

Panocide: The Past – Section One

Time

< Date: Undocumented. Location: Undetermined.>

An ancient object from times far past waited, and waited, and waited... It waited an interminably long wait. A wait that was beyond any measure for a small, cylindrical object of unknown power, ability and a very high state of sentience. Silently it waited for its time to come about. It was a wait to find a new master was inordinately long and its very existence was but a long blur in the realm of time beyond time. It had come into existence long before the creation of the universe in which it now resided.

It had survived the intrusion of its present universe from the ancient high entropy universe it had once occupied. Only its skills had allowed it to survive the differences in the laws of physics between the old universe and the new universe—a feat it had negotiated numerous times.

The physical laws of the new universe now harboring it restrained its skills and abilities; however it could also serve to hide it from the beings who had murdered its former master.

Countless trillions upon trillions of years had past the object by yet it patiently waited for the day when it would once again find a new master. A time to come when a living hand would once more control it and be guided by it. A time when it could compliment life again. A time when it could once more save lives.

The entity knew deep within itself the coming day of its new master was only a few billions of years wait. A simple yet long wait.

In the End

<Date: Undocumented: (The date was later placed by historians, the Elders, the Ancient Ones, and other ancient people of the Omniverse as being 6,535,214 standard years before the start of the Alliance.) Location: Calubus, the home world and educational center of the Synchronosien Sector of the Eo Empire.>

Duchess Dy'ree Ahmiss'dihda, a junior at the Synchronosien National University, watched the sub-spatial communications board dim by several connections with every passing moment. Each extinguished light represented a fellow university or college located on distant a world. Each light represented a world being eradicated by an invading army of an apparently unstoppable force. Many of these worlds represented many billions of people and the death count was soaring upwards through the loss of thousands of worlds. As each world was overtaken it was neither enslaved nor subjugated—each world was being outright and systematically exterminated down to all but the most primitive forms of life. Even at this point there were not many of these lesser life-forms left even when buried kilometers below the planet's surface.

Professor Cadre Ulla'vidae jogged over to Dy'ree's side. "How can this possibly be...? Whoever these forces are, they're smashing their way through the best fighting vessels our fleets have to counter with." He pointed to a dark wedge on the communications display slicing through to the heart of the Eo Empire. "At this rate their ships will be here at our hollow halls in a matter of minutes."

A student stuck her head out of a side room. With a scared look on her face, she said in a trembling voice, "Dy'ree, your parents are on line five."

"Thanks, Ole!" Dy'ree wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and pressed a touch pad on the control console before her. The screen flickered. "Mom! Dad!" she shouted as the snowy, static-filled

images of her parents appeared on one of the overhead screens. “Oh, thank goodness. You’re both still alive!”

“For the time being, Dy’ree dear!” her mother cried out, terrorized beyond her wits’ end. Her piebald face covered in dirt and grime as well as heavily etched with fear and dread.

The display shook violently as something large detonated near her parents’ location. In the background, Dy’ree could make out harsh hues of reds, oranges, and yellows from distant fires on the horizon.

Her mother sobbed, saying, *“You’re our last surviving child, Dy’ree. We implore you to find any way or means to get yourself out of the university and to get as far away from these invaders as you possibly can.”*

Dy’ree’s chest tightened and her breathing grew more difficult with each breath. Her brothers and sisters were now all dead and she knew very well she had no possible ship or any other means to evacuate the planet. “I will, mom. I promise I will!” She clasped her hands together, pleading and praying. “Now, you and dad need to get out of there!”

“I’m sorry, dear, but we have tried everything to leave but now we’re happy to just speak with you one last time. We’re trapped where we are. Now go. Please! Go!” Her mom’s eyes overflowed with tears of motherly love and those from the great pain of personal loss. *“Say good bye and leave!”*

Her father raised his right hand and said, *“Goodbye, my dearest Dy’ree.”*

Dy’ree froze and she watched the screen in horror as two dark, thin, gaunt demonic-like beings veiled in a black swirling fog entered her parent’s home. Behind them stood an eerie, pale skeletal figure with a large blue colored gem hung about its neck. Her father raised a weapon toward the first demonic being. Her father instantly burst into flames before firing off a single shot. Her father’s body flared and then exploded into chunks of burning flesh and sheets blood which were strewn far and wide about the room.

“Oh, God...!” Dy’ree’s mom turned her head about and looked straight into the camera. *“Go, girl! Go!”* As she shouted her skin started to blister. Pustules rapidly oozed greenish-yellow pus as she cried out in utter terror. Her skin fell from her body in one great sheet and within seconds the rest of her body liquified and splashed across the floor.

“No!” Dy’ree fell to her knees as the tremendous weight of her parent’s deaths thrust deeply into her heart. She covered her face with her hands and cried out. As sickening as the sight of her parent’s death was the pain of their loss overruled her stomach’s urge to throw up as it tightened in a hard knot.

The skeleton-like being, its grayish skin stretched tightly about its bones, waved its arm and blue-white shards of ice hurled towards the camera and the transmission abruptly ended.

“Mom, Dad!” She felt her chest nearly explode in her soul-piercing anguish. The pressure was unbearable within her chest and continued to rise as she cried out in utter despair. Then trembling violently, she slowly raised her head as a torrent of tears flowed over her cheeks. “I have no idea who these damnable invaders are, but I will have my vengeance against them for the deaths my parents, my brothers, and my sisters!”

Dy’ree felt Cadre pulling on her arm.

“First, let’s worry about getting you and all of us out of here alive!” he said.

Her lungs sucked a much needed breath as she turned to face him. “Damn them! Damn them all to hell!”

“Get a grip on yourself, Dy’ree. You heard you mother. —Leave!” He waved for others to follow him. “We need to get everyone we can to the physics lab in the basement. They’ve been working on some sort of personal spatial transport devices. They might just get us away from here with our lives intact.”

“Right...! Dy’ree leapt up to her feet. “Where are these invaders now?”

“Less than a thousand kilometers from here.” A young Hervraptish man grabbed his research

papers and stuffed them into a book pack.

“Forget those,” said another student.

“No!” The sound of uncontrollable desperation was in the man’s voice. “This is my life’s work!”

“Stay here and die—or drop it and run!” Dy’ree shouted. “You’re slowing us all down.” She reached into her own pack and withdrew a void sword.

“Hey! We’re *not* to have weapons on campus!” A Frecnasscher woman shouted angrily at Dy’ree.

Dy’ree didn’t pay the woman any mind. She promptly used her sword to slice a hole through the floor and then she dropped herself down through it to the basement level of the building.

Realizing the shortcut to the physics lab, Cadre followed next through the hole. Standing up, he said, “The lab’s near the far end of the hall. If we hurry, Professor Kerbé or some of his assistants may still be there.” He stepped out of the way as other students proceeded to drop down through the hole.

Dy’ree thought, *Oh, great. He’s the crackpot who boasted we would one day travel between universes with the greatest of ease.*

The ground beneath the building shook as the shock waves from not too distant, massive explosions arrived. It was quickly followed by a quick succession of approaching, although still distant, explosions.

“What the hell was that?” A tall, Verg man asked as he dropped through the hole to the floor.

“I don’t know and I don’t care to know!” shouted Dy’ree from halfway down the hall as she ran. “My only concern now is to escape from here. I’ll worry about my revenge some other day.” She slid to a halt before the laboratory door and found it locked. One quick swipe of her sword and the door was separated from its lock.

From inside the lab, several professors and students glanced up from their work.

“Get out! We cannot be disturbed!” ordered Kerbé. He stood up from his console and started walking briskly towards Dy’ree.

“In a few minutes we’ll *all* be dead!” She gestured towards the ceiling with her sword. “Those demonic invaders are here! —Now...!”

“I realize that.” Kerbé briskly returned back to his work. “We’re trying to open a large portal to anywhere *well* away from here. Now leave us to do it until it’s ready.”

Dy’ree watched the air above a short, raised platform behind Kerbé and begin to shimmer right as Cadre caught up with her.

Kerbé glanced at several of his students. “Okay, let’s try it again.” He stared at the platform, thinking to himself, *Damn it all! This may well be our last chance.*

“Primary power is on line and nominal.”

“Auxiliary power is on line and nominal.”

“Sensory grid array is nominal.”

“Computing grid is nominal. All sentient AI units are fully engaged.”

“Good, that’s very good.” Kerbé touched a button and a thin, black vertical line appeared in the center of the platform. “It’s opening! The portal is opening!”

Several of Kerbé’s students responded by jumping up and down with joy and hugging each other.

“No!” Kerbé’s heart sank as the portal started to dim and shrink. “Not again!”

“Dy’ree...” A faint voice echoed through her mind. She raised her void sword and stared at it. Startled, she listened to the words her sword whispered in her mind.

“Professor...!” She held her sword out towards the portal and activated. “My sword wants you to decrease the power input.”

“Are you nuts?” Kerbé glared back at her. “We’ll lose what little we have.”

She shook her head violently from side to side. “You’re already losing it. Do it, now!”

As Kerbé cut the power back, Dy'ree's sword extended its tip into the closing portal.

With a tremendous roar and a brilliant discharge of light, the portal expanded to a couple of meters across.

"There!" shouted Dy'ree.

Kerbé held his hands up in the air in shocked amazement. "Of course... The sword itself acts as some sort catalyst." He spun on his heels and asked Dy'ree, "Does your sword have a name? Some sword masters swear their swords have names."

She closed her eyes and listened for the sword to answer her within her mind. "It calls itself Traveler."

"That's fitting!" He clenched his fist and slammed it hard against his thigh. "I should have known the swords could have other uses!"

Cadre stepped closer to the portal. "This is our only way out and we need to make use of it now!"

"Not yet!" shouted Dy'ree. "Traveler's energizing..."

"Right...!" Kerbé grabbed a long rod with a sensory probe on its end. "A word to the wise: Look before you leap." He cautiously pushed the probe into the portal. The view was one of total darkness on the viewer, but the temperature readings flew off the scale. He then pulled the fried, blue-white glowing stub of the rod back. "We can't go in there. It looks to be a primeval universe. Light and normal matter have yet to separate out of the primeval soup."

Traveler's blade flashed with a dazzling white light.

"Traveler was building a charge... It has now changed portal destinations." Dy'ree stared at Kerbé in disbelief. "We were looking at one of the sources where Traveler taps its energy from. It had to fight to prevent the other universe from pouring into ours, but it was able to quickly charge and opened a clear portal to a safe refuge." She glanced at the destroyed probe. "Try it again, professor."

He grabbed and eased a second probe through the portal. This time a peaceful valley stretched out before them on the viewer.

"Dykarus," Dy'ree whispered. "It's my parent's home world and it's untouched."

"The invaders haven't touched it yet?" A young woman ran towards the portal but was promptly stopped by Kerbé's firm hand.

"Easy there.... With what little time we have left, let's all grab anything we can that might prove useful and toss it through the portal." Kerbé pointed to Dy'ree. "You. Hold that sword still until we're prepared to leave."

The young woman stared at Dy'ree. "How has Dykarus survived?"

Dy'ree eyes were fixed to the portal. She was crying inside as she thought of her parents. "I don't know. It sits in a cul-de-sac of interstellar dust clouds. That and a few years ago we returned the planet back to its natural state. There's nothing there except for a few maintenance robots on the family estate."

Kerbé briskly demanded, "Are there power generators in the palace?"

"They're moth-balled, but we should be able to get one of the smaller, emergency ones working within a hour or two."

"Good. Now I'm starting to like our odds." He waved his hands over his head to get everyone's attention. "We have several sentient computers next door. Let's get as many of those computers through the portal as possible. I want to save as much of our technology and culture as we possibly can." He pointed to two men. "You two go through and keep the other side clear of whatever we toss through."

The two looked nervously at each other for a brief moment then answered back, "Yes, professor." They cautiously stepped through the portal and the foginess of the opening cleared.

On the other side, great relief was shown on the men's faces as they waved back to the probe.

Kerbé stepped along side Dy'ree. "I really wish we knew more about these swords."

“I’m more interested in how the invaders cut through our military so quick. I saw my father erupt into flames and my mother... decay and melt before my very eyes.” Dy’ree’s voice cracked as her eyes well up with tears. “What the hell has happened to us?”

She froze as Traveler answered. She repeated its words for the others to hear, ““Spell casters. They’re called Dark Lords. They’re otherworldly mages from other universes out to eliminate sentient forms of life such as ourselves’.”

“What can we do?” Kerbé asked.

““Run...!””

“Right...” He grabbed a box of memory crystals and shouted, “Don’t drop these!” as he hurled them through the port.

One of the men on the other side dove and managed to catch the crystals before they hit the ground.

“Sorry!” shouted Kerbé. “But we do need to hurry.”

Dy’ree felt useless, standing there holding Traveler, even though it was keeping the portal open. She thought, thinking of the sword, *I wish I didn’t have to hold you here to keep the portal open.*

You don’t have to hold me towards the port. It will remain open on its own and it will remain open until you ask me to close it.

Thanks. Can I extinguish your blade so no one gets accidentally hurt?

Sure.

Kerbé nearly freaked as Traveler’s blade disappeared. “Don’t let it...!”

“Sorry, professor, I should have warned you. Traveler said the port is stable until *it* shuts it down.”

She walked away as Traveler continued to speak to her. It had her step out into the hallway and walked along to a computer storage room several doors down.

Go in here.

“What am I looking for?”

I seek a rouge AI unit. —Your best odds lie with a computer that doesn’t follow all the rules.

“Okay...” She smiled as she glanced about the room. “You have my interest tweaked.”

There. In the drawer listed as X744TGB-Glee2354. Within lays an active neural matrix named Glee. Get her through the portal at all cost.

“Right then...” Dy’ree grabbed the drawer’s handle and was able to slowly pull it out with the accompanying sound of grinding metal on metal. Grimacing at the sounds, she added, “That’s hard on the hearing.”

A young, tiger-striped Deirer man stuck his head inside the room. “What are you doing? We need to leave now.”

“I’m rescuing a computer, Sam.” She placed Traveler in her pocket and studied the remains of the computer inside the drawer. It looked as though it had once been part of a living, breathing thing. “Someone has literally cut this computer from its neural mounts.”

Sam shook his head. “Move...! The invaders are nearly here!”

“I know. Go!” She lifted the computer onto her right shoulder. “I’ll be there momentarily.”

Without offering to help, he quickly left. Dy’ree moaned from the computer’s weight as she turned about and headed for the door. “How much time do we have, Traveler?”

Two minutes at best.

“Oh, that’s just great!” She grimaced as she picked up her pace back towards the portal. “So how do we defeat these invaders?”

You can’t, but if you stay alive long enough, you may.

“Then how do I stay alive long enough to pay these bastards back for the death of my siblings and parents?”

Get off this world for a start.

It can't be that simple, she thought as the building shook violently. Dust and small debris rained down on her head. She coughed, nearly dropping the computer.

No. It's but the first step.

Her momentum nearly caused her to overshoot the laboratory door. Inside the lab, only Kerbé and three students remained.

Kerbé held his hands up to stop her. "Forget that thing."

"No." Dy'ree shook her head from side to side as she quickly closed the gap between them. "Traveler wants me to bring this one."

He gave up and threw up his hands. "Fine..." He gestured for the three students to pass through the portal. "We need to close the portal now."

"We can..." Dy'ree twisted her head about as a frantic genetically constructed soldier stepped through the doorway. On her back was another gelf soldier with his arms wrapped about her neck. She was carrying him since his legs had been melted off by what appeared to be some sort of an acid.

She fell to the floor, screaming in pain from the burnt stump of what remained of her left arm. Barely conscious, the man fell onto the floor beside her.

"Help us! In the name of God help us!"

With terrified looks on their faces, the three remaining students picked the man and woman from the floor and disappeared through the portal with them.

Dy'ree gestured to the portal with a nod. "Go, the port will close as I pass through."

Books fell off their shelves and pictures, awards, and diplomas dropped from the wall as the building shook violently once again. Dust quickly filled the air as part of the building's foundation gave way at the far end of the hallway.

Kerbé grabbed his briefcase. "Let's get the hell out of here!" He briskly stepped through the portal.

Dy'ree glanced over her shoulder as she stepped up to the portal. There she saw the vague, dark figures of several invaders stepping inside the laboratory. One of them carried a large scythe in its left arm and its face was skeletal looking in its gauntness while another was tall with a vaguely bull-like head and build. Behind the invaders stood a menacing dragon-like beast with glowing green eyes along with a ghostly wisp of a macabre creature.

One of the dark figures raised its arms and a flash of pink light shot out towards Dy'ree.

Clutching the computer tight in her hands, Dy'ree leaped towards the portal. When she was halfway inside the portal, she felt an intense, burning pain at the base of her spinal column. It felt as though the skin of her buttocks was being painfully peeled away from the rest of her body.

On the Dykarus side of the portal, Kerbé and several of the others watched as Dy'ree stepped out of the closing portal and fell to the ground while still clutching the computer. At the base of her tail a pink flame twisted in the air without burning her or her clothes. Dy'ree cried out again as the pink flame sank into her body. Releasing the computer, her legs kicked and flailed about violently as she writhed painfully on the ground.

"Damn!" Kerbé pointed to three women. "Help her, please."

"Yes, professor," one of the women said as they all hesitantly stepped towards Dy'ree. They didn't know what to make of the pink flame or the apparent pain it was causing Dy'ree, so they stopped short of helping her.

"Come on!" Kerbé stepped around the women to help Dy'ree. He knelt beside her left side and grabbed her shoulders. "Easy, girl... Stop squirming about so we can take a look and help you."

"It burns!" Dy'ree sobbed. "Damn! It burns like all hell!"

He felt sick as he looked at her blood-soaked pants about the base of her tail. He glared at the three women. "See if at least one of you can step past your fears and stop her bleeding."

Sy'jarie, the middle one of the three women stepped forwards and stooped beside Dy'ree right

side. She gagged as she undid the pants waist clasp from above Dy'ree's tail and carefully pulled the pants down a little out of the way. She then hesitantly raised Dy'ree's tail.

"How is she?" Kerbé stroked the top of Dy'ree's shoulders to calm her.

Sy'jarie coughed, choked, and then turned her head away as her stomach heaved out its contents.

Swallowing hard to try and prevent himself from throwing up, Kerbé slid over to see what he could do to help Dy'ree. He raised her tail and grimaced at the bloody site before his eyes. "Good Lord." He gently lowered her tail to her left and started removing his shirt to make a pressure bandage from it. "Dy'ree, you're rapidly growing a second tail."

She reached into her pocket and pulled Traveler out.

No! Traveler let Dy'ree know in a stern voice within her head its displeasure. *I know what you're thinking and I will not cut your second tail off. It was placed there through magic and to remove it could harm or even kill you.*

"Magic...?" Dy'ree said in a hoarse voice. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Kerbé through her teary, bloodshot eyes. "Traveler says they're using *magic* against us!"

Relic

<Date: 8/30/18,257 Standard. (The year One Standard commenced at noon on the first day of the foundation of the Dycinian-Larien-Lakiekan Alliance at the Great Hall of the Dycinian Council. As of the year 341 Standard, the union of growing nation-worlds came to be simply recognized as the Alliance throughout the known galaxy.) Location: The Króbiousur System, 18,000 light-years distant from the sectors of space governed by the Alliance.>

Police Sergeant Fores Dackmon momentarily took his eyes from the road and glanced at the sleeping form of his newly assigned patrol partner reclining back in the car's front passenger seat. She was Senior Syntient Police Officer Yari Dóvak.

From her appearance, Fores would have guessed her age to be around thirty or so years, yet he knew all too well that she was well over five hundred Króbiousur-years-old. Yari had been one of their world's first syntients and now was their eldest. And, of the thousands of syntients born to their world, she was only one of three to have ever had a child.

He thought of the one great pain Yari admitted having born throughout her long life: she had outlived all her children, all her grandchildren, and all her great-grandchildren. Two of her great-great-grandchildren were still alive, although Fores knew this was a mixed blessing as the two were well over sixteen decades old, bed-ridden, tube-fed, and totally oblivious to the world surrounding them. Syntients did not pass on their higher sentient abilities, although they did often imparted long, healthy lives to their offspring. Hence, her two remaining great-great-grandchildren were the two eldest known Króbiousurs.

He figured the lack of children by syntients and their inevitable deaths were probably for the best in the grander scheme of the universe. A world can only support so many people let alone a population of those who were nearly immortal.

Silently, he allowed himself to glance at Yari's sleeping form again. The umber stripes on her tan face were seductively long and thin to him, or any other Króbiousur male. Her full, eloquent tail draped itself across the front of her right thigh and then softly flowed down along her lower left leg.

Damn, if she doesn't come close to justifiable rape... he thought, violently shaking his head to rid the lewd fantasy from his mind. *If I keep thinking about her lying there, I'm going to have to arrest myself. —That's for damn sure!*

Fores steered the patrol car around a corner and proceeded along a kilometer-long stretch of run-down bars and sleazy sex joints. To the east, the first hint of the coming dawn was just beginning to

peer over the horizon. A sign by the road said they were entering the ancient and historic hamlet of Pazu.

The crackle from their vehicle's radio broke the silent. *"Central here. Attention all units in the Pazu area, there's an unregistered ship reported down west of the city by Arrah's pond. Possible illegal aliens have been reported. Request a synt confirm the possible illegal's nationalities. Immigration has been informed. Are there any units in the area who can respond?"*

Hearing the radio, Yari's eyes opened slightly.

Fores turned the patrol car about and grabbed the microphone as Yari sat up. "Central, Tango Eleven here... We're just east of Arrah's pond, entering Pazu, over." He kept the car's police lights and siren off as he quickly accelerated the vehicle to the posted speed limit.

Yari grabbed the passenger door's handle for support as they took hard turn out of Pazu.

"Roger, Tango Eleven. Report in when you're on location. Central, out."

"Get that?" Fores said, glad she couldn't read thoughts less she suspect his carnal desires towards her.

"Yeah..." She covered her pale green eyes with a pair of dark shades. Dark glasses were issued to all synts on their world. Looking in to the eyes of a synt could be somewhat disconcerting to most "normal" people.

Yari had been nursing an odd feeling for the better part of the day and the thought of some excitement perked her up somewhat. She slowly turned her head from right to left as she sensed the terrain before them for any alien life-forms or organisms. "Nothing, all I sense is a bovine herd." She looked up the side of a hill as the car turned onto a dirt road. "There's a couple of..." she sensed the heavy presence of alcohol thoroughly permeating the bodies of two men, "drunks on the knoll. It's best to allow them sleep it off."

A dim flicker caught Fores' attention. "I can make out a light up ahead.

"Ah, hell...!" Yari snatched the microphone from its console mount. An uneasy feeling gripped her and bore deeply into her stomach. "Central, this is Tango Eleven Sierra. We may be dealing with foreign synts." She dropped her shades and raised a pair of night field glasses to her eyes. The glasses automatically activated their optical stabilizing mode to counter the car's motion and her involuntary shaking. "I can see someone moving about but I cannot sense his or her presence. Better alert a security team."

Drawing near with his mouth agape, Fores pointed to a vessel of a little over twenty meters in length and was too large to fully show up in Yari's binocular view. The craft's skin was matt black color like that of an interplanetary combat craft. Once the ship's stealth mode was activated, a full spectrum scan of the vessel in deep space would have shown it to appear as a near-black body object. For all intensive purposes, it would have been invisible in the cold black depths of interstellar space.

"Look at that ship. I've never seen anything like it."

She lowered her field glasses, examined the vessel, and promptly donned her shades again. "Nor have I outside of a museum." Fores killed the car's lights as she spoke again into the radio's microphone. "This thing's painted black like a warship, Central. Although it is quite small, it could be some kind of scouting craft."

"Are there any identifying marks on the ship?"

"There are none that I can see at this point."

"What about occupants?"

"There's only one person I can see. If there's anyone else about then they're also a synt." Yari nervously bit her lip. Hesitantly, she said, "Curiosity is getting the better of me, Central. I'm going to risk contact."

Fores brought the car to a halt behind one of several mounds of fill dirt. A posted sign next to the mounds announced the land's owner was seeking clean landfill only. From the looks of surrounding piles of debris, no one was either able to read the sign or willing to follow its directions.

Yari made a mental note though their vehicle was well hidden behind the mounds of dirt, placing them in a defilade position, the mounds themselves would provide little protection should the vessel prove to be even a minor warship. All the vessel had to do was rise up a few meters to have a full view of the vehicle.

“Roger. Not advisable, but knowing you, be careful, Tango Eleven Sierra.”

Damn straight, she thought as she tossed the microphone aside, tapping her finger against her chin as she contemplated the alien. She knew if the alien was a syntient, then he or she would surely sense Fores’ presence. She snapped a smaller personal communicator onto a clasp on her left shoulder. “Well, whoever we’re dealing with must realize we’re here, even though he or she has paid no notice to us.”

“Hey, like that’s perfectly fine with me.” Fores smiled nervously. He studied the alien craft. “It looks like the pictures in my old school books about ancient Spacer vessels.” He grimaced. The black of his muzzle accented the white sheen of his teeth.

Yari opened her door and cautiously set her right foot on the ground. “I’ve probably investigated several hundred Spacer sightings in my life.” She leered towards him. “None have proven true. They’re what you read in the shady gossip rags at the checkout counter of your supermarket.” She stood then momentarily rested her arms atop the patrol car’s door and top. “This is probably another case of a nation using a Spacer-like ship design.” She added nonchalantly, “They’re quite a popular design.”

(The nations of the Spacers had died out approximately six million years prior to this point in time in a major galactic-wide catastrophe. The events leading to this calamity at this point in time were unknown. There were, however, rumors of a few small and very remote surviving colonies of Spacers somewhere within the galaxy. This was a favorite topic of many of the shady tabloids, novels, and shows thus keeping the specter of Spacers alive in the thoughts of the public.)

I hope so, thought Fores.

The odd feeling Yari had earlier suddenly grew worse.

Yari and Fores stepped to the front of their vehicle then cautiously zigzagged their way through the piles of dirt to within ten meters of the alien. There they silently stood, staring at the woman before them. The woman wore no clothing aside from a tool belt and a pair of eye shades she had resting above her forehead as she pulled a small panel away from the ship’s side hull.

The woman stood a full two meters in height. Her hair style was simple—straight and trimmed just above her shoulders. But what caught Yari’s and Fores’ attention was the woman sported *two* plush, flowing tails. The bottom tail was not quite as full and was a lighter brown color than its upper, reddish brown counterpart.

Yari glanced at Fores then cleared her throat. In the politest voice she could muster she said, “Police, ma’am. May we have a word with you?”

The woman continued to work on her ship. Yari sensed a dozen plus back-up officers in their cars moving in closer along the road they had used to arrive at the ship. As she raised a hand-held communicator to her mouth, she noticed in the dim light reflecting off the alien vessel’s side, revealing a severely eroded engraving above its entrance hatch—an Imperial Spacer emblem.

Yari’s blood ran cold.

“Central...” She had to use both hands to keep her communicator steady. “Central. Call Syntient headquarters. Tell them we have a live one. I repeat *a live one!*”

Fores jaw dropped as he pointed to the alien’s chest. “She’s... She’s got... four... You know what I’m trying to say.”

“So, she’s pleomastic,” Yari sighed. *Men*, she thought, rolling her eyes. “Get a grip on your hormones, sergeant. There are quite a few life-forms out there who bear that particular trait.” She briefly stared at the alien’s tails then whispered, “Although, I can’t say the same for her two tails.” She turned her attention back to the alien’s actions as she sensed Police Chief Kobur walking up behind her.

“We’re the police. Can we be of assistance to you?”

Again Yari was ignored by the alien.

Kobur stepped beside Yari as half of the officers spread out, surrounding the alien synt and her ship. The remainder stayed behind Kobur in reserve. Several carried heavy assault weapons while all donned light battle armor.

Like Fores, Kobur found himself staring at the alien’s chest as she moved about, working on her ship. Without showing emotion he turned his eyes to Yari. “Any luck, Dóvak?”

“No, chief. She hasn’t paid the least bit of attention to us.” She grinned. “You got here quick. I take it you just finished tonight’s urban assault class?”

“Aye...” Kobur cocked his head to one side as he studied the alien’s strange tails.

Yari took a couple of steps forward towards the alien as she thought aloud, “She knows we’re here. Why the hell is she ignoring us?”

The woman spun about, revealing herself to be Dy’ree. After a brief second, she dropped her glasses she had been using while making an occasional weld down with her left hand to hide her eyes as she sharply thrust her right hand out before her in a halting gesture. She uttered something completely incomprehensible to all who could hear her.

Yari’s stomach knotted as she caught a brief glimpse of Dy’ree’s eyes. A horrific thought donned on her that Dy’ree might be able to sense her presence; something that should be impossible as no syntient could sense another syntient.

Standing behind Yari and Kobur, an officer captured Dy’ree’s words with his hand-held computer and started running a translation program on them. He shook his head as the computer offered no immediate translation. The computer automatically jumped onto the web to find more translation reference files to continue its quest.

Dy’ree held two fingers out before her. Next, she touched her index finger to her chest and then pointed upwards. She then repeated her pantomime twice more and promptly returned back to her work.

Fores stepped up alongside Yari. “Does she want us to wait?” He took another step forward.

Again, Dy’ree whirled about, shaking an uncompromising finger from side to side as a stern warning. Her intentions that no one was to advance any closer towards her were not to be missed.

“See any weapons?” Kobur asked. Simultaneously, a voice in his earpiece authorized him to capture the alien at any cost short of losing Yari. He gestured to a corporal. “Never mind... We’re to take her in. Taser her...!”

“Yes sir.” The young man to Kobur’s left drew and aimed his taser pistol at Dy’ree. Its two electrodes protruding from its muzzle gleamed from the light of Dy’ree’s work light.

Kobur raised his hand, hesitated briefly, and then abruptly dropped it. “Fire...!”

On cue, two high voltage electrodes trailing thin wires shot from the taser’s muzzle with a pneumatic sounding “phfft.” The electrodes shot through the air to within two meters of Dy’ree when the airspace before them briefly distorted like a tossed rock precipitated ripples in a pool of still water. The electrodes sparked in mid air as their tips glanced off the unseen shield and briefly touched each other. They and their wires fell harmlessly to the ground as the echoing distortion waves on the alien’s protective shield quickly dropped from a sharp contrast to a mere whisper of itself. The distortion had faded in less than a second.

“Damn!” Yari, along with most of her fellow officers, took a step back. “There’s some sort of inertial damping field about the ship or her! No wonder she’s ignoring us.”

Over to Yari’s left, one of the officers drew his void sword.

(Void swords were well known at the time on most worlds as rare and presumed ancient artifacts of Spacer technology. The swords acted like gravitational singularities that were somehow stretched out meter or so along the mid axis of its handle. They could slice through some of the densest *normal* matter as though it was barely there. However, unlike normal singularities, two blades would

not merge to form a single singularity, nor could the blades pass through each other. Also, and strangest and most important curiosity of all, the sword itself would select its own master. It could only be activated and used by its sole owner until such time as its owner death. After such an event, the sword would wait, sometimes centuries or even millennia on end, before selecting new master.)

Dy'ree slowly turned. The soured look of annoyance etched deeply into her face. Slowly, she withdrew a forty centimeter handle-like rod from her tool belt in response. A thin black line quickly grew from the rod's business end until it reached over a meter in length.

"Look out! She has a *void sword* of her own!" shouted someone.

Ah, we're dead now, thought Fores as a nervous spasm overtook his left leg. *Damn! She must be a Spacer!* Without thought for his own personal safety, he lunged ahead of Yari and drew his own void sword. To his surprise, a third officer drew a sword off to Dy'ree's left side.

The third officer twirled his sword about in his hand. Brief flashes of light crawled and twinkled randomly along its blade as an occasional atom from the atmosphere gave up its mass to the deadly modified-singularity. Through some unknown technology the blade was prevented from emitting harsh, deadly radiation as it annihilated matter.

"Careful there, Drake." Kobur dragged Yari behind his large frame. Kobur knew if he lost Yari, the value of his very own life would quickly diminish to the lowest-valued commodity of dung existing upon the face of the Króbiousur planet.

Dy'ree briefly smiled then began whirling her sword about herself. Fores, Drake, and several officers halted their forward progression as they watched the alien's blade dance about her. Unlike their rigid, unyielding blades, hers varied its length, curling like a whip and dancing about her.

"Chief," the officer with the hand-held computer ran over. "I've isolated her language. It's a derivative of ancient Durvin."

Or Durvin is of hers? Yari wondered.

"Durvin...? There's no damn way she could be a Durvin." Kobur kept an eye on the alien's sword. "They are a rather short, slightly-built catlike people."

"Yes, but their sphere of influence encompasses many a world."

"Who cares...? Talk to her, Gaul." Kobur glared over his shoulder at the man with the computer. "Translate and get her to cease and desist, period!" He swung his head back around to the alien, thinking to himself, *what the government would give to have her*. He smiled briefly, devilishly. *One could name one's own price*.

Gaul listened as the computer translated the alien's speech. "Chief, I have a translation. In between her cursing, she's demanding that we leave her alone and she'll be on her way soon."

"Negative." Kobur violently shook his head no. "Drake, move in slowly, and be careful."

Drake cautiously advanced closer to the alien.

"Inform her that she's illegally on this world and that she's under arrest."

Gaul complied.

Dy'ree spoke slowly, keeping her sword at the ready.

Gaul translated. "She said, 'Good. Now that you understand what I'm saying. —*Leave me be!* I'll be off your world shortly'."

"Chief." Yari spoke with a slight waver in her voice. "Higher up wants me to try something." She swallowed hard at the thought of what she was about to attempt.

"What?" Kobur didn't allow his eyes to drift from Dy'ree.

Yari took her shades off, keeping her eyes averted from Kobur's and the others. "Let's see if she'll show us how powerful her synt abilities are. It could provide us with a clue as to how to handle her." She stepped around Kobur, not waiting for his nod of consent and walked forward until she was standing abreast with Fores. She stared at Dy'ree, daring her to remove her glasses and reveal the depth of her synt abilities.

Dy'ree mockingly laughed. "'Okay, if you're that curious then be forewarned'."

(When a normal person and a synt make eye contact, a normal could gain an inkling of the synt's abilities. The act could be a little eerie and disturbing to a normal, sometimes to the point of upsetting the stomach. Should two synts make eye contact, they would know who was the more powerful, and, more likely than not, elder synt.)

Dy'ree tilted her tawny-yellow on reddish-brown piebald face back and slowly removed her glasses. Her cold, blue catlike eyes stood out in stark contrast to the tawny-yellow, velvet-like fur of her face, chest and stomach. Emotionless, she stared into Yari's eyes.

Yari began to tremble. A dull throb spread through her head as Dy'ree's full potential slammed through her mind. Her knees grew weak as her whole body began to uncontrollably tremble. She was stunned and nearly lost to the world in a mental fog as she realized her abilities were far less than those of Dy'ree.

"No!" Fores charged Dy'ree as several energy bolts ricocheted off her protective shielding. Enraged, he thrust his sword out at her, but she had long sensed his muscle's tensing and was well prepared to dodge him. Parry, thrust, and counter-parry, she sent his sword flying end-over-end through the air. She brought her sword to his neck, stopping its blade just short of his neck.

His head was hers to take if she desired to be so.

Fores then caught full sight of Dy'ree's eyes and felt the prodigious force of her abilities. He promptly blacked out. —Not from her stare but from the terror of the moment.

Drake then attacked Dy'ree from behind.

Dy'ree spun about quicker than Drake had ever seen someone react before. In one clean slash her sword took his hand. His only concession was it would at least be a somewhat easy job for Króbiour doctors to reattach his hand as the Dy'ree void sword had performed a clean amputation with only the tiniest small amount of cellular disruption along the path of the wound.

"Stop!" Yari screamed as she came back to her senses. She quickly regained her repose. "The greater our attack the greater her response. There's no way we'll take her."

Kobur placed himself between Yari and Dy'ree. "Are you all right?" He signaled for his officers to cease fire.

"Yeah." She avoided glancing at Dy'ree's eyes. "I have a suspicion she's a different kind of synt, a form rare to our world. She's a guardian, and an unmatched one at that, too. But she is so... incredibly powerful!"

Kobur looked puzzled. "Aren't guardians less powerful than syntients?" He kept his movements slow and to a minimum so as to not alarm Dy'ree who had suddenly turned her full attention towards him. "And," he whispered, "how can you not sense her if she's an unmatched guardian? Aren't they supposed to be normal beings until they match? Or, has she lost her matched syntient?"

"Whoa!" Thoughts ransacked Yari's mind. A tear ran down her left cheek as she fought to regain the better portion of her senses. "She's not a normal guardian. To hazard a guess, I would say she was born an unmatched guardian and with her abilities intact." Her legs started to tremble again. "I would say she's a Spacer. I don't know how old she is, maybe in the millions of years, but she is definitely a Spacer." She sighed and silently wished she could become the alien's matched syntient. *Oh, what a team they could make*, she thought.

An icy chill suddenly ran the length of Yari's spine. She wondered how many more Spacers were out there, somewhere within the vast reaches of the universe.

Decision

<Date: 1/4/29,420 Standard. Location: Earth. The Terran home world.>

Erik Warren sat alone in a fast food restaurant as he slowly twirling a spoon about in his coffee mug and watching its aromatic brew swirled about within. Around and around he watched the coffee

spin, wondering about in circles, lost like his own mind. A half-eaten hamburger lay atop the remains of his fries. He sat there brooding, pondering the latest in a long line of disappointments in his life.

Once again his mind served him up a large dose of self pity. As it did such he paid no attention to the slow shuffle of footsteps from an approaching elderly woman.

“Why hello, Mr. Warren.”

Erik jumped with a start. He drew in a long breath as he looked up her.

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” The old woman placed her heavy purse in the seat opposite Erik. The purse was too heavy for her, but she carried all that was left of her life within it.

“It’s really no problem, Mrs. Farnsworth.” Erik shook his head then slowly ran his left hand down along his unshaven face and neck. “...I was lost in thought.”

“Thought...?” She steadied herself on the chair where she laid her purse. “You look as though you’ve lost your last friend in the world.”

“My applications to get my patents and inventions used by either the government or private industry have been rejected once again.”

“Again?” She glanced at the stack of paperwork next to Erik. “Why can’t you build something that uses one or more of your inventions in it?”

“I have built several models. They say they’re nothing but ridiculous toys. —That I should take them to the stage as a traveling magician. Their excuse is that they can be duplicated through cheaper means, yet what I have invented is something they cannot even begin to explain let alone reproduce.” He shook his head solemnly from side to side. “I have none of the money, credentials, or contacts to break into their technology consortium.”

“Then make something they can’t shoo off.”

“That could take years...” Erik looked and sounded even more depressed.

Mrs. Farnsworth smiled. “Wouldn’t it be better than spending the next several years repeating over and over at what you’re not succeeding at? Make something they cannot ignore. —Give them a show they cannot dismiss.” She briefly closed her eyes. “Give them something that, pardon the expression, smacks them right in the face. Keep it simple, but put enough bells and whistles on it, they’ll have to notice it.”

Erik’s eyes lit as his frown grew into a smile. “Right—you’re a genius, Mrs. Farnsworth!” A devilish grin grew on his face. “I’ll give them something they can’t deny.” His face soured. “But what...?”

“Just what have you been working on? What is it supposed to do?” She picked her purse up and used the chair for herself, placing the purse in her lap.

“Travel, Mrs. Farnsworth. A new form of travel.” Erik leaned back in his seat and chuckled. “You’re right. I’ll give them something that’s so far out of this world they’ll have to notice and accept it. I’ll do a simple disappearing act.” Making his mind up to leave a large tip for all who worked in the restaurant, he pointed to a menu on the wall. “My dear Mrs. Farnsworth, I believe I owe you lunch....”

Farewell

<Date: 3/3/29,420 Standard. Earth orbit.>

Erik nervously rubbed his trembling hands together as he glanced over the control panel before him. Since he was in the micro-gravity of orbit about the Earth his stomach was turning itself end over end even faster than his hands were.

Outside his vessel the international space station *Gandhi* slowly came closer into view. His radio constantly blared out warnings that he was approaching too close to station. That force would be used against him if needed and that he would be facing serious charges, fines, and prison time upon his

return to Earth.

“Houston, before you start popping missiles off, allow me to state that I have no reason to harm your precious space station. My sole wish to have the station and those aboard her to serve as unwilling witnesses to an experiment of mine.”

“Who is this? Identify yourself!”

Erik paused and held his breath for a few nervous seconds. “Warren. My name is Erik Warren.”

“Look, Mr. Warren. This is Commander Derrick Shultz. I don’t know how you got to where you presently are, but you must leave orbit and land immediately.”

“I should think not! Besides, I didn’t see any trespassing signs on my way up here.”

“This isn’t a joke, Mr. Warren. You’re to remove yourself from the proximity of Station Gandhi, now!”

Erik looked at the main display screen of his controls. The ship’s computer was making last minute calculations for his experiment.

“Look. I’ll be leaving orbit shortly. You can call it a flight of fancy or foolishness if you like. It doesn’t matter to me. And, should this not work, a lawyer will contact the government in seven years time. At that time my lawyer will release my papers so others may continue my research should they elect to do as such.”

“Just what are you planning?”

“I’m going anywhere in this universe but here.” Erik glanced at the approaching station. “Have you pulled up my profile, yet?”

“I’m receiving your records now, Mr. Warren.”

Erik waited as the man quickly read over the highlights of his personal file. “Well?”

“Ah... surely you don’t intend to go through with this madness?”

“Listen. Right about now, some scientists are about to freak out when they see what I left in orbit about Neptune and other planets. When they download images from the SRE 15 satellite, they’ll find my face staring back at them. Seven other satellites will also be downloading my image from about the solar system. All were taken within seconds of each other. This is my proof I have dimensionally bypassed faster-than-light travel.” Erik sat back and stared at the stars. “If I survive, in a year or two I may decide to return... It just depends on what all I find out there.”

A beeper sounded and lights flashed on Erik’s controls.

“It’s time. If there are any cameras on the space station, have them turn on now and start recording.” Erik pressed several places on a touch pad. “Wish me luck.” He paused for a long moment. “Listen. I know I’m a major pain to deal with, but, at least in my mind, I’m just rearing up against those who have laughed at my inventions over the years.”

He knew well the pain he was about to experience as he pressed the final switch. The nervousness of his stomach was replaced by excruciating pain as the space station and the planet Earth very briefly shimmered and then disappeared. The background stars formed themselves into new patterns.

Erik found his stomach turning and he grabbed a sickness bag and promptly emptied the contents of his stomach into it. He then spent several minutes caught up in waves of dry heaves. He thought his stomach was going to expel itself.

His leap away from the Sol system was far worse than the shorter hops and jumps between the planets. After a few long, painful minutes, his stomach stopped aching and he opened his eyes and took a moment to take in the starry view of deep space. Behind the stern of his vessel he saw a beautiful planetary nebula occupying a good forty degrees of his view.

Chuckling to himself, he said aloud, “I’m all alone now.” He stretched out his feet and relaxed, satisfied with the first leg of his experiment. “Now, if I can only find a way to lessen the pain I felt during the spatial shift...”

He grimaced. The counter on his console displayed one minute remained until the ship would

execute its next jump. He made a quick adjustment to several jump parameters. The ship's computer sang out, "*Three... two... one...*" This time, Erik felt far less pain as the background stars changed again.

Quarantine

<Date: 3/4/29,420 Standard. Location: A planetary system within the outlying Lantänger territory.>

"Oh, crap! I shouldn't have done that!" Erik had barely recovered from what was now the greatly diminished pain of his latest jump, as compared to his first jump, when through blurry eyes, he saw an alien craft parked two hundred meters off his bow. In the background was the half-shadowed orb of a terrestrial-type planet.

Panicked, he grabbed a sickness bag and his stomach let fly with what was left of his last meager meal he had managed to eat while drifting weightless in space. Recovering himself, he allowed the sickness bag to float before him in the weightlessness of space where he could reach it again should he need it.

"Note," he spoke as calmly as he could manage into his voice-activated recorder. "The stomach pains from the spatial jumps are greatly lessened whenever the exit and entrance points are well away from stars and planetary systems. Concerning jumps—gravity wells equal pain. This is no longer an assumption. Secondly..." He swallowed hard. "I may need a new pair of pants because there's an alien ship sitting right off my bow." He briefly paused as he took a deep breath. "Correction. —In this case, I am the alien!"

He turned his full attention back to the slim, maroon-colored vessel off his bow. "What am I thinking? These guys could blast me into a million pieces! Earth doesn't have anything like this ship... Or at least I don't think so."

His radio blared out a stream of incomprehensible words. He could only shake his head and stare at the ship ahead in response. He always had trouble dealing with other people; however it quickly donned on him the ship floating before him might be looking for some sign as to what his intentions were. He raised his hands and produced the friendliest smile he could. It then donned on him that showing his teeth could also be a sign of hostility as with some primates and other animals back on Earth.

The bow of the alien ship dipped slightly.

I hope that's a good sign. His smile quickly vanished as he saw the leading edge of a large ship's hanger overtaking him from behind his own vessel.

"Look at the size of this thing," he mumbled to himself as he shrank lower in his seat.

The ship resting before his craft eased itself closer to his bow, allowing the larger vessel to swallow the two of them.

Gravity's sudden appearance caused Erik's sickness bag to drop from where it was floating, hitting the padded deck and splashing its contents out across the space between his feet. Spooked, he grabbed the armrests of his chair in response to the sudden feel of gravity. He then had to use his right hand to pry his left from the armrest of his chair.

As the lights came on inside the large hanger, Erik could make out tools and what he took to be diagnostic equipment along one wall. Along the other wall was a small section containing a weapons' cache. Some of the weapons were small pistols, others appeared to be assault rifles and heavy machine guns, but a few of them were beyond his ability to describe.

Then with loud shouts, the hanger bay filled with dozens of troops wearing pressurized armored suits. All their weapons were aimed at the cockpit of Erik's little ship.

Erik sat staring blankly ahead as the full horror of the moment etched itself deeply into his face.

Quickly, several soldiers secured a clear triple-layered, sterile, isolation tent over the cockpit of

Erik's ship and a second like tent about the ship itself. Then one of the soldiers made a motion upwards with his hands.

Hesitantly, Erik opened the cockpit a few centimeters.

The soldier motioned for him to continue.

As the cockpit's bubble finished fully retracting, Erik stood. He then followed the soldier's directions to step all the way out of the cockpit and to move over into an isolation tent. There inside the isolation tent he turned around and found the gloved hand of a noncombatant technician protruding through a ring in the tent wall. He remained still as possible as the technician swabbed samples from his skin, eyes, nose, and mouth.

The soldiers then had him move to another part of the tent where they transferred him to a pressurized bubble mounted atop a wheeled stretcher.

Erik didn't argue. After several days of weightlessness he didn't mind staying off his wobbly legs.

The soldiers and technicians quickly wheeled him into an airlock and after it cycled through they rolled him inside the ship proper. There, he caught his first non-obscured sight of who his hosts were and what they looked like. He could only describe them as humanlike squirrels. They had well-furred tails and bodies, but their feet appeared much like his own with four nimble fingers and an opposable thumb on their hands.

From the looks of the face and the large well-developed chest of one of the squirrels, who happened to be dressed in a well-tailored black military-style uniform, he took her to be a female of their species. She appeared to have a quite keen interest in him. Smiling, she pointed down a corridor to her left. The soldiers and techs quickly followed her lead and guided Erik in the indicated direction.

Fii

<Date: 3/7/29,420 Standard. Location: High orbit about Lantänger.>

Erik rested alone on a bed in a private room the "squirrels" had provided him with on their ship. He referred to them as such since he couldn't communicate with them well enough to find out by what name they referred to themselves as. About the best he could manage in communicating was to point to his mouth whenever he was hungry or other such gestures.

The day before, the squirrels had given him numerous injections. He believed these were vaccines to protect him from their pathogens and that they had likely done the same to protect themselves against his germs. Either way, he saw the logic behind the injections but he still didn't like them.

Sitting there, he debated how the squirrels might have arisen on their world. *No doubt they lived in trees like many terrestrial primates once did*, he thought. *However, they don't have large rodent-like buck teeth. In fact, their teeth look almost exactly like mine.*

Staring at the ceiling, he heard a knock on his door and out of habit mumbled, "Come in."

The door slowly opened and the same commanding female squirrel in uniform he had seen on his first day aboard their ship directing the soldiers where to take him, and everyday since, stepped inside. "Thank you."

He leaped to his feet. "You... you speak..."

"I'm sorry." She bowed slightly. "It took us a few days decipher your computer and pieced together your language."

Curious, he thought. He noticed her words didn't match the movement of her lips. "I'm pleased you were able to figure out my language. I've never been any good at languages."

"To be more precise, Lu-bell, our ship's computer, deciphered your language." She took a few hesitant steps forwards. "My name Fii O'Jii." She bowed slightly towards him from habit. "I'm sure

you have many questions, and, as you might expect, I have even more questions for you.”

Erik shrugged his shoulders as he stood alongside his bed. “My questions can wait. Fire away.”

“Fire...?” A confused look fell across her yellowish tan on reddish brown furred face.

“Um...” He looked somewhat perplexed. “I mean, go ahead and ask your questions.”

“Well...” She smiled. “If you don’t mind, I’m having Lu-bell listen in on our conversation so she can gather the finer nuances from your language such as ‘fire away’ meaning ask... or maybe proceed.”

It’s your ship... he thought as he shrugged his shoulders then nodded. “Sure.”

“Thank you.” She gestured for him to sit as she made use of a chair sitting at the foot of his bed. As he sat back down on the edge of his bed she said, “I’m a Lantänger. I believe you’re called an earthling or a Terran?”

He nodded, thinking squirrel was a more fitting description, as he watched the way she wrapped the greater part of her quite large tail about her lap.

“Please allow me to bring you up to date as to what is happening. Presently, my world is applying for admission to the Alliance. The Alliance knows of your world’s existence, but they have elected to allow your world to develop unhindered. That is until now...” She leaned slightly towards him. “You have made first contact, and hence your planet is no longer considered... isolated. Sometime over the upcoming year or years, we and the Alliance will make a tentative gesture of greetings and hospitality to your world.”

Erik sat there for a moment, unsure of what to think. “Well, it has to happen one day.”

“True. But the galaxy is full of hostile worlds and unions. Have no delusions, Erik—there is no paradise out here among the stars!”

The tone of her voice sent a chill through him. He grimaced. “Nothing ever changes.”

“No. I imagine not.” She clasped her hands together. “I’m straying from what I wish to talk with you about. I’ll get straight to the point: Your ship traverses the dimensions of space in a manner which differs slightly—but significantly—from ours. We feel we can work with you to develop a better dimensional drive.”

He cleared his throat. “I... I guess. The dimensional drive I used to get here was jack-legged together in the basement of my house. I’ve already thought of numerous ways to improve it, especially whenever I jumped near a planet or star.” His face soured. “I felt a terrible pain in my gut every time I jumped near a large planetary mass.”

“I know the feeling.” She patted her stomach. “Once we make planet side you’ll find I have already acquired laboratory for your use.”

“Uh... thanks. I’m bewildered with all that has happened, but I do appreciate the lab.” He had no idea as to what she might describe as being a laboratory.

“Good. Now, if you don’t mind, may we discuss financial matters at a later date when we have a better grasp of what changes your drive may bring about?”

“I haven’t given money any thought... I don’t... have any.”

She smiled and said in a cheerful voice, “Your drive will affect countless trillions of lives.”

“Trillions...?” He nearly collapsed back onto his bed. “Other worlds.” He glanced at her through blurry eyes. “It just hit me as to how many other people there might in this universe.”

“I was only thinking of our little section of the galaxy. There has only been limited contact made with other galaxies let alone the vastness of our own galaxy.” She glanced at the ceiling. “Lu-bell. Panel, please.”

“Yes, *your highness*,” a disembodied female voice said.

Fii’s eyes grew wide as she stared at Erik. She had forgotten to tell her ship’s computer to drop her title.

Erik ignored a video panel descending from the ceiling. “You’re...?”

"I'm sorry." She dropped her tail and stood. "I didn't mean to deceive you. I was trying to keep things simple while we have our first talk." She slowly bowed. "As I said, I'm Fii O'Jii. I'm the forty-second daughter of my father and sovereign ruler of the Lantänger people, Saul O'Jii. You are presently aboard my personal ship, Lu-bell."

"Well..." He lowered his eyes towards the floor. "That does explain the soldiers in the hanger when I arrived."

She crossed her hands before her waist. "We weren't certain of your intentions or about any pathogens you may have harbored on and within your self when you first arrived. You are the first from your world to make it out this far."

His eyes narrowed. "And should I return home one day? Could I infect my home world?"

"Not likely, but it is one reason why the Alliance will take their time in contacting your world." She took her seat again and drew her tail across her lap. "If they have to go in early, they'll have medical teams on hand to stop any pandemic that may arise. We have your genetic scan, so we have a good idea as to what ways viruses and other micro flora and fauna can work to help or impede the Terran body."

"Mm..." Erik's eyes narrowed even more. "Tell me, what could cause this Alliance to make early contact?"

"Other unions." She pointed to the video display. "Lu-bell, show a sequence of images of life-forms hostile to our world and the Alliance."

"Yes, your highness."

The image of a tiger-like beast appeared first on the screen. A few seconds later it was replaced by a reptilian humanoid picture.

Erik was captivated as the image count grew into the dozens. "So many."

She slowly shook her head from side to side. "Some of them will see your world as a prize to be exploited." She smiled. "And yes, we too will exploit your inventions, but you and your world will be more than adequately compensated. Not to digress, but fifty million Alliance credits have been placed in an account set up for you to cover any immediate expenses you may encounter."

He asked in a suspicious voice, although he knew he could probably not presently compare Alliance credits to the money he used back on Earth, "Just how much are these Alliance credits worth?"

Fii thought for a second. "Lu-bell, and the ship housing her, cost me around twenty million Alliance credits."

"Holy...!" He had to force himself to breathe slowly and calm down.

She looked very concerned as she leaned towards him. "Are you all right?"

"Definitely... I think. Yeah." He crossed his arms over his chest and patted the back of his left hand with his right palm. "Please... continue."

"Well..." She glanced at the scrolling video feed. "Some would see your world as a source of slaves or for whatever natural resources remain after your people's development, but that's usually a secondary harvesting. A few will see your people as fresh meat. Mind you, I dare to say so literally!" She looked deep into his eyes. "You look shocked. Good. I will always remember my sister, Hiirey. She was consumed by a bipedal reptilian race called the Ehrvayers almost two years ago."

Erik lowered his head. "I'm sorry to hear about her."

"Your work, and future innovations, will help our military to fend off the Ehrvayers and others like them." A small smile of satisfaction grew on her face. "However, first you have much to learn. You may call up whatever information you want through Lu-bell. Then, if you like, I would be honored if you would join me for supper tonight... Planet side, that is."

"Um..." Erik straightened his shoulders, still trying to comprehend all that had happened. "I... I would be honored, your highness."

“Please, Erik. Just call me Fii.” She glanced at a small keypad and display strapped to her left forearm. “We’ll be planet side very soon. I have a few tasks I need to take care of, and then I’ll treat you to a delicious meal in this quaint little restaurant I know.”

Dinner

Erik tensed up as he glanced around at the people inside the restaurant. Nearly everyone in the place was a Lantänger, and yet not one of them paid him any mind. This to Erik made him feel even further out of place for he was the only Terran around for several hundred light-years. He found his mind wondering off, debating within itself if the people knew of him and were ignoring him or what...

“Hey.” Fii gently shook his shoulder. “Relax.”

She wore a solid black dress which plunged quite low and wide to reveal her ample cleavage as well as a long split displaying her long legs. About her neck she wore a simple diamond pendent, and each of her earlobes bore a solitary diamond.

Erik turned his head and relaxed greatly as he noticed her smile. “Sorry. I’ve never been the gregarious sort. I’ve spent most of my past few years working in my basement lab on my experiments and ship.”

“That’s quite all right.” She gestured for a waitress to come over to them.

The waitress, an older, tan and orange Lantänger hurried to their table and bowed. “If the two of you are ready, I would be pleased to take your orders.”

Erik tapped his earpiece, amazed at how it was able to translate between their languages.

“Yes. Have the velays come into season yet?”

He noticed the Lantänger word “velays” didn’t translate over to his Terraglish.

“Sorry, ma’am. The Krylians have stopped all transport to and from Tray-bäowis. However, we have quite a selection of rather large malviss krill. Might I suggest chilled malviss soup as an appetizer?”

“Mm... Very good. We’ll each have one, please.” Fii raised a holographic display mid-table and had it scroll through its store of images of possible main courses. “Ah. Here we are.” She stopped when she found an image showing a large steak with numerous side dishes.” She glanced at Erik. “How does steak sound, Erik?”

He nodded. “I could go for a rather thick well-done one.”

“Good.” She turned her attention back to the waitress. “Two Gherny steak dinners. Make one thick cut and well done, and I’ll have a medium, thick cut. And, would you bring us some decaffeinated tea, please.” She glanced at Erik. “What would you care to drink?”

“It’s late, so decaffeinated tea sounds good.”

Fii Nodded to the waitress. “Make that two decaffeinated teas, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The waitress bowed again as she backed away from the table. “I’ll have your appetizers and drinks sent right out.” She quietly made her way back to the kitchen to start their order.

“I believe she knows who you are.”

“More than likely.” Fii smiled. “But they don’t mention who anyone is in here.” She giggled. “I guess that’s why I like this place so much.”

He glanced about the restaurant, taking in the relaxing aesthetics of lighting, music, and such. “It is rather calming in here.” He considered the people he could see inside the restaurant. “Odd...”

“How’s that?” She leaned closer towards him.

He looked around the eatery once more. “Are all your men off fighting these hostile worlds you’ve spoke about?”

She shook her head from side to side. “In a way, I wish they were...” She propped her chin up with her hands and her cheerful smile disappeared. “Did you, by chance, read about the people called

the Vishahntiens?”

“Um...” He stared off into the distance as he thought. “They’re somewhat feline-like people who have only one male born in a thousand plus births...” His shoulders drooped and he dropped back in his chair. “Your world...”

“No, not quite as bad as the Vishahntiens have it.” She lowered her hands to her lap. “We average about one male in forty plus births.” She sighed, “Although for my father the odds seem to be against him. He has fathered one hundred nineteen daughters and two more are on the way.”

“Then your world was trying to produce more male children in its early history like the Vishahntiens?”

“Oh, heavens no!” She held her left hand up as though to hush him, then quickly lowered it.

He could see tears well up in her bright brown eyes as she composed herself.

“What happened to my people is a malignant black mark in our history. Millennia ago, during our third major world war, a dictator named Quiintus perceived his own imitate defeat and he took action to have revenge on all, innocent and guilty alike.” She pinched her right thumb and index finger together and held them up for him to see. “Quiintus released a viral attack which killed hundreds of millions. And then...” Her voice cracked. “Sorry.” She sipped some water from her glass. “Then the viruses were most likely mutated from radiation released from an earlier, limited nuclear exchange. The virus mutated and became non lethal to the general population, but its gene-splicing ability irrevocably damaged the Y chromosome of our males. This caused most of the male eggs to die before their cells had a chance to divide more than two or three times.”

She glanced behind Erik and noticed a hover-bot waiter bringing their appetizer. “Our first course is here. We can discuss this topic at a later time.”

He briefly glanced over his shoulder. “Good. We can talk about something I dread.”

Fii looked surprised as she took a bowl from the bot and handed it to Erik. She placed the second bowl on the table before her. “What may that be?”

He tucked the corner of a napkin inside his shirt. “This Alliance you world wishes to enter... Do they have any thoughts concerning me?”

She smiled, holding back a chuckle. “Relax. Sometime within the next week they wish to speak with you about buying rights to your inventions.” She shook in a few grains of an unknown spice into her malviss soup. “As it stands now, it’s a ‘win-win-win’ situation for my world, you and your world, as well as the Alliance.”

“Just when do they want to meet with me?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “They’re allowing you a few more days to get settled in. After that, be ready to...” She waved her hands about before her. “How would you say it... to have you brains picked?”

Erik still couldn’t believe the situation he found himself in. “Are they really that interested in what I have to say?”

“Of course, silly.” She sipped some of her soup from a small, ladle-like spoon. “You had better eat your soup before it gets warm.”

“Oh, yeah.” Erik took a quick sip. Surprised, he glanced up at her. “Hey, this is good. Very good.”

Fii laughed. “I see a future export.”

“I’d better invest in it.”

“It’s your money.”

“Mm... Yeah.” He leaned back in his chair. It donned on him, although Fii wasn’t Terran, she was still a good looking young woman. *Hell*, he thought, *even her plush tail is kind of cute—in a kinky sort of a way.*

“You can set up your investments anytime you like.”

“Tomorrow’s good.” He savored several more spoonfuls of his soup.

Interested in a different subject, Fii leaned forward. “So, tell me about your family back on Terra?”

“Um...” Surprised, Erik shook his head. “No one.” His eyes saddened as his breathing slowed and deepened. “My parents and older sister were killed in a freak monorail accident when I was young. I was adopted and raised by my great aunt and uncle, Joan and Sid. Alas, they both passed on when I was in my late teens.”

“I’m so sorry.” She reached out and touched his left forearm. Her eyes expressed great sorrow as she looked deep into his eyes.

Is she coming on to me? He wondered. He felt his chest was about to burst with the possibility. “I had my work.”

She whispered, “That cannot possibly fill the emptiness of one’s heart.”

“No... It can’t.” He placed his right hand over hers and was taken by the soft smoothness of her velvet-like fur. “I’ve never been good with... words.”

“Here.” She grasped the uppermost ornamental button of her dress with her left hand and gave it a twist. The button came off with a faint snap as it was designed to do. She raised Erik’s left hand and gently placed the button in his palm. “This is an ancient tradition among my people. I’ve removed the first button; it’s up to you to undo the others.”

He smiled as he felt his hand close about her warm hand and the button.

“Time,” “In the End,” “Relic,” “Decision,” “Farewell,” “Quarantine,” “Fii,” and “Dinner” are sections of text from the story *Panocide*.

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