

Panocide: The Past – Section Three

Earth

<Date: 4/11/29,421 Standard. The Terran home world's first official contact with sentient life-forms from other worlds. The contact was negotiated through Terra's off world colonies.>

Erik sat silently, staring out a portal at a small, white-streaked, bluish sphere. Fii was resting against his right side, held comfortably close by his arm. Her right hand slowly circled and patted her swollen tummy. Their near fully developed child moved and kicked about within her belly.

"There's the space station *Gandhi*," he whispered. "I used her as my jumping off point for my trip which eventually led to you."

She made a pained look with her face. "I bet that hurt." She snuggled closer to him. "I'm glad you found a solution to the pain from spatial jumps."

"It's only a partial solution. We still can only jump so close to a planet or star with relatively little or no pain." He thought about how Alliance troops now had the ability to exit a spatial jump in a high orbit about a planet. It was painful but the capability gave the Alliance a tactical advantage against hostile forces within the galaxy.

Fii pulled his left hand over and placed it against her belly. "Tell her. She didn't mind the last jump."

"Hi, Bea." He gently patted Fii's tummy. "How's daddy's little girl?" He felt Bea kick. "Whoa! That was a good one."

"Tell me about it." Fii lifted his hand, kissed it, and then placed it back on her stomach. "You're worried, aren't you?"

"Yes." He leaned his head over against hers. "There are a fair number of religious extremists and fanatics in Terra's government along with the usual number of crackpots and crazies. I even worry about the liberals." He glanced out the port once more. "One reason for first contacting the Terran colonies instead of Mother Earth herself. When I left the Terra, the Centralists were the major holders' power. By now, I imagine, they have grown even more powerful." He said with disdain as he wrapped his arms tightly about Fii, "Maracyn's their leader. I don't want you to go planet side until he and his followers are no longer a threat. If he were to find out our child was half Lantänger and half Terran, he would..."

"Don't worry." She hugged him back. "We'll all remain here aboard the *Larien's* flagship until it's time for Bea's birth."

"Good. I just want the two of you and the others to be safe." He gently rubbed her belly with his hand.

Mara, a young Dycinian woman, and Tiara, a variegated reddish furred, cat eyed woman and an Ajosian industrial heiress, poked their heads out of the room's bathroom. Tiara said, "We're running a little late. Kola's fur's so thick it's taking quite a while to dry her off."

Mara and Tiara slipped back inside the bathroom and Jedii, now showing her own pregnancy, and Mea, an orange, self-colored furred Voeshalter woman, stepped out.

Jedii helped Mea to put on her four-breasted bra. "I think Kola has also clogged the drain with her thick fur."

"I heard that," said Kola from beneath several towels from inside the bathroom. "I'll have you know these showers were designed to handle even the hairiest of the nations within the Alliance... The drain works fine." She stepped out past Jedii and Mea. The stark white fur covering her four breasts was still clearly damp as was the tawny tiger striped fur cover the rest of her body. She glanced at Mara's hairless body and the long, damp black hair she sported atop her head. "Unfortunately, we were in such a hurry to get here we all forgotten to bring our fur and hair blow-dryers."

Mara added, "This is a naval ship, not a civilian space liner. We might be able to borrow some blow dryers, but they're not likely to have any really nice, fancy ones we can buy."

Fii smiled. Happily, she and Erik had arrived on an earlier flight.

Kola's eyes lit up. "What are we thinking?" She tapped her forehead with the back of her hand. "The military uses full body fur dryers. They don't do your fur much good but they're quick." She glanced at the ceiling. "Computer, where's the closest available hair dryer for heavily furred people such as myself. —I'm a Rychtaevier."

"This s a Hurcon class flight battle cruiser, your quarter's facilities is being rapidly adapted to your needs. Please wait one moment while changes are implemented."

"Thank you." Kola smiled at Fii and Erik. "Where there's a will..."

"There's a way," said Erik without thinking.

"True, dear." Kola glanced inside the bathroom and watched as a panel in the bulkhead retracted out of sight by a service robot and was quickly and quietly replaced by a large blower control panel.

"Your facilities are ready for you, ma'am. Thank you for allowing us to service to you."

"No, thank you for changing out our hair blower." Kola knew she was speaking to the ship's computer; however she also knew a highly sentient artificial intelligence.

"You're welcome, ma'am."

Kola grinned and waved to Fii and Erik, then quickly darted back inside the bathroom.

Jedii said, "We'll join up with the two of you before whatever planned ceremonies end." She waved and blew kisses along with her co-wives and they all stepped back inside the bathroom.

A bell sounded at their cabin's entrance.

Fii said in a faint voice, "Come in."

A Dycinian-Larien sailor stepped inside and saluted while an Ajosian sailor remained outside. "Your highness, the Vishahntien ambassador to Terra is prepared to meet the Terran ambassador within the next few minutes." He glanced at Erik and nodded. "Lord Warren." He turned his attention back to Fii. "May I get you something, your highness?"

"We're fine. Tell the ambassador and his guests we'll be there momentarily."

"Yes, your highness. Your ride awaits you." The sailor saluted, then turned and shut the door behind his self.

Erik stood, allowing his arms to grab and hold hers. "Are you ready to stand up?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." She took a deep breath and leaned as far forward as her belly would allow.

"Up we go." He pulled her to her feet. He joked on a hushed voice, "Are you sure you don't have two in there?"

"Ha-ha. Funny." She purposely stepped on his foot. "You tell me."

He grimaced. "One! Just one." He pretended to hobble towards the door then straightened up and stepped back over to Fii's side. "Ready?"

She nodded. "Dear, have you decided when you're going planet side?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Probably within a few weeks." He kissed her on her pinkish-brown nose. "Besides, the more I get involved, the more likely I am to foul things up." He provided her with his left arm.

Fii started to shake her head no, but quickly changed it to an affirmative nod. She knew Erik would likely mess up the political situation. "Come on." She took his arm and walked beside him. After a few steps he opened the door for her. "I do wish to meet the ambassador from the Terran colonies." She glanced over her shoulder and shouted to Jedii and the others. "Catch up when you can!"

"Okay. You two take care," said Gedii. "If we're a little late, we'll see you at the reception on the promenade."

Outside their cabin the Dycinian-Larien sailor waited with along side a small transport buggy.

The Ajosian sailor had reported back to her superiors that Fii and Erik were on their way.

“Thank you, seaman.” Erik said as he and the sailor helped Fii sit in the front seat. Erik jumped into the back seat. “Ready.”

“Yes, sir.” The sailor stepped around the front of the buggy and slid in behind its controls. “Let me know if we’re traveling too fast, your highness.”

“I’ll be fine.” Fii gestured forward with her hand. “We’re only a hundred meters away from the reception dock.”

“As you wish, princess.” The sailor kicked the buggy’s motor into gear. They then proceed along the corridor.

Fii looked over her shoulder. “Nervous, dear?”

Erik’s face soured. “Crowds...”

“You’ve survived crowds before, dear.” She flashed him a warm smile.

“But this time some of them will be my own people...”

She reached back and touched his hand. “But this time I’m with you.”

The buggy rounded a bend in the corridor to the right and another to the left where it pulled up next to an airlock. The sailor stopped the vehicle and stepped around it to give Erik a hand with helping Fii out.

“Thank you, seaman.” Fii smiled at the young man. “Will you be here afterwards?”

“Yes, your highness. Although I will need to secure the buggy out of sight around the corner.”

“Thanks again.” She bowed slightly in return to the sailor’s salute. She then turned and looked through the airlock’s open reception hatch where she saw the Vishahntien’s first ambassador to Terra, Marc Ujanie. “There he is.”

“The guy your sister Dai went to collage with?” Erik opened the airlock door.

“That’s him.” She nudged him in the ribs. “She had a crush on him then. And, she may still have her crush on him to this day.” She laughed heartily.

The ambassador heard her laugh and turned around. “Your highness. I’m delighted you could make it here.” He stepped past his Vishahntien women guards and took her hands in his. “You’re so beautiful in your family-way.” He gently touched her tummy with the fingertips of his right hand. “I heard it’s a girl. God bestow His Blessings upon her, you, and your husband.” He kissed Fii on her cheeks and then turned his attention to Erik.

Erik was cautiously eyeing the tall Vishahntien women and stoutly built Sha’kal troops who were employed as the ambassador’s personal guards when Marc grabbed his hand and shook it.

“Congratulations. Erik, is it?”

Erik looked bewildered. He noted there was quite a size difference between Marc and the female Vishahntien troops. Marc was not as tall Fii, and the female Vishahntien troops protecting him were a good head or better taller than Fii or his own self. The Sha’kal troops’ sexes differed by mass. The men were tall and thin while the women were as tall or slightly taller and were very stoutly built.

“Uh, yes it is, ambassador.” He bowed, partly to take his eye and mind off of the troops and the armor they wore. “I hope life finds you well.”

“That it does, friend.” Marc released his grip and patted Erik on the shoulder. “Please forgive me as I am about to embarrass you.” He raised his arms above his head and announced, “Attention, everyone. I wish to introduce the first Terran to visit our worlds, Lord Erik Warren. And, I would like to point out genetically they’re highly compatible with the Lantängers.”

Erik’s face flushed. Fii also felt her face flush, although the fur on her face hid the fact.

“Although this first child of theirs is a little girl, genetic specialists inform us they stand a fifty-fifty or better chance of a baby boy in the future.” He leaned closer to Erik’s ear and whispered, “Maybe one day this could lead to breakthrough for my own people.”

Marc knew full well the Vishahntien people would never again tinker with their genetic makeup for that was how they had ended up with their present disparity in their male to female birth ratio.

Erik whispered back, "I wish you and your people the best of luck in that pursuit."

"Thanks." Marc patted Erik on the shoulder then glanced over to the ship's Larien executive officer. "How much time before the Terrans arrive, commander?"

Commander Van'nossa spoke to the bridge and relayed the message back. "The captain said, 'The Terrans are presently docking, ambassador'." He glanced out a small portal. "Five meters and closing."

A red light blinked above the inner airlock hatch for a few seconds and then changed to a steady green.

Van'nossa announced, "The shuttle is secured within the bay."

"Very good, commander." Marc started forwards as an Ajosian syntient, Ligus Tryber, stepped before him. Marc asked, "What is it, captain?"

The man gestured over his shoulder towards the airlock. "I sense that one of the women aboard the shuttle has not taken her vaccines."

"Thank you, captain." Marc spoke to Van'nossa, "Get me the Terran ambassador, commander."

The image of the Terran ambassador flickered into existence on a wall display. "*Ambassador Parks here. What can I do for you, ambassador?*"

"Greetings, ambassador. I'm sorry to break into your debarkation, but one of our syntients has sensed a woman aboard your shuttle who has not taken her vaccine."

"*Nonsense. I personally watched all my staff take the vaccine several days ago.*"

Forcing him self not to look worried, Marc asked, "How many people are aboard your shuttle?"

"*Counting the pilots, twenty.*"

"I count twenty-one," the syntient said. "The woman is in the shuttle's stern and no other Terrans are with her. I would place her age at sixteen to twenty of your Terran years."

Parks' worried image turned about as he shouted, "*We have a stowaway aboard!*" He pointed to a Terran guard. "*Find another guard and search the stern of the shuttle! Find that woman immediately!*"

"*Yes, sir!*" The guard spun on his heels and sprinted from the ambassador's cabin.

"Ambassador!" Marc demanded, "Get out! Don't blow any alarms less you tip the woman off. She could possibly be carrying a bomb or other such device. Just get everyone out of the shuttle as quickly as you can!"

"*Right.*" Parks waved everyone towards exit. "*Everyone, go! Get off the ship. Now!*" He avoided the words abandon ship.

Fii and Erik watched as all the Terrans, aside from two guards, promptly exited the shuttle. A commotion sounded from behind them and a Vishahntien second female syntient pushed her way through the growing crowd of Alliance and Terran personnel. She activated her void sword, and turned and glared at Marc for a second. She then disappeared through the main airlock to where the Terran shuttle was docked.

"Oh, great!" Marc said aloud as he realized who the syntient was. He then signaled for a Sha'kal and a Vishahntien guard to follow the syntient. "Follow Lieutenant Colonel Haizung. If she allows you, help her. If possible, help the stowaway after her capture."

"Yes, ambassador!" The Sha'kal and Vishahntien skipped their salute and took off in an all out dash to catch up with the syntient colonel, surprising several Terrans along the way.

Marc held out his hand to Parks s he approached. "I'm sorry for all of this, ambassador."

"No problem, my dear ambassador." He accepted Marc's handshake. "How did you know there was a stowaway aboard my shuttle?"

Marc glanced at Ligus.

Ligus bowed. "I can sense life-forms, Ambassador Parks. I am a syntient." He suddenly grimaced.

"What is it, captain?"

"From what I just sensed, I would hazard to guess that Colonel Haizung has just severed the left arm of the stowaway. Now one of the Terrans has just thrown a punch, probably at the colonel, and has now been knocked unconscious in turned by her... Now our two guards have arrived on scene and the other Terran guard has raised his arms."

Parks asked, "How's the first guard?"

The captain shook his head. "Out cold. He probably made the wrong move towards the colonel after she disarmed the stowaway." Ligus shrugged his shoulders. "He's still alive, so she let the incident slid."

"*Ambassador!*" Suki Haizung's image appeared on the display. She was holding a small box against her chest by pressing her left palm against a stowaway's severed left hand and forearm. Beneath the palm of the amputated hand lay a pressure release switch attached to the bomb's detonator. "*Get everyone to safety and send in a bomb disposal squad. Also have an emergency team tend to two Terrans.*" She raised the box a couple of centimeters. "*One for obvious reasons and the other from where he took a swing at me.*"

Fii let out a squeal as Erik didn't wait for any word or orders. He knelt, swept her up in his arms, and cleared the reception room as quickly as humanly possible for a man of his age.

Independence

Ambassador Parks slowly raised his head. A stone cold look was draped over his face. "The stowaway, one Miss Nicole Browning, a recent immigrant to the lunar colonies, has admitted her involvement in a plot to assassinate both the Vishahntien ambassador and myself. Furthermore, she has admitted the plot was hatched by the group calling them selves the Earth Centralist Movement."

One of the Terrans whispered in an angry tone, "I knew it. I just knew it."

Parks motioned for silence with his hands. "To update Miss Browning's medical condition, her arm has been successfully reattached but she has sunk into a deep suicidal depression. Remember at this point in time there is an investigation underway, so we must wait a few days for the final word." He walked over to Marc's side. "The sad events of today aside, today is also a great day for celebration. Rolls Li, president of the Terran colonies, is currently engaged in talks with the Alliance. The question of our mother planet may not be answered for some time," he raised his arm and made a fist, "but her colonies," he swung and raised his fist upwards, "*will be aligned with the Alliance.*" He stood to attention and thrust his lower jaw out. "It gives me great pleasure announce that the Terran colonies have declared their independence from Mother Earth!"

"Yes!" An elderly Terran thrust his fist in the air as he stood.

"About time!" A woman whole heartily agreed.

Someone in the rear opened a bottle of champagne causing several fellow Terrans and a couple of Alliance personal to duck in response.

Parks raised and waved his hands for silence. "We must remember, we are not only at the end of a long journey, but we are at the beginning of a new and invigorating one. The journey here has been a long and hard one and the new journey we face may well be an even longer and harder one, but we must constrain our emotions and persevere to see it through." He extended his hand towards Marc who rose and shook it. "Ambassador Ujanie, as I am the new ambassador to the Alliance for the United Terran Colonies, I would like to welcome you and all other Alliance citizens to the Sol system."

Great! Marc thought as he hoped his cringe didn't show. He knew the Terran colonies declaring their independence could greatly complicate an already tense situation. Still, he carried on. "Thank you, Ambassador Parks." He bowed, then turned towards the audience and bowed again. "As great as this

day is, we must all hope for cooler heads to prevail on the Terran home world, and more importantly..." His eyes slowly traversed the room, moving from one pair of eyes to another. "On our own worlds."

Erik leaned over and whispered in Fii's ear, "I can tell you from experience there are plenty of hot heads on my world—especially in politics and religion."

"I know, dear. I've read the reports." She added rhetorically, "Need I remind you're one of them?"

He put his arm about her and gently patted her upper arm. "Aye, but I'm your own personal little hot-headed troublemaker."

"Ambassador," an Alliance officer reported to Marc. "We have an incoming transmission from Terra."

"Thank you, ensign. Please transfer it in here."

"Yes, ambassador." The officer disappeared.

A thin, three-meter-wide video display descended behind Marc and Parks. Both turned to face the display and watched as an older Terran appeared. He was in a dark grey suit and behind him stood several high ranking officers wearing dark uniforms of greens, browns, and blues. The amount of gold trim and decorations worn by the officers easily dazzled the eye.

The elder Terran spoke, "*Greetings and salutations from Earth. I see you have already contacted our colonies. I am Neno Hyriku. I am the Minister of Security.*"

Marc studied the man. As a Terran of Asian decent, the man nearly looked as though he was Dycinian, albeit sans tail. "Greetings and salutations from the Alliance, minister. I am Marc Ujanie and I am a Vishahntien. I have been selected by the Alliance to serve as ambassador to your world."

Neno studied Marc and his facial markings then looked over the various people behind him. "*Interesting. Some of your people appear to be quite different from each other. We were... wondering what your people may look like.*"

"There are countless other life-forms not represented here, minister. We can send you information on this and subjects for you to peruse through at a later time."

"*That would be very kind of you, ambassador.*" Neno glanced away for a few seconds at someone who was out of sight. "*We've had a report of an attempted bombing and assassination aboard your ship. Do you know about it and, if so, could you fill us in?*"

"Sure." Marc stepped to the side of the camera. "Could you put the suspect's picture up?" He looked at a small display showing the outgoing signal and saw the woman's image appear on the side of the display he had stepped away from. "Thank you." He glanced at an information monitor behind the main display. "Minister, she gave her name as Nicole Browning. Her left arm was severed to prevent the bomb from being detonated by her. Her arm has since been successfully reattached."

Neno briefly glanced to his right then faced the camera. "*We show Nicole Browning as her real name. Although young, she has a record as a radical, but nothing like this was predicted on her psych profile.*" He pulled a clipboard into view. "*She had no official religious affiliation, but she was known to associate with a group calling themselves the Earth Centralist. She has also been arrested at several quite violent, environmental sit-in protests, although she herself did not participate in the violence.*" He handed the clipboard off to an unseen person. "*As to why she attempted to assassinate you, we can only guess.*" He cleared his throat. "*At a later date, the two of us and our colonies will need to discuss under whose jurisdiction Miss Browning's crimes falls under.*"

"Sure."

"*I also have here several applications for immigration.*" Neno held several sheets of paper up. "*This is a bit puzzling... The first applicant is Fii O'Jii Warren, princess, and that she is currently with a child fathered by a Terran. Might I ask how this can be?*" Neno stared at the camera with a very expressive look of utter contempt and disdain on his face.

Marc glanced over his shoulder at Fii and Erik.

Erik nervously stood as all eyes turned to him. "I'm a citizen of Terra, minister. I am Erik Warren." He placed his hand on Fii's shoulder. "This is my wife, Fii." He didn't bother to mention Jee and his other wives standing behind him and Fii as it could only serve to make matters worst.

Neno definitely looked disgusted as he stared at Fii's swollen belly. *"I'm not sure how I feel... My next question is how long have you been with these people and how?"*

"I've been away from Terra for a little under a year." He briefly clenched his jaws as the thought of possible trouble seeped into his mind. "As for how, I built my own ship to test out my spatial navigation theories."

Neno was handed another clipboard. *"Erik Warren. You're listed as missing and presumed dead after you pulled some sort of dangerous stunt while on an unauthorized private space flight."*

"I survived quite well, thank you," Erik said in a monotone voice.

"I must inform you there are charges pending against you."

"Then I won't be coming home!" Erik glared back at the camera lens.

"Minister." Marc interrupted. "Lord Erik Warren is a very famous and valuable person within the Alliance. His new spatial engine designs and modifications have revolutionized our space travel. Instead of spending days or even a week or more to clear the gravity well of a planetary system, we can now execute spatial jumps a few thousand kilometers from a small terrestrial planet without much bodily discomfort. Lord Warren has made major developments affecting the future development of countless worlds."

Neno glared back with narrowed eyes. *"You're joking?"*

"No, quite to the contrary." Marc firmly set his jaw. "Within the Alliance, he is considered one of our greatest assets...."

Playing Tag

<Location: Upper Terran atmosphere.>

"Roger, Nineteenth Hole. I have a visual on the bogey now." Captain Nat Turner studied what his fighter's sensors told him—or didn't tell him. He brought his plane's six autonomous wing men closer to the alien vessel. "I still have no thermal or radar signature from the target... The target is not attempting to take any evasive moves."

"Roger, Dancer One. Get a closer look if you can."

"Moving in... Target's remaining steady. ...No reaction."

"Be careful, Dancer One. It's might be one of these UFOs everyone seems to be seeing lately."

"Roger that. I can't afford to have the cost of this fighter coming out of my paycheck."

"We can't afford to lose you, either. Too much paperwork."

"Yeah, right." Nat moved two of his bot planes closer to the alien craft.

The alien craft maintained its speed and direction as it abruptly spun about to starboard to face Nat.

"Gees!" Nat pulled his head back as far as he could inside the confines of his helmet.

"What is it?"

"The craft just rotated about in midair and is now facing me while traveling backwards." The alien craft slowly drew closer to Nat's fighter. Nat could see the pilot before him but couldn't see past the pilot's visor. The craft's pilot's visor flipped up and a set of tiger eyes stared back at Nat.

Nat nearly lost it. Five of his autonomous wing men scattered and took up wide defensive over watch positions while the sixth bot fighter placed itself between Nat and the alien craft should the alien open fire.

The tiger-like pilot saluted and turned the craft about and started a slow climb.

Nat followed the maneuver along with his autonomous fighter bots.

“Nineteenth Hole... The pilot appears to be... a tiger.” Nat knew his bio readings were off the scale back at the base where they were monitored.

“Confirm... Tiger?”

“Roger that.” Nat twisted and turned as the alien craft started rolling and banking across the sky. “It’s not a UFO any more—it’s definitely an alien craft.”

“Copy that, dancer one.”

With each passing second the alien craft increased the severity of its moves. Nat quickly found himself fighting hard to keep up with the strange, alien craft. “Dancer One breaking off, Nineteenth Hole. My ride can’t follow the moves this bogey’s performing.”

A Trip to Earth

“Roger, Gandhi. We’re nearly through our preflight check off.” Lieutenant Carlos Hernandez glanced at his copilot Lieutenant JG Nana James. Both were charged with piloting the UTC shuttle, *Miranda*.

Nana glanced back at Carlos. “All systems nominal. We are Okayed for departing.”

He glanced over his indicator panel. “Roger. Release the docking clamps, Gandhi.”

“Roger that. Clamps released. Good luck, Fox-trot Two Niner.”

“Thanks.” Carlos watched until all of the docking clearance indicator lights were all cleared. He then gently nudged the shuttle forwards out of its cradle. “Ambassador, we’re clearing *Gandhi*’s docks now.”

“Thank you, lieutenant.” Marc leaned forward and glanced out of one of the shuttle’s ports. “She’s a beautiful station.”

“That she is, sir.” Carlos added a touch more power to the shuttle’s engine. “From what I’ve seen of your Alliance’s technology, this would be a much faster trip on one of your own shuttles.”

“True, but it’s not nearly as nostalgic.” Since there was no artificial gravity, Marc had to push himself back into his form-fitting seat to get comfy. “It’s the little things from years gone by that find a warm spot in my heart.”

“Aye, sir. Personally, my wife and I collect small figurines.”

Marc smiled. “You’re in luck, lieutenant. There are several interplanetary collector clubs to be found about the Alliance.” He decided not to mention several of his wives also collected small figurines but as he couldn’t tell one from another he wouldn’t be able to discuss much about them. He then glanced back out the port again and spotted a darkened vessel in the distance. “I see a derelict hull. Accident...? I sincerely hope no one was hurt.”

“No, fortunately not. What you see there is the interstellar exploratory ship *Giordano Bruno*.” Carlos shook his head in as memories of her demise flooded his mind. “The Earth Centralist movement stopped construction on her several years ago. The *Bruno* was designed to leave our solar system and find other intelligent life-forms and colonize another world. Our world has spent many years of developing forced human hibernation for the extended spaceflights to other systems. Alas, several Centralists sneaked aboard and torched her. Of course, you found us, so all that Centralist dogma about the Earth having the only intelligent life in the universe is just so much hot air now.”

“Careful, lieutenant.” Marc warned. “Their beliefs have been bruised and they may strike out at all those who they feel have inflicted their wounds and dishonored them.”

Nana whispered, “Don’t rub salt.”

Carlos smiled and quipped back, “Dang and I’ve saved up several barrels of it for a day like today.”

Marc looked a little perturbed. “I take it there’s quite a bit of tension between Terra and her colonies?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.” Carlos rolled his eyes. “Most of our fellow earthlings live in abject squalor, yet the Terran government will spend who knows how many billions every week on propaganda to blame us, the colonists, for the mess they themselves have created.”

“Easy.” Nana patted his hand. “We’re ready for our descent.”

“Thanks.” Carlos pressed a switch authorizing the ship’s computers to begin their downwards journey. “Ambassador, next stop Terra.”

“Thank you, lieutenant.” Marc shook his head, wondering what all trouble he had set himself up for. He glanced over his shoulder to the shuttle’s rear where several Vishahntiens and Sha’kals were playing, at least for the time being, a quiet game of cards. He whispered to himself, “So much bickering. If the Terrans only knew the dangers they’ll face in their future, they would stop their petty squabbles and really begin to worry.”

“So, ambassador.” Nana spoke up. “Who’s this princess who has so many Terrans upset planet side?”

“You speak of Princess Fii?”

“I believe that was her name. Fii *O’Jii* or something like that. She kind of looks like a squirrel.” She stifled a chuckle. “She has a rather large, bushy, red-brown tail.”

“That’s her. She’s a Lantänger.”

“I should say she looks like she’s about due.”

“Any day now. She wants to have her child on Terra if at all possible.”

“Why would she want to have her child there?”

“Because her child is half Terran.”

“How...?” Nana’s head twisted sharply about as her eyebrows shot up. “Or who...? Your Alliance has only been here for a day or so.”

“Erik Warren.”

“Warren.” She closed her eyes and thought for a few seconds. “Isn’t he the fool who blew himself up while in orbit almost a year back? It was all over the news in the colonies.”

“Negative.” Marc chuckled. “He invented a spatial engine and jumped out into the realm of the stars. There he came across the Lantängers, and in turn, the Alliance.”

“Whoa!” Carlos added with a laugh, “I bet that was exciting.”

“Painful actually. Jumping as close as he did to your planet’s surface he was lucky to have survived. He has since spent his time with Lantänger and our scientists vastly improving our jump engines; he has done the Alliance us a great service. In return, we want to grant Fii’s and his wish to have their first child born on Terra, but that’s only if we can absolutely insure their safety.”

“Good luck. Most people on Earth I would describe as decent people. They’re just simple folks trying to live out their meager lives as best as they possibly can. However, I personally know a few troublemakers planet side who will most likely try to cause you some serious problems.”

“A year ago, Erik himself would have been described as one of those troublemakers. He has personal problems of his own making. On the outside, he’s not very gregarious, nor does he have the best social skills. He also doesn’t have much patience for others and he can be very self-centered. On the inside he has some personal demons running about. But I have to hand it to him for he is trying to break out of his self-made shell. He’s an older Terran, being seventy-one of our years—that works out to be fairly close to the same number in your years, too. On the other hand, Fii is presently seventy-nine and she may have a couple of centuries of life remaining. Erik may live to see a hundred, a hundred-fifty with our help, but he deeply dreads having to leave Fii and his companions one day.” Marc glanced *up* at the cabin’s ceiling. “His dear Fii has filled a very deep void within his heart.”

“One fifty...?” Carlos turned about in his seat. “Where do I go to sign up with you?”

Marc laughed. “You already have, although it may take a few years to finish up comparing your species’ genetic makeup to other worlds to see how best to enhance your world’s general health.” He decided not to mention syntns or descriptions of other worlds less they spend the next several hours or

days asking to learn more about them. “We do not, however, live in an idyllic world. We have to constantly be on guard for hostile intentions by others. There are many nations out there in the galaxy we have to keep very a watchful eye on.”

Nana looked scared and concerned. “Surely it’s not that bad.”

Marc shook his head. “Truthfully, it can be very bad. That’s why we constantly train and try to stay atop any new technologies, medicines, or stratagems. If you want peace you have to be ready to make all-out total war.”

A loud klaxon blared.

“What’s that?” Marc checked his seat belt.

Carlos watched a heads-up display intently. “Missile...! Two missiles!” He grabbed the shuttle’s control column and kicked the shuttle off autopilot. “We have trouble, ambassador!” He turned towards Nana. “Get a hold of *Gandhi* and tell them we’re under attack.”

She nodded as the Alliance troops tossed their cards away and took up their weapons.

“Damn! More missiles are coming on the screen.” He watched as a couple of the missiles disappeared from the display. “Something or one is taking the missiles out.”

“Warm welcome!” Marc shouted through the din. “Laria’s and Vishahntia’s empresses will not be pleased with this attack!”

Carlos’ stomach dropped as he watched numerous missiles hurled their selves up through the earth’s atmosphere. The few that rose up were promptly intercepted—but they were quickly replaced by a multitude of others.

“Turn this thing around, lieutenant!” Marc ordered.

“We’re trying, sir,” said Carlos through clenched teeth.

One missile closed in on the shuttle’s bow. It exploded against an Alliance fighter which had sharply veered over to save the shuttle. The air about the fighter warped and shimmered like a stone tossed into a calm pool as the fighter’s inertialyzers dampened the energy of the collision.

Killing the klaxon, Carlos asked, “What was that?”

“You just saw the latest in military grade inertial shielding.”

A second fighter used itself as a shield to protect the shuttle.

The shuttle shook violently as the stern end of the cabin rapidly filled with smoke. Marc watched in horror as blood and body parts from his escorting guards flew past him.

“Mayday! Mayday! This is Fox-trot Two Niner, the UTC shuttle *Miranda*.” Carlos watched the shuttle’s controls as its fire suppression activated automatically when and wherever it was needed. “We have taken a serious hit to our stern. We’ve lost the better part of our controls and we are in a rapid descent. Respond, anyone.”

“Roger, Miranda. This is the Larien fleet cruiser Kôrmar. A rescue team has been dispatched. Protect the ambassador at all cost. Repeat. Protect the ambassador at all cost.”

A Vishahntien-piloted fighter swung underneath *Miranda* to piggyback the shuttle on a dangerous ride down to earth. The act was suicidal for the fighter’s pilot who had to disengage her upper inertial shields to allow the shuttle to ride piggyback atop her in the long plunge to the Earth’s surface.

Carlos looked over his shoulder and saw the surviving guards taking up positions in seats around Marc. One of the Vishahntiens was injecting the dead troops and their detached body parts with a pneumatic hypodermic gun. He then turned his attention back to the view before him, fighting with the controls, trying to slow the shuttle as the ground drew closer and closer.

“Gandhi...” Carlos took a deep breath as tears flooded his vision. “Please convey my love to my wife and children...”

Retrieval

<Date: 4/12/29,421 Standard. The planet Terra.>

Gayle, a blue-grey skinned Larien woman frowned as she slipped her combat helmet on about her head. It made an audible clicked as it locked in tightly its retaining collar. With a touch of a finger to a built-in computer on her left forearm pad, her visor displayed a tactical, wide-spectrum holographic representation of her surroundings.

She glanced at the building before her. "North Jersey State Hospital," she whispered to herself, repeating the translation provided by her display. She then stared down towards the ground. "I can sense the ambassador. He's about twenty meters below and near the center of the main medical structure."

"Roger, field marshal. With your permission we're going in," said Byron, a Sha'kal lieutenant. "Granted."

"Go, sergeant!" Byron gestured with his hand additional commands.

"Yes, sir." With a rapid sequence of hand signals, a Vishahntien sergeant sent her troops towards the hospital's rear entrance.

Byron knelt as he studied a holographic map of the hospital projected before him from Gayle's helmet. The map, however, couldn't be seen by unaided eyes. "There are several operating theaters in this area. I hope they haven't started cutting on him!"

Gayle kept staring through the map projected by her helmet as she slowly shook her head to the left and right. "We're too late to stop that."

"Damn!" Myrie, Gayle's syntient aide said in unison with Byron.

Gayle sensed Byron and Myrie baring their fangs behind their armored facial visors. The three of them then started jogging at a quickened pace to catch up with their comrades.

"How much harm have they inflicted to the ambassador?"

"It appears they are probing about his abdomen. They may be trying to clear shrapnel and foreign debris, or possibly looking for bleeders. They also have three surviving guards nearby: two Sha'kals and a Vishahntien."

"Is the surviving Vishahntien the one who placed her fighter beneath the shuttle our ambassador ridden in?" asked a concerned Vishahntien private.

"I can't say." Gayle signaled for everyone to halt. She cautiously crept towards the entrance, then reached about its corner and dragged a surprised Terran guard out into the open. He unexpectedly found himself being slammed hard against a wall by Gayle. Then a sergeant, this time one who was a Vishahntien second female, promptly took him down with a swift kick to the solar plexus.

"Secure this building," ordered Byron. "First squad, take the right. Second, left. Third, remain with us." He lowered his large, somewhat catlike body to get a better look at the guard. "He appears to be a rather old Terran."

Myrie, with her larger female Sha'kal frame, remained standing behind Byron. "These Terrans must be far behind us in rejuvenation techniques."

"They don't have any synts, yet," said Bryon.

Gayle shook her head as she sensed something out of place elsewhere within the hospital: evidence the Terrans had some synts of one form. "Command, we're entering the medical facility now." She pointed towards a set of elevator doors. She then abruptly turned about and shouted to the troops, "Snipers! Behind us!"

Shots rained down on the group from a nearby skyscraper. The bomb-resistant glass of the entrance shattered in spider web-like patterns, though few small shards of the glass found their way to the floor. Nearly every piece of the shattered glass remained within its laminate. The incoming fire was from Terran kinetic weapons were quickly answered in turn by fire delivered by the Alliance's energy,

kinetic, and electromagnetic rail-type weapons.

Gayle shouted as she dove for cover, “Across the southern plaza atop the roof and two floors down on the northern corner!” She sensed her comrades for injuries. “Command, we have a Dycinian pscanner down along with two normal Sha’kals and a Vishahntien.” Blood splashed across the walkway before her. “Make that three Sha’kals, command!”

Byron picked a spent round from the ground between his feet and raised it up before himself. “Nasty, field marshal! It looks like a 14.5mm depleted-uranium round. That’s why they’re easily penetrating our personal armor!”

Gayle stared upwards without emotion as an Alliance fighter dove in and sprayed the snipers’ positions with 45mm hyper-velocity, armor-piercing incendiary and high explosive rounds.

The sniping ceased.

“Let’s get our ambassador back!” ordered Gayle.

Safe But Not Sound

“What are the lab’s findings, Gail?” Chief Surgeon Karl Miller asked his wife as she entered the operating theater. Although she was head of the surgical department, and a highly skilled surgeon in her own right, she often opted to assist him in the more sensitive operations the Terran government would on occasion ask of them to perform.

“Well...” She finished donning her surgical helmet with an audible click as the theater doors sealed shut with a faint sucking sound. “It’s definitely not a form of tattooing. It’s his natural pigmentation.” Grim faced, she stared at their gravely injured and most unusual patient: Ambassador Marc Ujanie. Gail admired the exquisite orange and umber striping pattern encompassing what remained of his body as well as his large bushy tail. She found his face was humanlike but carried a definite feline air about it. “The lab determined his tiger-like complexion is completely natural. The bones of his nose and face are not fractured... That’s some form of a small snout he sports. From what little remains of his legs, they appeared to have been digitigrade form. Needless to say about his tail...”

“Mm...” Karl glanced across the theater at a government agent named William Alexski. He was their representative delegated to observe the operation on their odd guest. Karl wasn’t able to make his mind up about William. He was definitely out of place considering the extremely conservative political forces who had assigned him to the case. “And what about our patient’s genetic makeup?”

“It’s very close to ours, but he is definitely *not* from our world.” Gail shuttered at the thought. She absentmindedly traced the lines of their patient’s tiger stripes with her eyes. “Our first real...” She stopped herself short from saying alien. *Everyone’s walking about in a daze, she thought. Almost everyone in the hospital knows what we have down here. It’ll take a good week to get this place back in working order. No, maybe even more. The government will come in to cover up what all has happened and disrupt our routine even more than this and the presence of the other aliens have already.*

Karl briefly glanced up to study an overhead monitor displaying computer-generated holograms of their patient’s internal organs. “Any changes, Raul?” he asked the anesthesiologist as he continued the delicate job of micro-gluing severed vessels and tissues together.

“No change,” said Raul. He knew he could only hazard a guess at what their patient’s normal readings should be, though they did appear to be within that of an earthling’s.

Karl paused as a nurse blotted the perspiration from his forehead. “How are...?”

A loud commotion rang out from the surgical theater’s outer prep room.

“Damn! These interruptions are becoming a nuisance. Someone go out there and find out what the hell’s going on!” The tension of the operation was showing itself in his voice. “And quickly put a stop to whatever it is! If it’s a news crew, throw them out on their butts with your own hands if you have to!”

“Some of our staff has been trying to catch a glimpse of our special patient,” whispered Gail. “Not that they’re likely to as all this security has every part of the hospital locked down tight.” She remotely repositioned an overhead light to remove a shadow from Karl’s view.

“I’ll have a look, doc.” William casually stood up. “My legs could use a good stretch right now.” He unconsciously unsnapped his pistol holster as a precaution as he strolled to the exit. He pulled his mask down, opened the door and began to step out when, without warning, he was hammered backwards. His body landed hard against the floor from where a beanbag wad from a stun gun had slammed against his stomach and briefly robbed him of his ability to breathe.

Then unearthly and heavily armed and armored troops stormed inside the theater with their weapons raised and each quickly aiming from one target to the next as they surveyed the room. Most of the alien soldiers circled the operating room, keeping their weapons on the surgical team. The remainder of the troops used their armored bodies to separate the surgical team from their patient.

Karl noticed some of the alien troops were not fully human in their appearance. They were 250 plus kilogram, tiger-like man-beasts, and their ungodly looking armor added to their fierce, non-human appearance—the Sha’kals.

“What’s happening...?” “Gail!” “Damn!” “Look out, Helena...!” Screams reverberated throughout the operating theater. The troops tried to lessen the panic and terror rampaging through the surgical team’s minds by stepping back closer to Marc.

“Please...! Stay calm, everyone,” one of the soldiers ordered in an odd and heavily accented female voice.

Karl vaguely perceived from the armor design of one form of the soldiers they were all women—at least by an *earthly* definition of the female form. The other larger and less humanlike ones he couldn’t say what their individual sexes were. He also noted that all of their armor was whisper silent as it moved and slid against itself as well as other objects. The molded, plastic-like armor appeared to harbor little mass of its own.

“What the hell...?” He felt his heart nearly burst from his chest as one of the Sha’kals leaned over at its waist to stare face-to-face with him. As the alien backed him against a wall, three long black metallic serrated claws sprang from its armored glove. It then pressed the weapon firmly against his throat. In his mind he was absolutely positive the man beast had to have extremely long, sharp, and painful flesh-tearing fangs hidden beneath its helmet.

“No kill,” said Byron in a very deep, guttural voice, gesturing with a side-to-side motion with his battle claws. “You stay.” He then retracted the claws but kept Karl firmly pinned against the wall.

Karl heard one of the women speak to someone outside the theater in a strange tongue. A few seconds later two women stepped in. The shorter woman was Gayle and while she wore full body armor she had her helmet slung behind her waist on a combat utility belt.

The taller woman wore no armor and bore the same distinctive, tiger-like complexion of their patient, though she had a more humanlike face, no tail, and fully plantigrade feet. She quickly rushed over to her wounded comrade and began to use several unknown instruments in an apparent medical examination. She shouted something incomprehensible when she found Marc’s right leg was missing from below the knee and left his left leg was severely crushed.

Gayle said something to the woman. Gayle’s grayish-blue complexion reminded Karl of ancient Egyptian wall paintings of the god Osiris. With the darker contrast of her bluish-black hair, her looks were quite striking, however her stoutly built body made the look of intense anger she bore upon her face look all the more intimidating.

Even though Gayle wore an odd, oval-style of sunglasses, the surgical team and William found it difficult to maintain eye contact with her. Something about her stare left an uneasy feeling in the pit of their stomachs.

Either she’s a weight lifter or is her species is very muscular, Karl thought as he kept the greater half of his concentration on the man-beast before him. He took a second glance at Gayle’s oddly-

colored face. *Damn, if she doesn't look pissed.* A knot grew in his gut as she made eye contact with him. He quickly averted his eyes towards his wife.

Gayle walked over to William, planted her foot on his chest, opened his gown, and lifted his pistol from its shoulder holster. She quickly cleared the bullets from the weapon then tossed it aside. The weapon's clatter as it bounced along the floor rang out starkly through the shock-imposed silence. She then motioned for troops to search the rear labs.

With very little effort on her part, she lifted William from the floor with her right arm, took a few steps forwards with him dangling, and pressed him hard up against the wall. His feet flailed about in mid air as he fought to regain his balance and a solid foothold. She whispered something alien to him, then, with an annoyed look on her face, she shouted something else over her shoulder towards the exit.

She was promptly answered by a man who had a tawny complexion and could have easily passed for a Terran of Asian descent from the front. Unseen, his tail was tucked away in a pouch in his body armor.

William made a quick mental assessment of the aliens. The man-beasts, the two different women, the patient, and the Terran-like man meant there were at least five other intelligent forms of life in the galaxy. However, he didn't realize there were three different sexes who appeared physically unrelated to each other among the Vishahntiens.

He thought while smiling, *this surely well proves we're no longer the universe's only known intelligence.* He lost his smile and shuttered at another thought, wondering how many others there might be out there. Then laughter nearly broke his pursed lips with the thought of the predicament of Earth's more fanatical and ultra right-wing religious groups would find themselves in. *Now, they won't be able to say we're the center of universal life anymore and all that other cosmic religious mumbo-jumbo anymore.*

William then cringed. He knew the appearance of these aliens would be unwelcome—even hostilely resisted—in many quarters. Especially by the Earth Centralists and their religious cohorts, the followers of a self-styled guru and savior named Maracyn.

After several alien sounding words were spoken between the man and Gayle, the man handed her a small, oddly marked box. She lowered William down to the floor and gave him a look that stabbed at his very mind and served to remind him to remain standing exactly where he was.

Gayle withdrew a small device from her ear. As it pulled away, it trailed a nearly invisible wire which lay across her cheek to the corner of her mouth. She tossed her old earpiece to her comrade and took the new one from its box. From its side she gently extracted another wire microphone lead, drawing it along her cheek to her mouth. The wire lead then quickly disappeared against her skin.

"Testing." Her eyes lit up. "Ah, good. This one works."

William heard her words in vivid Terraglish.

"Thanks, sergeant." With a sudden, swift movement she hefted William from the floor once more. "Now!" Intense anger *glared* out from her eyes. "Since you're armed, you must hold some form of responsibility around here!"

As she spoke, all the Terrans quickly noticed the movement of her lips and mouth didn't match to her words.

"Let me keep this *simple* so there won't be *any* misunderstandings!" she expressed through clenched teeth. "When an ambassador is sent to your planet, you do not blast his ship from the sky and then proceed to cut on him as though he was *just* so much *meat!*" She turned sharply to glare at Karl and Gail.

They found her glare sent an unexpected, mind-rattling chill climbing up their spines.

"Ambassador...?" William forced himself to remain calm.

"Yes, ambassador!" Her grip tightened, and she twisted her wrist, drawing his collar even tighter about his neck. "We've spent the better part of a year negotiating our ambassador's arrival. We

have complied with our part of the agreement between our worlds. We've even gone well out of our way to insure your population doesn't know about us. Which, personally, I felt was a mistake. Now... now, for the umpteenth time, your government has reneged once again on our agreements." She emphasized her point by lifting William several more centimeters up from the floor.

"*Holy...! What have our arrogant bureaucrats gotten me into?*" William asked himself under his breath. He then tried to sound more intimidating than intimidated, "Just who are you...?"

Her icy glare promptly informed him he had not achieved the effect he had sought. "I am Syntient Field Marshall Twenty Gayle V'shan'nos of Laria." She signaled for Byron to back away from Karl. "I'm from the Alliance. We're an interstellar union formed mostly from various forms and types of mammalian life." She gestured towards her comrades-in-arms with her chin. "I'm currently on assignment with the 95th Vishahntien-Sha'kal Shock Corps to aid in recovering our ambassador to your world." She lowered William, steadying him until he regained his lost balance. "You're lucky your world doesn't realize how rare Vishahntien males are less you face the wrath of their entire nation. Not for wounding their ambassador, mind you, but for wounding one of their few *men*. Vishahntien women outnumber their men by a good thousand or more to one." With her right index finger, she slowly gestured to the alien doctor and all the humanoid troops—all of whom were Vishahntien women.

William nervously glanced at the armored Vishahntiens as they stood ready with their weapons. Even without their armor, he guessed they were all a good deal taller than he was and he was considered above average height for a Terran.

"Your world was greatly honored to have a Vishahntien male sent as our first ambassador." She tilted her head back. "And you are...?"

He recovered his composure as quickly as he could manage. "I'm Agent William Alexski... I'm with... special security."

Before this point in time, William hoped with all of his life to meet sentient beings from other worlds, but presently, he was finding reality a little difficult to handle. However, there was an additional bit of knowledge William played with in his mind. He realized he could help his own political cause through the aliens, although that very action could bring about charges of high treason. Possibly from each and every one of the sides vying for the domination of the planet Earth. The Centralists themselves maintained a tight hold on Earth's government, and whatever beliefs did not hold with their teachings could quickly place a person in dire circumstance.

As an undisclosed member of a minor political group which still maintained some vestige of political power, William knew if he was to follow the directive to find and maintain any contact—no matter how tenuous—with any possible aliens, suspected or otherwise, he might encounter, he would have to place his life on the line. His party knew they were out there and desperately wanted to contact them.

William couldn't pass up the golden opportunity now playing out before him, yet he was unsure as to how to approach the aliens with his clandestine knowledge. He desperately wished he could discuss his next few actions with Lord Denvearson.

Hesitantly, he stated, "I must warn you there are those on this world who will not take kindly to your presence..."

"*That!*" Gayle raised her right fist in anger. With a slow, deep breath she slowly lowered her hand as she calmed herself. "We have already found out!" Abruptly, she spun about and shouted to the Vishahntien doctor, "You're losing him, Trish!"

Trish swept the ambassador's body with a medical scanner then injected an electrochemical into his heart containing medicating micro and nano-bots. "Thanks, Gayle." She made a second sweep with her scanner. "I hope we can at least get him out of here without having to nox him." She glanced up and looked at Gayle. "Have all the dead from the crash been noxxed yet?"

Gayle sensed an Alliance medical team finishing up in the hospital's morgue. She nodded

affirmative.

“What is nox...?” Karl inquired, though dazed and still shaken from his encounter with Byron. He glanced at his wife and found she was accepting the aliens’ intrusion into their lives better than he was.

“Nox... That is noxxation drugs,” Trish said softly as she concentrated on her patient, “postpone neural and bodily degeneration in the dying, severely injured, and dead until the proper medical facilities for bio reconstruction and regeneration can be reached.” She picked up an instrument that could have easily past for a weapon. “After noxxing, between eighteen to twenty-four hours, or even more under the right conditions, are available for recovering the patient. Many more days can be achieved if they were noxxed at the time of their deaths.” She added with a hopeful voice, “Now if I can get Marc out of here alive.”

Gail hesitantly stepped forward. “I’m Doctor Gail Miller, chief administrator of the surgical department. And this is my husband Karl, our chief surgeon. If our hospital can help, please fell free to ask.”

“Hospital...!” retorted Trish, still angered at their ambassador’s near dissection and death. “Sorry...” She waited a moment until her emotions subsided somewhat. “I don’t know if there’s much of anything you can do medically. However, please stand by. I’m sure we can use your help shortly as we evacuate him.”

Trish spoke to Gayle as she readied a second injection, “His sinoatrial node as well as his entire body... Well, he’s lucky to be alive.” She placed an infusion injector firmly against the ambassador’s chest. “Tell me when the bots achieve a good balance, Gayle.” The injector hum as it slowly infused its life-sustaining chemicals and more bots into Marc.

Gayle sensed Marc’s reaction to the bots and their drugs as they quickly diffused throughout his cardiac tissues. “There... that’s very close.”

Trish raised her injector for the Terrans to see. “The little bots in this should keep him stable until I can get him back aboard our hospital ship.” She handed the instrument over to Karl. “Feel free to examine it, but don’t touch the red dimple. You might very well inject yourself.” She held a small black rod up in her hand. “Although I can quickly disarm them.”

“What is this called?” Karl rotated the instrument over and about in his hands.

“It’s called an irrykonèsheer... It’s a rapid multi-action diffusion injector. This one’s presently set to deliver micro-bots for stabilizing the cardiac rhythm and balancing a person’s blood and tissue chemistry. The bots themselves use various smart drugs. For example, they set up a simple form of artificial intelligence in the cardiac muscle itself to establish and maintain a proper rhythm.” She passed another small probe over a nasty looking cut on the ambassador’s forehead and watched a small viewing screen as it displayed a holographic analysis of the ambassador’s head trauma.

Trish sighed in relief as she confirmed the wound was a mere superficial laceration.

Gail leaned closer to Karl and whispered something while shaking her head uncertainly.

Karl shook his head then spoke to Gayle, “How did you know...? I mean...” His voice trailed off. He ignored the injector in his hands as he attempted to make sense of their *guests*.

Gail inched closer to the operating table while staring at Gayle. “How did you know there something was wrong with your ambassador?”

Gayle raised her hand up to hush them. “I can sense the presence of life-forms. I am a syntient.” She nodded towards the entrance. “Before entering, I made a *sensing* scan of the ambassador to see what complications he had. I also informed our soldiers as to where all your staff was located.” She motioned to the rear lab. “For example, some of our soldiers are about to reenter with six of your co-workers.”

The Terrans turned as several Vishahntiens escorted the remaining members of the surgical team back to the operating room.

Pointing to two of escorted Terrans, an older woman and a young man, Gayle said, “She has an

artificial right hip, and he has several rib implants along with substantial reconstruction of his pelvic and lower lumbar area. That most likely occurred when he was a young child.”

The man stared back at her as though she was absolutely crazy, although quite correct. “I was in an air bus crash as a child.”

Gayle smiled. “Later, if you would, see our med-techs about having your back rebuilt so you can achieve full motion with it again.”

“Ma’am, my vertebrae are permanently fused.” He nervously glanced about at the alien soldiers. “Nothing further can be done.” Still, the possibility lingered in his mind.

“We can give it a good try.” Gayle smiled again. She didn’t bother to tell him that Alliance medical technology could completely replace his back in a few weeks. She then suppressed her translator to speak further about their ambassador with Trish.

Three more aliens entered the theater. Two were Vishahntien syntients who wore subdued purple epaulettes with red piping like Gayle’s. The third was a woman whose subdued epaulettes had yellow piping, the color markings for a guardian. To the Terrans, she looked fairly humanlike with a heavy feline air about her, especially her catlike eyes. She was highly agitated as she whispered something to Gayle.

Gayle’s reaction to what the woman said was one of *extreme* anger.

A lump grew in William’s throat. Partly from Gayle’s anger, but mostly from where he had made up his mind to disclose his political affiliation. “May I help? I know some...”

Gayle spun abruptly. “Sure! Have your fellow Terrans to stop this damnable, one-sided war of theirs. We’re here to make contact, friendly if possible, retrieve our ambassador, alive. Period! After that I personally hope we quickly and quietly get off your planet!” Gayle planted her hands forcefully on her hips and stared coldly at William.

His stomach churned as he nearly passed out from her glare.

“If you can do something to help. Then do it!”

“We’re fighting...?” As much as the news shocked William, he couldn’t help feeling a small sense of pride in Earth’s defiance; however misplaced he thought the action might be. From what little of the Alliance’s weaponry and technology he could see, he realized even a minor skirmish could prove devastating his world. Some in the Alliance like Gayle were growing angry but were also holding back their urge to retaliate. His apprehension grew with the realization that should the Earth be resisting the aliens then his colleagues might well no longer have any political control—and could very well be dead.

William was a member of a minority political group who, among other things, aspired for Terra’s outward growth into the galaxy to insure mankind’s future survival. The opposing majority group, the Centralists, took a near fanatical, religious view to keep Earth isolated, especially from her orbital, lunar, and Martian colonies. Their teachings proposed the control of all people, their actions, and their thoughts, from a highly centralized government. Further, a small group of extremely pious fanatics deep within the heart of the Centralists’ movement were inspired to impose their strict religious beliefs upon all through whatever means were deemed necessary.

A man commonly known as Maracyn was a powerful force in their crusade to control Terra. At the time, the Centralist’s propaganda pictured their group as a mildly conservative, well-founded organization preordained for the betterment of humankind. An appealing thought to the population in general.

Now, William realized, if Terra, Mother Earth, was to expand outwards into the universe, she would have to do so with the permission of its current residents or by force. The latter choice would most likely prove an act of suicidal futility. However, should Terrans elect to remain isolated on Earth and remain within her home planetary system then they would in time choke on their own waste and their numbers would once again plummet downwards into the millions as they once had centuries before *or worse*.

“Somewhat...” Gayle wrapped her arm about the guardian’s shoulder to comfort her. “Our computers deactivated your defenses when we entered your system. We quickly took control, insuring your world, along with your orbital, lunar, and Martian colonies, would never suspect the switch.” Gayle glared at the Terrans with a stern face. “We’re currently running the core infrastructures of your planet.” Before William could respond she spoke to Trish. “Will you be all right if I leave now?”

“Sure.” Trish nodded. “I’ll be transporting shortly.”

“Good. I want to check out something I’m sensing downstairs. Then, afterwards, I’ll see what I can do about these hostilities, otherwise there won’t be enough trust left between us to open any further talks.”

Trish motioned to the guardian. “What happened to her?”

“She’s Guardian Lieutenant Taby Neokryatain. She has just lost her matched syntient,” Gayle said in a monotone voice.

Trish glared briefly at the Terrans. “Anything I can do?”

“No. Her execution by Terran forces caused too much neural damage.” Gayle didn’t elaborate on the syntient’s brain being obliterate, though she knew Trish would immediately suspect something along that line.

Trish glanced up. “Was your syntient young or old, Lieutenant?”

“Early middle-aged, ma’am. She was Colonel Ti’Var of Dycinia,” the Voeshalter guardian replied in a song-like voice. A deep, emotional shutter rocked her body. Her ability to fully sense the presence of life about her had been thrown into turmoil with her matched syntient’s death.

“Steady, Taby,” Gayle said with another reassuring squeeze to her arm. She said to Trish, “I’ll check back later.”

“Good luck.” Trish felt the Terrans would prove to be even more obstinate than her own people when they were first contacted. She motioned for Karl, Gail, and their team to step closer. “Would you be interested in seeing more of our medical technology?”

“I would be a fool not to,” Karl replied eagerly.

“Good. You can follow the shuttle crash victims and dead back my hospital ship and we’ll see what we can do to recover them...”

Gayle gave the two young Vishahntien syntients some instructions then started for the exit. “Come with me, Taby. You now have more *invested* in this world than most of us.” She noticed Taby had removed her arm, leg, and pelvic armor. “Later, you’ll need to don your armor again.” After Taby’s deep personal loss, she didn’t want her taking unwarranted risks. On occasion, guardians died soon after the loss of their matched syntient from diminished sensing abilities, depression, or other related causes. She motioned to William. “Let’s see what you can do to help.” Her computer showed the given name “William” along with its casual usages on her contacts’ computer display. “How should I address you as Bill, Will, or William?”

“William, ma’am.” He took the long route around the room to avoid the Sha’kals.

Gayle gestured for Myrie to remain with Byron while she checked out what she sensed downstairs.

“I’m called Gayle, William.” She waited impatiently for the theater’s door to slide open.

“Question... if you wanted to cut through your planet’s bureaucratic red tape, where would you start?”

“Officially, I would say the Lower Hall of Councils. That is, of course, if they would even see you.”

“I can see to that.” She sneered. “Though that would mean issuing lots of threats and such, if they’re as stubborn as I think they are. How about your royalty?” she asked as they stepped into a surgical prep room full of alien personal.

“They don’t truly reign. They’re... merely figureheads. Tourist attractions, so to speak...” He swallowed hard as he spotted another menacing alien life-form in its body armor. “Although they do function as disinterested third party in disputes.”

“Good. Let’s see if they’re disinterested enough to help with negotiations.” Gayle began debating several plans-of-action to recommend to Alliance Command in her head.

William whispered as they stepped out into an empty hallway, “I know someone in particular who can serve your needs. Personally, he’s the route I would use....”

Pscanner

“Whoa...! Slow down, Lynn.” Gayle held her hands up in mock surrender. “My translator wasn’t programmed for psychiatric terminology.” She tapped her earpiece to remind Lynn. “I’ve sent for Alliance psychiatric personnel who can discuss such matters with you. They’ll provide you with any assistance you may need.”

“Thank you.” Doctor Lynn Chung gestured to their left. “The patients you wish to see are this way.” She pushed a door open, revealing a room full of surveillance equipment and an orderly. The monitors showed the patients in their well padded rooms.

“Oh, my God!” An orderly staggered backwards at the sight of Gayle and Taby.

“Easy, Tom.” Lynn waved Gayle and Taby onwards through the door. “They’re friends. They’re here to help.”

“If you say so, doc.” Tom started wondering if he might not need a session or two with Lynn at a later time as he looked over Taby.

“Go talk with Shawn. He’ll fill you in to what all’s happening in the world today.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He cautiously stepped from the room while keeping a wary eye on Gayle and Taby.

Lynn transferred one of the monitors’ displays to the main viewer. “This is Mylee Aziz. Although she sometimes becomes like this for short periods of time, ever since your arrival, she hasn’t slowed at this behavior.”

The screen showed a woman violently slamming her head against a padded wall at random times while she masturbated. Occasionally, she would attempt to slap and punch herself in the face, but her restraints prevented her from raising her arms above her waist. The restraints normally prevented her from masturbating herself, but the staff discovered she didn’t get quite as worked up if she could sexually relieve her emotions and tensions.

“Most of our patients sit about in an apathetic daze. However, as you can see with Mylee, there’s little doubt that she’s very severely disturbed.” Lynn bit her lip. “She did appear to be making headway in the past few months but we’re now going to have to restrain even more.”

Gayle shook her head and sighed. “She’s more sensitive than the other the pscanners. However, her cure is simple enough.”

“Huh...?” Dismayed, Lynn glanced at Gayle.

Gayle activated her communicator. “Command One, Gamma Nine-five here. Over...” She listened to the reply in her earpiece. “Roger, I have some news for you to pass along: I now positively confirm the Terrans have pscanners... I repeat, the Terrans have pscanners... There are five of them at my location... the hospital... No, they’re not in all that bad shape, although they’ve been treated as regular psychiatric patients... Roger, I sense Foxtrot Seven coming down the hallway now... Roger, command. I’ll keep you advised. Out.”

“Pscanners...? What are pscanners?”

“They’re somewhat like my self except instead of sensing life they sense, or *feel* might be a better term, the emotions of others.” Gayle thought for a second and further added, “None of us, however, can read minds.” She pointed to the monitor. “One of the reasons behind your patient’s behavior is the emotions of others whirling about in her mind. She can’t get a grip on her own emotions because the emotions of others are always in her way. The pain caused from banging her head and the pleasure from her masturbation most likely helps to distract her from the emotions of others in her

head.” Gayle turned and faced a Dycinian woman as she entered the room. “Earlier, I called in one of our pscanners to help with yours.”

“Pscanner Major Vela Jy’Korhom reporting, Field Marshal.” She saluted.

“Pleased to meet you, Vela.” Gayle returned her salute. “This is Doctor Lynn Chung.” Gayle continued as Lynn and Vela shook hands. “Lynn, I’ve brought in a Dycinian pscanner in since they’re one of the most Terran-appearing nations within the Alliance... discounting their tails of course. You patients can already sense some of our personal inside the hospital, but I don’t believe your patients could handle physically meeting other forms of life—especially non-humans just yet.”

Lynn glanced at Taby and half jokingly said, “You can’t really tell...”

“Thanks, but I’m not one of those forms. I’m in the same class of humanoid life as you are... I’m just from a different world.” Taby gestured out the door. “Some other Alliance nations are far more catlike or animal-like that I am.”

“I had better remove my armor.” Vela said to Lynn, “Would you happen to have a lab smock I can borrow?”

“Sure.” Lynn leaned over a chair, snagging a spare smock with her fingers and handed it to Vela.

“Thank you.” Vela laid the smock aside, then unsealed and removed her arm, leg, and body armor. “Has she ever been hostile towards others?” She manually pulled her tail forwards and up between her legs so as to hide it from Mylee by securing it place with her flesh suit’s belt.

“Fortunately, no. Mylee has only been a threat to herself. The others sometimes hardly recognize themselves let alone others. But we take precautions all the same.” Lynn studied the flesh-like undergarment Vela wore beneath her armor. The variable-camouflaged “flesh suit” provided additional protection against shocks while functioning as a second layer of skin for protection against hostile environments as well as biological and chemical warfare.

Vela glanced down at her armored boots. “These won’t do.”

Lynn pointed behind Taby. “There are overshoes in that cabinet we use while cleaning.”

Taby browsed through a draw comparing the rubber shoes to Vela’s feet. “These look about right, besides; they’re the smallest ones in here.”

“Thank you.” Vela sat her boots aside and slipped the overshoes on. “A fairly good fit.” She glanced at the image of Mylee on main screen. “The others are phlegmatic, so I’ll start with her.” Vela donned her borrowed smock.

“Do you want someone to go in with you?”

“No, just point me in the right direction if you would, Lynn.”

“I’ll take you to her room.” Lynn went to a reinforced door, entered in a sequence of numbers on a touch pad, and stepped through as the door slid opened.

“I’ll monitor you from out here,” said Gayle as the two stepped through into a long dark corridor lined with heavily bolted doors.

“She’s in here,” Lynn said as she entered a different set of codes to access the door. “She’ll probably ignore you completely.”

“No!” Vela frowned as she straightened her borrowed smock. “She’ll quickly realize she can’t feel my emotions.”

Lynn’s eyes widened as her right eyebrow shot upwards. “Interesting...”

Vela opened the door and quietly stepped into the room, then gesture for Lynn to close the door. “Hello, Mylee.”

“Ugh...” Mylee, shocked at not feeling Vela’s entrance, retreated to the furthest corner while continuing her self-abuse with increased earnest.

Ever so slowly, Vela took a seat on the padded floor. “My name’s Vela... I see you’ve noticed we share something in common.” She crossed her legs, making herself more comfortable. “Mylee, I’m here to help you with those emotions you have whirling about in your mind. I should know, for you see,

I have them in my head, too. They're not demons. They're not a sign you're crazy. They're not your main attacking you... They're an ability you have yet to fully realize."

Mylee slowed her self-abuse and stared at Vela.

"I want you to realize who you are. I'm going to show you how to find your own emotions. How to be *mentally* alone for the first time in your life." Vela leaned forward a few centimeters.

"Mylee, allow me to begin by telling you that you are a pscanner...."

"Earth," "Independence," "Playing Tag," "A Trip to Earth," "Retrieval," "Safe But Not Sound," and "Pscanner" are sections of text from the story *Panocide*.

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