

**Prologue: In which the story is set forth**

The twenty-one Rhysling kidlets nestled around their food father, each attached to him via a feeding tube. The trickle of nutrients, hormones, and genetic material brought on the cozy-yet-alert state that left the kidlets ready for stories and wisdom. A quick game of tag -- with feelers flickering among the group too fast to see, even if the room weren't pitch black -- got the last of the wiggles out. Dad, patient, waited as the flicks slowed down, with the final feathery brush coming, as usual, against his own curled proboscis.

"Ok, darlings, now that you all got *that* out of your systems" -- a gentle chittering indicated muffled giggles -- "it's story time. I *was* going to lecture on the 7th Age of Rhonne" -- now a not-so-gentle hissing of dismay -- "but I've decided to take requests. And since Melone was wise enough to tag me last and end the game, she gets to suggest."

Melone, the most sober of the litter, nursed her trickle for a few moments, then said, "Tell us about *humans*."

Even Dad's fast reflexes couldn't stop the gentle mist of surprise that wafted from his neck gills, though only a few of the kidlets could interpret it for what it was. "And where did you learn of *humans*?"

"I was sampling through the data orchards and ran across a tasting of them. I brought up some images, and they didn't scan like any sapients I've learned about so far. And yet the tasting was pungent with fear, respect, and even an essence of gratitude. Who are these beings? Are they real or are they myths?"

"The correct question is: who *were* these sapients? To quote from a fragment of one of their own sagas: 'They are extinct. Their fire has gone out of the universe.' But even so, they are important. Since one of you will become Emperor -- or Empress" -- this said with an extra squirt of affection nectar to Melone's tube -- "you need to know of them. They could yet return, they or their progeny. And that could be...dangerous."

They all snuggled in the moist dark for a while, Dad quietly troubled by the request. He wondered who had put Melone up to asking that question, or at least had put the *human* scent in her path. It was, he was sure, no accident -- or, if it was, it was perhaps all the more significant for that.

A wingless resolve settled upon him. With a silent, wistful sigh for that which would now be irrevocably past, he pushed a rear-hand into an alcove in the wall behind him, grasped the bar within, and rotated. The opening constricted, firing certain hormones into his body even as it snipped off his hand. He knew that blast doors were settling into place around the Royal Feeding Room they occupied, and that the Guards of the New Emperor were emerging from their life quarters and taking up position in the appropriate bunkers around them.

*Well, now I've done it*, Dad thought as he dilated his backmouth to accept the feeding tube emerging from the wall behind him. He summoned up all his love for these twenty-one kidlets -- whom he had nursed and watched over and taught for nearly two sevens of years -- and began to mix and trickle new hormone mixtures customized to each child. Twelve would grow sleepy as he told the tale of *humans*; eventually, they would drift off to sleep and never wake up, becoming instead food banks for the rest. Six would lose their gender and become *unndat* -- "those who can

disagree" -- the most trusted and beloved advisors of an Emperor. The last three...

..of the last three, one would be ruler, one would be mate, and one would be the food-father of their successor brood. But they would make those choices themselves.

*Night has fallen*, thought Dad. *Time to fly*.

"So," said Dad, breaking the settled silence, "let's talk about *humans*. Yes, they are myths now, but they are, or were, real. The universe itself tried to make them go away. Rheyson the prophet saw something in them, though, and rolled the first stone down the slope of the battle for their existence. It was a young male *human*, a slave, an orphan" -- the kidlets *shripped* at the horrible thought -- "who led that fight. Fate, I think, wanted him to vanish in the mines, to stay forever in those holes. But he was pulled out instead, and not to be eaten. He claimed his birthright and sought to re-weave reality on the loom of existence. His shuttle was his ship, a ship called *Sundog*..."