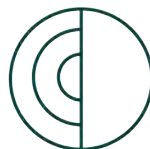


# **Episode 3 Transcript - Rooted Wisdom**



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**0:00:59.3 Aileen:** Hi, there, I'm Aileen. Welcome to my kitchen. I just finished preparing charred eggplants with onions, tomatoes, and ginger for my toddler, Ila. I love to cook these vegetables not only because Ila is this total fiend for them, but these kinds of crops are what help me pass on roots to her using all of her senses. When I was growing up, my relatives used to teach me Filipino nursery songs about beloved and everyday vegetables. This taught me that, in so many ways, our food connects us not only to our taste buds, but to our eardrums. The aromas of this dish make me think about connection, and this is what brings me to a topic that we're gonna learn about today: Memories and songs that shape our homes. I brought together two leaders with deep wisdom on this topic.

**0:01:47.3 Aileen:** Lilian Hill is an indigenous land steward who works to create community-based indigenous-led organizations that address resource extraction, food and housing inequities, and infrastructure that builds resilience. Shorlette Ammons is a food equity educator who works to confront the role of institutions in creating a more just and equitable food system for all people. Settle in and enjoy our conversation.

[music]

**0:02:18.6 Aileen:** Hello, Lilian, and hello, Shorlette. Welcome. Thank you for making time to come around our virtual kitchen table. Something I wanted to learn more about, and I feel like a conversation would be so incredibly rich, is about the memories and songs that shape our sense of home. And I think that a conversation with the two of you will just bring so much truth and so many first-hand stories about what this could mean. And before we jump in, I want to invite us to center our minds with a question: When you hear the word "home" what kinds of memories or songs come up for you? And, Lilian, could I invite you to kick us off?

**0:02:56.6 Lilian:** When I hear the word "home" I am taken to a place where I was born and where I grew up, which is on the Hopi Reservation in Northern Arizona on the High Mesa tops where, when you look all around you, you can see the landscape, you can see the sunrise and move through the sky and see it set. And I grew up in the home of my great-grandmother below a kiva, which is a sacred place where a lot of our ceremonies take place. And during part of the year, there would be singing, and there would be the sound of a drum at night when our spiritual beings would come into the village, and they would prepare for ceremony, so home is hearing these songs and hearing the drum. And also, behind my great-grandmother's home, there's a mesa and there's some rock outcroppings where I would go and sit up on the rocks, and just roam and play and just be. Growing up in the village, I felt secure and I felt that I was a part of not only my space and my place, but part of the larger universe, or part of the larger paradigm that exists in the natural world.

**0:04:10.9 Aileen:** Thank you for transporting us there, Lilian. And, Shorlette, what kinds of memories or songs of home come up for you?

**0:04:19.8 Shorlette:** In hearing Lilian's reflection, I instantly thought of dirt. [chuckle] I'm from the country, but I think the thing that comes to me first, instantly, I get smells and sounds when I conjure home that just have seemed to follow me around. Some of it is about place, but it's mostly about an experience or what I feel is kind of this presence, similar to Lilian, that just kinda stays with me, she described it as a part of a larger universe, feel that connection. Home is not necessarily about a specific location, but a place that just kind of follows me around, that's deeply embedded.

We used to call my cast iron skillet a spider, so I can smell and hear the grease from frying chicken on Sunday mornings. Cooking in the spider, I hear the crackle of me and my twin sister's hair being straightened with a hot comb.

**0:05:07.4 Shorlette:** In that same kitchen, a lot happened in the kitchen, it was kind of like the center of our family. Instantly hear a lot of laughter, a lot of overlapping conversations, we had a lot of folks living in one place. I hear the scraping of hog hair with a mayonnaise lid, that was our role as little people on hog killing days. And in terms of songs, I hear a mix of both secular, kind of '70s soul and juke joint kind of music, like Betty Wright and Green Onions, and then a lot of gospel 'cause we grew up in the Black church. And I instantly think of what I think was my granddaddy's favorite song, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." But we grew up in the choir, so a lot of choir practices that we went to kicking and screaming, 'cause we'd rather be outside playing in the dirt, but a lot of cousins laughing and a lot of communal singing. Good memories.

**0:05:59.8 Aileen:** Thank you for sharing the soundtrack, I can hear it starting to build in my mind as you're both telling these stories. And, Shorlette, you started to take us there with some of the kitchen noises or sounds, the music of the kitchen. Food is so visceral, so sensory, so connected to our bodies, and want to invite you to share any personal connections or relationship with food that you feel has really shaped your path today and the kinds of work that you're doing in your community.

**0:06:29.0 Lilian:** Food has been a huge part of my life and part of my cultural upbringing and background has been really in understanding my relationship to food through being out there with my great-grandparents and with my parents and others, gathering seasonal greens or roots or different berries that grew within my people's homeland, so really knowing where these foods are in their own space and their own landscape, bringing them home and trying them or eating them fresh off of the plants themselves. So a lot of wild foods was part of my upbringing and background, as well as the meats that we ate, most of the meats came from my dad or my uncles, my great-grandfather going out and hunting during different parts of the season, so ate a lot of jackrabbit, and a lot of dove, different types of birds that are out there on the land. My family farmed a pretty large area that was handed down from back in the day, so we grew lots of corn, beans, squash, and chilis. There will always be something cooking in the kitchen, whether that's tortillas or yeast bread, green chilli, there was just always a lot of food cooking in the kitchen.

**0:07:41.1 Lilian:** So my connection to food has always been through everyday experience, as well as during times like when a baby was born or when people were getting married, there was always a lot of food that was brought into the spaces, like lots of corn being ground and hot water being poured over cornmeal, and that smell is just a very visceral of blue cornmeal, and people staring pots and stews brewing over fire. And so there's just a lot happening all the time, with ceremonies and events happening, so I feel like my food experience was really shaped by the community around me and by extended family sharing food and bringing food during different times. One of my memories of my grandma was she loved potatoes and green chilli, and she loved to cook, and having beans sizzling and boiling over the stove was something that I always look forward to.

**0:08:35.8 Lilian:** And as a young person visiting other families within the village where I grew up, there was always grandmas cooking, baking or making cookies, or there was always bread or something to eat all the time. That's what I remember growing up. And as part of my experience is

wherever I would go, people would always be either preparing or there would be food around for people. No one was ever really hungry.

**0:08:56.9 Shorlette:** Yeah. I would say, similarly, I just have this kind of relationship to abundance, what it feels like to have enough in a world of scarcity, because even though we were definitely poor, we just always had food either right out the door. And it was good food. I won't like just kind of Stone Soup Bible of throwing things in a pot. It was very intentionally well-made, delicious, the kind you would want seconds of, which maybe that was the reminder that we were kinda poor, 'cause you would be limited in the amount of times you could come back for more. So that part of my relationship to food feels really easy and comfortable, especially coming from a lineage of people who operate with this level of discomfort around food systems.

**0:09:40.2 Shorlette:** So that part of whenever I got older and started doing work in food systems, if you come from where I come from, it jacks up our relationship with food in a lot of ways, because it was so innate, it's hard to see a beginning of that relationship. It's just always been. It's definitely shifted over time. Maybe that's part of being a grown-up, really reconcile the systems piece and understanding my role in it, and what can I do as a result of that connection to it, that joy and that love of the culture and the tradition of food that's brought me this far, the ways that people are connected and that keeps us connected and creates relationships to each other across cultures.

**0:10:18.9 Shorlette:** Just in Lilian's description of food being all around and somebody always preparing food, it was either my grandma or my aunts inside the house, but then outside the house will be my granddaddy or my uncles doing the physical work of raising hogs. And my granddaddy also had a little side hustle, a nab business. He sold nabs and sweets at the poultry plant, so it's kind of this industrial connection, because even if my family left our little home place, which, I don't know, call it a little mini-farm, it was more like a tenant farming situation. Even if they left that, they left to go to another food industry that they didn't have a big stake in or a big role in, which is like the poultry industry or his little nab spot or something.

**0:11:03.9 Shorlette:** In terms of how it looks in my work, I think my relationship to food, growing up working in the farm as a farm worker, it created and instilled my work ethic, my willingness and want to work hard, my willingness and want to be efficient, not waste my time or other people's time. That has been as early as I can remember, so it also informed me working hard in school, that same work ethic, but also inspired me to work hard in college so I wouldn't have to go back to the field, so I don't ever see not having a relationship or connection to food, so it's hard to say how it's shaped who I am, but it's been that constant informer of who I am.

**0:11:43.3 Aileen:** The sharing of food is so communal. It's not this individual thing, it's so communal, it's so linked to relationships and family. And both of you just shared this story of being rooted in the love and celebration that can come with food and the abundance that can come with food shared in a communal way. And I wanna actually lift up this question, this theme that you touched on, Shorlette, in your sharing, which was about going from food relationships to food systems and how that starts to get real sticky and more complicated, I want to ask both of you, in the ways that you've been practicing these abundant communally rooted experiences of food, how have you seen these changes happening? Are there traditions that you see disappearing that feel important to protect or to keep going?

**0:12:28.9 Lilian:** I think the changes can be subtle, but it can also be a shock in a lot of ways. I think within my own experience growing up during those times on our Reservation, I've seen a real shift in the way that my own food culture are within... My own traditional food system has changed dramatically, and I think a lot of change has come about through change in an economic experience. And for a lot of folks living on the Reservation, people who don't have a lot of access to 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM jobs, or this cash market economy is hit and miss out there where I'm from, 'cause I'm from a very rural place as well. And so people living on the Reservation are and were back in the '80s and '90s, more self-sufficient, had their own hustle, or were artists who stayed home and worked and just made however much income they needed to live and to survive.

**0:13:21.5 Lilian:** And I think that really changed within the past 15-20 years perhaps, where folks have become more mobile and have become more economically supported in different ways, either through leaving Reservations for jobs and then coming back home, and sending more resources home to the community. But for my own experience from my own parents and for a lot of folks in my community, being self-employed, there was more freedom to do the things that needed to be done around preparing food or growing food and being connected to food in that way. And so when folks moved away from that lifestyle, I see this drastic change. And there was a lot of commodity food also coming into the reservation from food banks and from outside of the community, and so that created a lot of dependents for the community as well.

**0:14:09.4 Lilian:** Leaving or stepping away from subsistence or farming lifestyle to be more dependent on this larger corporate food system and not really knowing what the repercussions of that would be, but more so seeing it as a stepping stone to this American dream, or a stepping stone for a better life for the next generations or for the little ones coming up, through that change, through the folks leaving the Reservation or more resources coming in, somehow I feel like more and more people have stopped farming, have stopped being connected to the traditional food ways in general, and are moving more towards being supported by a larger food system, where folks don't know where this food is coming from, they don't know if it's even healthy or what's in it. More and more so, I feel like our communities are becoming less connected to food and to the traditions and to the knowledge and wisdom that has been there for us for a very long time.

**0:15:06.3 Lilian:** In 2004, there was a food assessment done for the Hopi community, and what that revealed is that less and less people are farming or are directly harvesting or gathering food than ever before, and that a large percentage of people are sourcing food from outside of the community, so that creates a number of issues and a number of problems. One of them is that the economic resources are leaving the community, food that is basically foreign to our communities and our people is being imported into the community, which causes a whole slew of health issues and health problems, and so we're seeing increases in diabetes and obesity, and those are issues that come with this food system. And so we're definitely not removed from that system, we're directly a part of that.

**0:15:51.8 Lilian:** Looking into the future and the future of our own communities and our own people and the health of our community, we have to return to the ways that have been left for us, the ways that we oftentimes more and more so cast those things aside, or we say, "Okay, those are things that they did in the past." We have to be modern people, and being modern people means that we let go of our traditions and our culture and our rootedness to accept this larger paradigm, which ultimately is rooted in capitalism, is rooted in a system that doesn't care about us, that exploits us over and over again. Once you start making that connection, once you start to understand this larger

food system and this larger paradigm, you really begin to understand the fact that our original food systems and our original food ways are the path that we should be under, the path that we need to return to, and we need to make those systems relevant, and we need to strengthen them and begin to understand our positionality around food.

**0:16:56.3 Shorlette:** I can get with that. It makes me think about college, etcetera, came back home, my degree is in Library Science, so I went back to the public library, started gardening on the grounds of a public library in Eastern North Carolina, technically not rural, but come on now. Definitely culturally rural, even it was kind of in town, in Goldsboro. But these young people were absolutely content to come and work in this garden, and when I reflect on that time and being down there, we didn't start that garden to be in terms of a lot of community garden programs and work, it's about a program, it's about being adjacent to a housing project and wanting to feed the whole projects, like teach the projects how to eat or something like that.

**0:17:38.5 Shorlette:** And there's nothing wrong with that either, but I say that to say, these young folks came to the community garden with this willingness to be content, to be happy about this experience, so they brought joy to the garden with them. It wasn't like this kind of kicking and screaming thing because there was a willingness to learn about this aspect of their culture and who they are in terms of thinking about the connection to libraries and intellectual freedom and intellectual curiosity, and being in the south and being in a rural place. Libraries make sense to have gardens and to play the extension of a story role through a community garden, not just for the sake of saving a community from food insecurity, because I don't think that was the role for that garden at that time. I just see it in terms of those traditions.

**0:18:23.4 Shorlette:** Even now I can reflect back on my time growing up as a farm worker, there was a lot of content and a lot of joy. But then like I said, when you add that systems piece into it, I don't think the discomfort necessarily that I had was in the system itself, but it was in my willingness to not accept to complicate the system. That's where a lot of people was just comforting, it's like, "I'm not gonna ride with this system, this don't make sense. And also reconciling that uneasy feeling I had when I was in the field, when I was little, where me and my cousins, 8, 9, 10 years old, bend over and picking cucumbers, and then seeing this white kid ride by on the tractor to kind of supervise us. He was probably our age or younger, supervising me and my aunts and them.

**0:19:05.5 Shorlette:** So I just felt like there's something innately wrong with that dynamic, I felt uneasy. I think there's been a willingness to just really do the work of reconstructing either completely dismantling this kind of hierarchical systems, where this young kid can look over us is kind of overseeing role we've seen a lot, particularly during this pandemic time, people being really intentional about connecting people to Black food and Black farmers, but there are specific realities that exist in rural places and among country people and indigenous communities that can't operate within that bubble in the same way, because of infrastructure, lack of resources, this kind of influx of "help" through this charity model of feeding people, especially during times like these.

**0:19:51.0 Lilian:** Yeah, definitely. Also I wanna add on that you brought up this model, this charity model, and for a lot of our rural poor communities, that's something that has become prevalent is the religious organizations or governments continually are importing or exporting this food into poor communities without consent or without really understanding the realities that exist within our communities. And so that to support on one hand can be seen as, Oh, this is a great thing. These

people are poor, they're impoverished, they're hungry, let's give them whatever the food system doesn't want anymore. And so, when this food enters our communities, it enters our communities in a way where a lot of it is junk food, a lot of it is expired, it's rotten a lot of times.

**0:20:37.2 Lilian:** Even through the COVID pandemic, there's tons of funding being brought in and all of this food being purchased from this large food system that is continuing to create some serious issues for our communities, so rather than saying, Okay, these communities need infrastructure, these are the things that we're working towards, or rather than working with those on the ground who are trying to disrupt or dismantle or even challenge the system or create new systems, there's just this continual imposition and this domination that occurs.

**0:21:08.5 Aileen:** That's right.

**0:21:08.6 Lilian:** And is just so problematic, and I think that it's important to be able to understand those systems and how they can cause harm to our communities.

**0:21:18.3 Mark Winston Griffith:** Peace ya'll. I'm Mark Winston Griffith, an alumnus of The Castanea Fellowship Program. As the executive director of the Brooklyn Movement Center, I was looking for a community of peers who also saw a world where food truly became a source of health, equity and well-being for all, Castanea brought those very leaders together and invested in us to make it happen. Since then, I've collaborated with a cadre of Castanea fellows on a national initiative to hold philanthropy accountable, and have tapped into game-changing support from my food systems work here in Central Brooklyn.

**0:21:49.7 Mark Winston Griffith:** So I'm looking forward to what's ahead in my professional as well as my personal journey along with following the impact I know my friends from the program will continue to make. Learn how Castanea can support your journey. Visit [Castaneafellowship.org](https://castaneafellowship.org). That's C-A-S-T-A-N-E-A-F-E-L-L-O-W-S-H-I-P.org.

**0:22:18.9 Aileen:** This is incredibly powerful. What I'm hearing from both of you is just really reflecting on how food security or food access can get framed in these charity-driven ways and aren't driven by what's on the ground.

**0:22:30.4 Lilian:** Right.

**0:22:31.1 Aileen:** And how so much of that is rooted in these really deep histories of colonization and imperialism and slavery and how food systems are so incredibly complex.

**0:22:42.2 Lilian:** Right.

**0:22:42.8 Aileen:** And often at the expense of communities on the ground, right?

**0:22:45.8 Shorlette:** Mm-hmm. Simple access and security over-simplifies the complexity of a situation that Lilian just described. Security is relative. Who is secure? Who decides? And if you're bringing more junk into my community because you are a charity and you have this excess food, how is that making me more secure, more safe, if it's creating more harm in terms of long-term health conditions and health disparities down the road, 'cause you're not investing in the

infrastructure that's needed to really make communities more secure, and the pandemic reminds us, it's not just about access. We go... At the beginning of the pandemic, we were going to the grocery stores, even when we had jobs and there was no food there, I could walk to the grocery store and there was no food there. And respect, that's a part of it, but it's not to the change the real transformation that's truly required.

**0:23:32.7 Aileen:** What could that transformation look like, what does that sovereignty, that self-determination look like, in all the ways that you've been guided by your community stories and memories of home and ancestral memories and cultural memories. What does sovereignty look like?

**0:23:48.5 Shorlette:** I want Lilian to tell us, I'm really looking forward to Lilian's answer, 'cause I'm gonna write this down and like... Go for it.

**0:23:58.1 Lilian:** I mean, when I think of what our communities could look like and will look like one day, I think I really am inspired continually by those who aren't here anymore, by those who left a legacy, perhaps for us to remember and who left really a road map or a path that isn't very clear, it's not always clear, but I think that we as humanity as human beings, we have the ability to recognize patterns. On the land, we have the ability to recognize our own connection to the Earth and to the water and to the weather, the patterns that come through as well, we are pattern language people.

**0:24:38.5 Lilian:** When I think about the future of food systems, I think about the ways that people have moved on the land and the ways that they were more mobile, I think than the times that we live in today. And I'm talking about within the region where I lived in the Southwest, this area prior to European colonization was not only occupied, but we actually had a very large stable population of people within their own areas, and their own communities that actually had a very high level of knowledge and understanding of their landscape and their connection to the landscape, as well as a high level of mobility or roads and trade routes were constructed and forged and navigated during ancient times.

**0:25:22.9 Lilian:** This was like pre-industrial revolution times where people travelled by foot basically. And so when we look at our own feet and how fragile and how soft and how delicate they are, I also think about those that lived before and those that were more mobile and more emergent, and where it wasn't anything extraordinary to travel hundreds of thousands of miles on foot, back in the day. And so the food systems that existed and continue to exist, they're still here. Our food systems back in the older times and the ancient days, these food systems were more food scapes, so they were on the landscape and people were free to navigate and to gather and harvest and trade, and there was whole societies and communities that emerged in this way, to provide food and medicine for their own community, so I think moving forward, looking and reflecting on those systems, those were regionalized and some were hyper-local, some were micro-food systems and others were larger food systems.

**0:26:26.6 Lilian:** So when we look at sovereignty, each of our nations and each of our people have developed food systems that were dynamic and that continue to be dynamic, and we traversed and navigated through mountains, through deserts, through oceans and through rivers to access food. And I think more sovereignty in that way, more control over our lives and our own choices as



people, because our food systems were directly connected and related to the environment or to the world around us, and so I think moving forward as people, the more that we're able to take control and ownership of our food and build power through our food systems, the more that we are going to be sovereign people in the future, so as long as we allow corporations and institutions and conglomerates to control our food, we are always going to be subservient to this system and to this paradigm and our sovereignty as human beings and as humanity is always gonna be compromised.

**0:27:24.8 Lilian:** So I think that moving forward, that's our challenge as humanity is to grow and cultivate our own food systems that are really owned by us, we have ownership, we have control, we have power over these systems, but to do so in a way where we're understanding this larger paradigm of where we're at as generations living in a time of change like global climate catastrophe and change in different predictions that are coming to light.

**0:27:50.8 Lilian:** And so I think that our food systems really need to be able to be resilient and to be stable, and we have to do that by being directly connected to them and honoring them and respecting them and having a deep level of commitment to this work in whatever way that we see ourselves in it, if we're chefs, if we're policy-makers, if we are farmers, if we're gatherers, if we're hunters, fisher people, in whatever sector we find ourselves in within our food system, we always have to be cognizant and to understand that we are living in the present, but that there's generations coming after us so if we can align ourselves and align our work in this place and time to pivot towards a more dynamic, a more robust and a more community-controlled food system, it's gonna have an effect because it's directly challenging the paradigm that we find ourselves in right now.

**0:28:44.2 Aileen:** That's it. That's absolutely it right there. Imagine in our conversations about food access, food security, if we thought about it like that, access in terms of the broader globe around us that we're being offered on these particular landscapes as the world shifts and moves and not limiting how we think about access to the grocery store around us, but the landscape, what the landscapes are offering us, that's phenomenal and profound. How do we get free as human beings as like a human species, how does that level of freedom serve the land, the earth, all the things that we've input to create these systems, every particle, so that we can then break it apart and really re-defined sovereignty in terms of a human experience that is not just about the individual, but everything that the individual touches and interacts with. Lilian has this layer of just sense-making, it feels like common sense to really think about it and explore it through that kind of indigenous lens.

**0:29:46.8 Lilian:** I also wanna mention too that in speaking of our connection and in relationship to food, I think in this Western paradigm or this different world, there's a lot of disconnection as well to recognize the invisible or the unseen elements that exist in the world and in the realm of where we live, or in the oceans and the rivers and the valleys, and in the springs and different places, there's actually spiritual beings who reside in the soil, who reside in these different areas, and they wanna be acknowledged and recognized as well within our work and within our life to dismantle, to change, to challenge these larger systems, these are the invisible and the spiritual elements and the beings that reside in the corn, the corn mothers and the corn maidens and the serpents that live in the water, and the fish and the eels, and all of the different birds and those beings aren't always recognized by humans as being as important.

**0:30:51.5 Aileen:** Right.

**0:30:52.4 Shorlette:** Right.

**0:30:52.7 Lilian:** Those are the beings that need to be recognized, and need to be protected as well, and their voices need to be elevated as we move forward, so within our food systems work, we need to move towards a different paradigm of recognition and of honoring and giving life the rights that humans have as well, or giving not even the rights, but the respect and the recognition that they deserve to.

**0:31:16.9 Lilian:** So in moving forward, I see that I am a farmer and I am a gardener, and that I am a orchard keeper or water harvester, but really I'm just doing the bidding of the snakes and all of the different creatures and beings that actually come and partake in my efforts as well. So I'm not alone, and I'm out there and making a home and nurturing space and place and time for others that aren't human, they don't look like us, but they have eyes, they have ears, they have a brain, they have an intelligence that we don't always understand.

**0:31:50.6 Aileen:** Oh, Lilian, oh, Shorlette, thank you for taking us on this arc of home that starts so personal and it expands so deep and so wide, and it comes back to home again, and it's just a joy to be in conversation with you all. I know that both of you in your own families as parents, as teachers, coming from a librarian background, as tenders of the soil in so many ways, you're nurturing and passing on encouragement and support in different ways, so as we get to wrap up and come to the end of this episode, I want to ask any advice or encouragement from both you. What is one simple thing that you would encourage any listener to do that can make a huge difference in their own local homes and local communities?

**0:32:35.9 Shorlette:** Listen and share some mutual respect and then act on what you hear that makes sense for your larger purpose.

**0:32:43.8 Lilian:** Yeah, I think finding clarity through all of the chaos and the madness and all of the disarray and all of the catastrophe that we find ourselves in within this larger global society in context, just trying to navigate and sift and find clarity and trying to be in balance with the natural world, I think is super important moving forward, because these industrial hard systems that have been created by those who don't care about life, we can use tools and different things from that world, but I think ultimately it's important to shed things that aren't ours and that don't belong to us, that don't serve us anymore. And by shedding those things and by finding clarity, we can then recognize and start to pick up the tools and the things that are gonna serve as deeply as we move forward and as we navigate and as we shed, and as we create a new future for our families and our communities.

**0:33:47.1 Aileen:** Thank you so much Shorlette, and Lilian for making this time today and appreciate and grateful for our conversation.

**0:33:52.3 Shorlette:** Thank you, thank you both, appreciate you.

**0:33:55.8 Lilian:** Thank you. It's been an honor.

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