about recent, er, xenophobic attitudes that are becoming popular in the city.”

“I don’t plan on getting an apartment and moving in! I just want to talk to a Yerin!”

Bruntd sighed deeply. “Very well. But I do not think you’d like to walk.”

“Not especially.”

“Then we’ll use a tree skimmer.”

“A what?”

Carril had to give the Dearnans credit for their ingenuity. The only advanced tech they had access to was random pieces of Yerin technology they were able to buy, scavenge or steal. Even if it was all hundreds of years ahead of what the Dearnans themselves could make, they were able to adapt Yerin technology to serve their needs in ways the Yerins never would have. One such advancement was the tree skimmer, a small two-person vehicle that combined the chassis of old Dearnan vehicles with Yerin anti-gravity devices. Bruntd happened to be entitled to use one of the skimmers in town, thanks to his role, and they both wasted no time packing Carril’s few belongings into the cramped trunk of the skimmer. Carril slid the door shut on the rear of the rust-covered, frog like vehicle and dusted off his paws. “I’m surprised, Bruntd. I would have expected you to stall this trip as long as possible.”

“Haha! Well, we Dearnans have been learning from aliens like you for a hundred years! Far be it from me to break with tradition and not pick up some of your… pension to rush.”

Carril hoisted himself into the passenger seat, situated behind the pilot’s seat. It was much too broad for him, but at least there was room to sit. “You’re a fast learner, then! …say, how does this thing work? Is it a kind of hovercar?”

Bruntd jumped in and started the engine. It sounded (and smelled) like this vehicle ran on fossil fuels, though Carril had no time to huff about this before Bruntd pulled up on a lever. “I’m not sure how it works, I just know how to drive it! Might want to hang on!”

The vibrations in the frame began to increase. Then, like a stone from a slingshot, the skimmer rocketed into the air. “AHHHHHHH!”

“Nearly there!”

The roof of the skimmer deflected most of the branches and leaves, but Carril still found a pile of plant viscera in his lap once they burst through the canopy. They flew for another few seconds, before Carril’s stomach turned and they began to fall. “Uh… Bruntd?!”

“Yes?!”

“Aren’t we supposed to be flying?!”

“What? No, we’re going to land again!”

“Where?!”

“Right there!”

Aside from the hole they had come from, the jungle’s canopy was almost a seamless roof over everything below. As they fell towards the green carpet, they began to slow until, just a few feet over the canopy, the vehicle leveled out, Bruntd accelerating them towards the distant city. “There! No problem, right?!”

Carril leaned over the side and watched the leaves fly by, swaying only slightly from the skimmer’s flight; they left only a subtle wake in the jungle. “Huh. So that’s why it’s called a tree skimmer.”

“Well, yes! We could have taken a ground vehicle, but this is the fastest way to travel. The forest makes a very convenient road. It’s just a bit too convenient for most Dearnans! We do enjoy our long journeys.”

“Oh, I know all too well.”

They both chuckled, though over the wind the sound was lost.

It only took around an hour to reach the city, and Carril wondered what convoluted rout the mail carrier had taken for his trip to last weeks. They slowed as they approached the edge of the jungle, where an abrupt drop marked the tree line. Another fifteen feet and the suburban area began, and though the houses were packed together fairly tight, there were only a few Dearnans wandering about. Bruntd set them down in a shaded area next to a collection of other vehicles. Carril was about to climb out when Bruntd grabbed his arm. “Hang on, we need to be cleared.”

“What? How long will that take?”

“Well, that depends on-”

“Bruntd!”

A Dearnan waved from a nearby booth and began meandering over. Bruntd smiled. “We’re in luck! Hello, Vern!”

“What are you doing in the city? And- Moons! I-is that a Foorian?!”

“I’m an Atriean, actually.”

“It spoke!”

“Of course he spoke! He’s an off-worlder. An alien!”

Vern straightened up slightly, his red-clay skin shifting to a more pronounced red. “I see. What’s he doing here?”

“He’s lost, and needs to be returned to his people.”

“Hm. You’re right about that. Alright, you’re cleared for landing. On you go!”

Carril hopped out and helped Bruntd to the ground, then turned to thank Vern. However, he was already back in his booth, his back turned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Dearnan move that fast… he seemed a little cold, don’t you think?” Carril grumbled.

Bruntd began walking towards the street. “Towards you, perhaps. I suspect he’s been watching too many public broadcasts. Besides, city folk move a lot quicker than we do!”

He shook his head, something he had picked up from Carril. “Best forget about it. Welcome to the capitol of our planet! See’eff!”

They walked through the streets, drawing some awed gasps from onlookers. Carril was getting nervous enough to palm his service pistol every now and then. He’d never taken it out, or even told anyone (besides Bruntd) that it was a weapon, but he was never without it. The deeper they walked into the city, the more people they encountered. Carril tried to distract himself by watching the strange houses and buildings as they passed, then came to a sudden realization. “Bruntd?”

“Hm? Yes?”

“We’ve been walking right in the middle of the road, but I haven’t seen a single vehicle.”

“What?! In the city?! Oh, no, you won’t see vehicles around here! This is where people live!”

“Hm. Where I live, hovercars go by all the time.”

“Are they noisy?”

“Not really.”

“Well, then that explains it! Of course, an advanced species such as you would have developed silent vehicles… but the pollution! The air in your cities must be unbreathable!”

“Uh… actually-”

“Hang on…”

Bruntd took a sharp ninety degree turn towards what looked like a small, open air market. It reminded Carril of an Atriean restaurant, something about the way the tables were arranged, but the vendors sold everything from electronics to produce, and there wasn’t a single chair in sight. Bruntd stopped at the closest stall, which was covered in paper. “Take a look at this, my friend… It seems things are worse off than I thought.”

The clerk eyed Carril suspiciously, but didn’t bother the two as Bruntd spread a section of the paper out and studied the writing. There was a photograph of a Dearnan in some sort of uniform, which Bruntd scowled at. “What a windbag.”

Carril took out his data pad and read for himself…

1. In an unprecedented and historical broadcast, Commander of the Dearnan Colonial Forces, General Scoot, indicated his plan to address a crowd in See’eff square at sun-up tomorrow. Although his previous broadcasts on the subject of our Yerin administrators have drawn a considerable viewership in the past months, and were pre-recorded as not to offend tradition, this latest announcement has curried strong, albeit predictable reactions from the Dearnan people. Frankly, this paper and its staff find the General’s disregard for modesty to be quite obscene, and-[/I]

Carril stopped reading as his reflex to laugh won out against his politeness. He stepped away from the paper and grabbed his chest. “Hahaha! Are you…? You guys can’t even address [I]crowds?![/I]”

Bruntd crossed his arms. “Well, no… we can’t. All those strangers, it’s like speaking directly to everyone you meet on the street, but all at once! I’ll ask you not to laugh…”

“Alright… heh… I’m sorry, I suppose I just come from a very, er, obscene world.”

Bruntd looked quite offended. Carril held up his paws. “I’m sorry, okay!?”

“Humf. I’ll forgive you, as you are an alien.”

He approached the paper again. “So, this is General Scoot… pff!”

“You’re laughing again.”

“His name means “to eat cake” in my language.”

“It means “conqueror” in ours. Well, an archaic form of the word, anyway…”

The picture showed an incredibly stone-faced man (which was saying a lot) who instilled a low-grade sense of dread in Carril. He couldn’t quite pin down why. “We, uh, should get moving…”

“Don’t you want to hear about him?”

Carril walked from the square, forcing Bruntd to follow. “Yes, but I think we should get to the Yerins as soon as possible… You can give me the rough picture while we walk.”

“Alright, they’re only a few streets away.”

“So… who is he? I read that he’s the one stirring up this recent wave of xenophobia.”

“Oh, that’s a good word, I like it. Yes! He was elected to be the head of our Colonial Forces around, oh, five years ago? He was a nobody at first, but his writings became very popular and soon he was given a spot on our public broadcast system. He was a, er, political pundit. I’ll show you some of his recordings, maybe.”

“If everything goes right, I’ll be gone today.”

Bruntd rubbed his hands together and nodded slowly. “Indeed.”

“How does a pundit get into the military, anyway?”

“Oh, he joined the Colonial Forces. No one knows why, it’s a much talked about secret among his followers. When the last General died, and the people voted on a new one, they chose him.”

Carril gulped. “This is beginning to sound familiar, and a little worrying.”

He got a reassuring slap on the back. “Don’t worry! He’s not exactly the most powerful man on the planet! All he can do is talk and spread his message. Ultimately, the Yerins have control over the military.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yes. They took direct control of most of our infrastructure, after the dark years. They’ve helped us get back on our feet, though, and once we’re self-sustaining the Yerins have promised to turn direct control back to whatever Dearnans happen to be in power at the time.”

“I’m a little shocked… I’ve never known the Yerins to be this… heavy handed. I can’t say I blame your General for his views, your people are basically vassals!”

Bruntd stopped. “Don’t say that, it isn’t true. You should have seen our world before the Yerins came. Although I was not alive at the time, it was an era of death and suffering our people surely would have gone extinct from. Our cities were devastated, our farmland fallow, our civilian and military leaders all killed… the Yerins saved us. They’ve taken no resources from us, only implemented a few rules and promised to supply us with enough materials to rebuild ourselves. And we’ve done so.”

“Alright, I’ll admit I know nothing about your planet, past what I’ve read. But I do know my own people’s history, enough to dislike the type of people who would take control of a planet, even if it is for the people’s “own good.” I’ll tell you about it, sometime.”

“If things go bad with the Yerins, that is.”

“Yes…”

They turned a corner, and Carril spotted the Yerin Administration building right away. It was the only building painted a boring gray, and was also constructed of metal, rather than the wood and plastic all Dearnan homes were made of. “That’s it.”

“Oh, yes, it is!” Bruntd laughed. “Good eye.”

Bruntd’s identity papers got them through the electronic lock on the door, and the two stepped into the most boring lobby either had ever seen. Bruntd huffed. “Such a drab place.”

“At least our senses of aesthetics agree.”

Carril approached the first Yerin he saw, a man behind a small partition who was frantically writing something. “Excuse me!” Carril said.

The man’s bulbous head swiveled, and he focused his giant eyes on Carril. “An Atriean? How did you get here!?”

“I need to speak to someone in charge. I’ve been stranded on this planet, and I need to get back to the Empire.”

The man hopped off his chair and backed towards a door. “Stranded, you say? A predicament, to be sure… just give me a few moments, I’ll get someone.”

He slipped through the door. Carril frowned. “I’ve only met a few Yerins in my life, but they all seemed remarkably together. He seemed downright panicked.”

“Really? I didn’t notice.”

He returned faster than Carril expected, with a much taller Yerin. She cleared her throat. “Pilot, is it?”

“Yes…”

“How did a military man get past our sensor network undetected? Did you come in a ship? When did you get here?”

Carril was speechless for a moment. “Um… did you not get my letter? I visited this planet ten years in the future, and was sent back…”

The two Yerins exchanged a glance, and Carril knew they didn’t believe him. The woman took a slim device from her back pocket and pointed it at Carril. “That will be easy to confirm… Hm…”

She showed the scanner’s results to the man, and they were both silent for a long time. “Well?”

“We’ll give you passage on the next cargo ship off the planet. You’ll only need wait another week.”

Carril banged his paws on the partition. “Thank you!”

The Yerins glanced at Bruntd, the man speaking to Carril. “Do you have a place to stay?”

“Yes, I’m staying in a nearby township.”

The woman abruptly left while the man returned to his computer. “Good. We will send a skimmer to collect you. Good day, and may the light ever drive back the darkness.”

The conversation was over, so the two left. They walked in silence, until Carril sat down on one of the many benches lining the street. “That felt wrong.”

“What do you mean, friend?”

“Yerins are very… fastidious when it comes to time travel. If they detected signs of temporal radiation on me-”

“Hang on, what radiation?”

“Er… that might be a bit difficult to explain…”

“Oh, forget I asked!”

They chuckled. “Alright. My point is, the Yerins usually question people they suspect have been displaced from time. So, either something’s wrong…”

“Or you haven’t travelled back in time?”

That was something Carril didn’t want to consider. “I’m not hallucinating this. You’re real, aren’t you?”

“Last I checked, yes. I bet the Yerins are just nervous about General Scoot…”

“I am too… is there somewhere we can stay in the city? I’ve decided something.”

“Hm? I suppose I have a friend or two that would be willing to let us stay. What have you decided?”

“I’m going to watch that speech. Tomorrow.”

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[i]Four weeks, one day on[/I]

The next morning, and after a rather awkward breakfast where Carril was forbidden from speaking lest he offend the host, he and Bruntd headed off into the city. Carril immediately noticed the amount of foot traffic: unlike the other day, streams of Dearnans walked through the streets, grouped together in chattering family units, all walking towards where the General would soon make his speech. “Big turnout…” he muttered absentmindedly.

“You know, I think most of these people just want to see if he’ll actually go through with it.”

“Hm?”

“You know, if he’ll actually… address the crowd.”

“Maybe he planned it that way.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, the General is a clever man.”

After a half hour walk spent in silence, they arrived in a giant public forum, which was quickly filling with Dearnans. Buildings rose all around them, thicker and taller than anywhere else in the city. It made the space seem much smaller somehow, even if the graying sky was still visible. It felt like a cage, and Carril was briefly glad he was small enough to slip between the bars. On one end of the field was a stage, where Carril assumed the General would make his appearance. As more people filed into the grassy area, the noise seemed to drop considerably. ‘Probably to keep from accidentally talking to a stranger.’ Carril mused.

He pulled Bruntd away from the crowd. “We can find a better view than this. I’m shorter than most Dearnans…”

“Oh, sorry, you’re right. Perhaps we can get a seat up there?” He pointed to a rooftop garden.

“Are we allowed up there?” Carril asked as they headed for the front door of the building. It looked a little bit too much like someone’s house.

“Yes, if we pay.”

“Pay?”

Soon they had a seat on the roof, overlooking the entire square. Bruntd sighed. “Now that is a nice view. Look at all those people!”

The gray mass of people was speckled with flashes of colorful clothing. It was somewhat mesmerizing. Carril nodded slowly. “Huh. So, can we order something to drink while we wait?”

“Drink? What do you think this is?”

“A… café?”

Bruntd laughed. “No! This is just someone’s house. It’s not uncommon to rent people the roof, for viewing things, or just sitting with the plants. Not everyone can afford all this lushness!”

“But… there’s a forest right there.”

“Oh, but it’s a full forty-minute walk!”

“Hmm… I think I’d need more than a week to get used to this planet.”

Bruntd laughed again.

It was another hour before there was any movement on stage. However, instead of a decorated General stepping up, three small Dearnans wheeled a massive box up a ramp (with great difficulty) and shoved it to the center of the stage. They left it for a minute, and then it began to speak. “People of See’eff! This is the voice of your protector, General Scoot of the Colonial Forces. I know some of you may have expected an in-person appearance…” Bruntd and Carril shared a knowing glance at this, “…But I’m afraid I must disappoint you. I am inside the box my assistants kindly placed on the stage, and I began talking a full minute before you heard me, so…”

Carril’s smile grew wide enough for Bruntd to notice. “Don’t you start!”

“I’m sorry, this is just the most convoluted way of addressing a crowd I’ve ever seen! He has to stand in a box with a delay!”

“Please try and take this seriously, no one has ever done something like this before!”

“Alright, alright…”

He tuned back in to what the General was saying. “…And I’m sure the burning question on all your minds is why? Why did I call you all here? It is simple: our world is diseased. No, I am not talking about the plagues that sweep across our crops, or infect our children. I am speaking of the constant presence of a choking hand, wrapped around the torso of the Dearnan people! This hand promised to be warm, and guiding. It has done nothing but rob Dearnans of the power to govern themselves! Why is it, that in a hundred years, our population has not grown? Why are there not more great cities, such as this one? Where are the people of Kee?! We are a caged people, and we asked to be put there. I ask you, my countrymen, after one hundred years of bondage, what have we kept for ourselves? The Yerins run our government for us, like we are children! They give us machines and medicine, but they do not teach us to make our own! We entrust our fields to their brittle hands, and most fall fallow by the end of each season! But… you all know this already. You have lived it.”

There was a brief pause. Carril leaned over. “What’s Kee?”

“A great tragedy… It was going to be a city, but most of the colonists disappeared. No one knows why or how, but Scoot has been blaming the Yerins lately.”

The General’s voice returned. “Let me tell you about my own life. For the past two years I have been pleading, begging even… for the Yerins to relinquish their hold over our world. Dearnans must stand alone if we are to thrive again. Truly, like we did before the dark times, and before the Yerins fixed a yolk to our backs. Grand Tala, the Yerin coward that runs our government, strung me along for those two years, making promises he did not fulfill, lied to my face on many occasions and continues to lead our people to its eventual, stagnant end. I will make this speech brief, because the time has come for action.”

Bruntd straightened up. “Uh oh…”

“Uh oh? What do you mean, uh oh?!”

Bruntd gulped as the General spoke more on “action.” “The General has always been, er, very rhetorical. He’s never actually done anything, aside from organize some peaceful protests...”

Carril stood. “Uh oh…”

“What?”

“Look!”

He pointed towards a building on the far side of the square. There was movement from the roof. “I think there’s some people up there!”

“Oh, dear, I can’t see that far…”

The General raised his voice. “The Yerins expect us to lie down! They think we are a weak people, incapable of fending for ourselves! I WILL SHOW YOU THAT THIS IS FALSE!”

Bruntd grabbed Carril’s arm. “We need to leave.”

He did not respond, or move. His eyes were glued to the building. “Is that… a Yerin?”

“Grand Tala, Vice-Tala, and Secretary Progtin. These three “administrate” our planet. Three people. Feed on!”

A projector spun up, and on the white surface of the box an image appeared. Three Yerins, against a backdrop of gray sky, were bound and backed by five Dearnans with rifles. Carril gasped. “Oh, Drifrasa’s tits!”

“Moons! He’s not- Oh, he is! Carril!”

“Wait! There’s nothing we can do from down here!”

“Yes, there is! We can run!”

“Just wait!”

“As of this moment, Dearnans stand alone. I am reinstating the authority of President Gee, and the authority of the Dearnan Colonial Forces.”

There was a heavy silence, then, from the box, stepped the General. He said nothing, only swept his hand towards the building. Everyone turned. Three shrill screams echoed around the silent cage, and it was only then that Carril turned and ran.