

Excerpt from *Leaders: a Twin-Bred novel*, by Karen A. Wyle

[NOTE: the following is the final scene in Chapter 1.]

Ton-lal-set, deposed Eminence of the Southern Region, leaned against the corner of his cell, draped in chains, and pondered his chances. He had survived many panel reviews, but had never been informed what considerations led the panel to keep him alive on any or all of those occasions. This might be the day his execution was finally decreed.

Had Jak-rad even known that his fate was being discussed, and his possible execution deferred, during his periods of imprisonment? Had he realized he was being evaluated, not simply interrogated? If only the panel had eliminated that mutated menace as they could and should have done, all the catastrophes that followed would have been prevented, and Ton-lal-set might by now be leading his own, purely Tofa expedition to the stars!

Ton-lal-set vaguely recalled, from his days as host mother at the Twin-Bred project, that the humans had quite a different penal system. When panels met periodically to consider the fate of a human prisoner, they were deciding whether to release the prisoner before a maximum sentence had expired. How typical of humans, with their vacillating and sentimentality! But where his own fate was concerned, he could wish that the human-loving Tofa now running things had adopted such a procedure.

What little gossip he had managed to hear suggested that executions had become less involved and less painful under the new regime. Rumor had it that one recently condemned prisoner, another former host mother, had been given a drug that put him to sleep as it killed him. Dying in one's sleep! What sort of execution was that?

If Ton-lal-set did not follow his former colleague into slumber and death, was there in fact any purpose in continuing to live? Or were all the Tofa outside the prisons content to abandon their traditions and forego ambition, slurping up favors from the humans? Had the world changed so much?

