

Panocide: The Past – Section Four

Guardian

William grimaced as his grip tightened about the armrests of his seat in an Alliance shuttle as it sliced through New World City's thick, polluted atmosphere. The ship's sleek hull cleared the capitol city's immense domes and spires by mere meters as it soared over the urban terrain along its flight path. Far to the west, the last remnants of the setting sun faded between distant, copper-hued spires.

The technology behind the shuttle's power units was unknown to the Terrans, aside from Erik Warren's independent discovery. Even the Alliance itself had only a vague idea of its workings. The shuttle's gravitonic engines were powered by a hyper-dimensional taps which drew off energy from other, much younger, universes. These taps intermeshed with and tapped the surrounding space-time continuum of bubble universes. These openings were often described to the layperson as being smaller than Plank's diameter of 10^{-35} meters, smaller than the very fabric of the universe itself, or more often as being dimensionally shifted so as to appear to be smaller.

Likewise, the entropy change was expelled through another tap into long dead universes. This effect left the universe of the Alliance with a negligible net energy or entropy change while allowing vessels to move vast distances or power whole worlds. Within the tapped younger universes the action of drawing off a minuscule amount of their energy was suspected of causing minute density ripples which might have lead to the early formation of galaxies, super clusters, and the all important intergalactic voids. "Might" was a key word of speculation here. More importantly though, this speculation may have possibly lead to *life* itself in other universes. Of course, the scientists of the Alliance and other unions had alternative theories concerning trans-universal energy taps and their effects upon other universes.

True spatial and temporal manipulation could only be achieved if exotic matter was brought into the universe; however these rare forms of exotic matter had to exist in the universe first for more to be brought in from a parallel universe. Though contradictory, there were other ways to achieve nearly instantaneous between star systems. Sometimes universes could "touch" one and other or otherwise affect each other. Then there was a way brought on by life itself.

"Ah, please! Could you slow down, Gayle?" William's voice strained, nearly to its breaking point as he barely managed to hold down the contents of his stomach. He glanced out the starboard window to where the city's eastern domes were passing into the darkness then as he turned his head his sickness grew. "This isn't like a transit tube..."

"Easy, William. We're nearly there." Gayle eased the shuttle's throttle back.

"And could we gain a little altitude so the ground won't fly by so fast." He affixed his eyes on a distant spire in an attempt to fight off his air sickness, ignoring the passing blurs as best he could.

Gayle glanced at the shuttle's coordinates. "No need. We're at New World City's port."

William *quickly* glanced about at the surrounding skyline. "Yeah, that's Palakeen's tower over there."

"We'll be grounding shortly." She brought the shuttle to a near instantaneous halt over the heliport.

"*Damn!*" William threw his arms out before himself in an act of belated self preservation as he prepared for what appeared to be an imminent impact with the flight control console.

"Huh...?" Gayle glanced at him, somewhat embarrassed. "Sorry about that, but my mind is on other things." She smiled. "That was, however, a normal stop. We have inertialyzers aboard which allow for quick starts, stops, and directional changes."

"Normal...?" For a man with a dark tan complexion, his knuckles were stark white.

"Aye, although inertialyzers do allow some of the shuttle's less intense motions to be passed

along to your body so your mind will realize you're actually moving." She grinned wide. "One day you won't think twice about it."

"Today would be nice to start," he said coldly as his head slowly bobbed up and down in mock agreement. He hoped she was right, but at the moment it didn't help to alleviate his queasiness.

Taby removed her headset. "They're still refusing us clearance, Gayle."

"What's with them?" Annoyed, Gayle turned to her syntient aide. "Myrie, I want you and Byron to carry extra magazines and bring rail launchers, too."

"Roger that." commented Myrie as she slapped a fresh and fully charged magazine into her weapon, "I always like extra insurance."

William glanced back at Myrie and Byron, still uneasy over their large, menacing, catlike appearance, especially Myrie's substantially larger, thicker frame. He figured Byron weighed in close to 150kg without his weapons and armor, and Myrie easily topped 250kg.

"Gayle." Taby pointed downwards with her right hand. "There's still no *official* word for clearance, but there is another party indicating we're to land at pad three."

"Roger, Tab." Gayle shrugged her shoulders as she smirked. "Pad three it is. We'll go where we're welcomed." She swung the shuttle's nose about and sensed William's stomach muscles tightening. "Sorry about that, William. We're touching down now."

"Thank you." William's voice was quite unsteady. "Whatever's waiting for us has to be easier to handle. *Not* that you're a bad pilot mind you..." He felt relieved as the shuttle's inertialyzers allowed him to feel the lurch of their landing. "But, I may need a fresh set of trousers," he joked as he clasped his hands together to keep them from shaking.

Gayle smiled and then turned and spoke to a first lieutenant Ü'Ñnyae pscanner. "What do you feel out there, Rory?"

He closed his eyes for a moment then his whole body trembled. "There are a lot of Terrans surrounding us. I'm having a little trouble focusing on any single individual, a new world and all that, but I have an overall view." He shrank back from the wave of emotions he felt. "This is one tense, angry, and scared planet!"

"Yeah, that pretty well sums up our world," quipped William, half jokingly, half seriously.

Gayle cut the ship's landing and guidance engines. "Care to join us outside, William?"

"Oh hell, yes!" He hastily unbuckled his harness with only one slight fumbling of his fingers. "Ah..." He paused and glanced at Gayle. "Is anyone outside the ship?"

"Not on the pad, but I'm sensing several small parties on the floors below, and there are others in the vicinity overlooking us." She gestured to the closest spire. Three other spires stood well back from the corners of the landing pad.

"I can see several Terrans over the side of the landing pad on the roof of a dome!" A Lakiikan sergeant eagerly reported from an observation dome.

"No need to shout, Klæe." Gayle was puzzled at why she was so excited.

"Sorry. I'm a little over enthusiastic." Klæe smiled. "This is my first time away from Lakiikia system proper." She lowered her observation chair.

"This is your first time out and you're a sergeant?" Gayle slowly spun her chair about. "Where have you been hiding?"

"I was assigned to a polar research group on our sister planet's moon, Kuran. Nearly near froze my little 'you-know-what' off at that ice station, too." Klæe's catlike pupils narrowed to thin lines as she entered the bright lights of the shuttle's main deck.

"Gayle," said Byron. "Better take these with you." Her identification tags dangled from his hand. He had attached two small, military-issued, tracking devices, disguised as trinkets, to all of their ID tags. The tracking device was a back-up strategy to relay their positions via sub-spatial signals.

"Thanks." Gayle slipped her tags on as Byron passed out the tags of the other as well as a set for William. Gayle shook her shoulders, allowing the tags and trinkets to slip beneath the breastplate of her

armored suit. “Tango Four-nine, this is Gamma Nine-five, over.” She radioed for final mission confirmation.

“Roger, Gayle. They can’t tap our communications. Are you ready to depart the shuttle?”

“Kabis!” She recognized the voice of her old friend. “Are you pulling ‘high chair’ duty today?”

“Aye, I’m currently stationary, five hundred kilometers above your position.” He paused to scan an incoming report. “We’re picking up military traffic in your vicinity. Better watch yourself, Gayle.”

“I always do.” She sensed Terrans moving and scurrying about within the surrounding domes and the upper levels of the city below. “Can you tell where their main threat might come from?”

“Why, from directly beneath you!” Kabis laughed. “You’re on the roof and we control the skies, so where else?”

“I should have expected...” She broke off, turned, snapping her fingers to gain the other’s attention. “Kabis, I’m sensing a female Maukator below. She’s exhausted. No doubt a prisoner.”

“Roger. I’m checking our missing in action files.”

She waited as Kabis scanned the Alliance’s records. “Is that ensign you married still hanging onto your arm?”

“Yes,” Kabis whispered into his mike. “She’s with me now.”

“Hi, Gayle.” Kay’s young, bouncy voice blared out over the radio.

Gayle grimaced at the loudness of Kay’s voice. “Hello, Kay. You’re not giving Kabis a hard time are you?” She absentmindedly tapped her fingers against a console as she rolled her eyes and then stared at the ceiling.

“Ouch!” Kay giggled. “More like the other way around.”

“Uh-huh.” Gayle rolled her eyes again and sighed, recalling her younger days. *There’s nothing like a young syntient to ruin an older one—especially one named Kabis*, she thought. She caught Myrie’s eye with a wave of her hand and gestured to several cases of medical supplies.

Myrie nodded. She then scooped up the supplies and passed them out amongst the others.

William accepted the cases from Myrie and then rushed over to Gayle’s side. “If our security has one of your soldiers, they won’t go easy on her. They may even kill or severely maim her.”

“Patience. I doubt if they’ll resort to such extreme measures just yet.” Gayle sensed the Maukator being escorted to the level below them for injuries.

“Need I remind you that many of them are xenophobic, religious fanatics? Many still lust after the *good old days* of sanctioned death, torture, and mayhem. Especially back to the recurring dark periods of our history misnamed as the Freedom Inquisitions.”

Gayle paused for a second. She didn’t know what the “Freedom Inquisitions” were, however to be safe... “Good point.” She looked at Rory. “Can you *feel* her?”

“Barely... She’s at the limits of my practical range.” Rory grimaced then shrank back with a shutter. “She’s scared! Really bad!” He shuttered. “I don’t know if they have physically harmed her, but she has been mentally tormented.”

“Mm...” Gayle scanned and counted the Terrans surrounding the Maukator. “Focus and concentration on her and those guarding her. Any trouble will probably involve her, Rory.” She added in thought, *or likely end up involving her.*

“Aye. If possible, I need to move closer to her to get a better feel for her emotions.”

Gayle nodded.

Kabis reported back. “I’ve identified her, Gayle. She’s Corporal Jade Sezzy Ar’Quekä of the 458th Light Reconnaissance Battalion.” Kabis cut his transmission for a moment. “There is another Maukator; however she was just recently taken prisoner on the opposite side of this planet.”

“Roger.” Gayle shouldered a pulse-beam energy rifle and slipped her pistol into its holster. She was playing it safe; she knew she could always put her weapons away should peace prevail. Then, as an added precaution, she pulled her dog tags out from beneath her breastplate, snapped one of the tracking

devices from its holder and swallowed it. She looked about at the others. "All of you may wish to do the same."

The rest of her comrades quickly swallowed one of their tracking devices.

William paused briefly as he studied his trinket then quickly swallowed it. "It needs something." He added with a whisper, "An acquired taste, I believe."

Klae made a sour face and muttered, "I had to do this in training once and I had hoped that would have been enough." She charged her assault rifle. "I hate the way they bore inside of ones' stomach lining."

William glared wide-eyed back at Klae as he grabbed at his shirt over his belly.

She smiled in return and winked at him.

"Gayle, your insurance should be arriving at any moment. Twenty-five Dorānjay ground support fighters will provide you with close aerial support. Just give the word should you need them. Also, two heavy combat transport shuttles are a couple of minutes behind you."

"Thanks, Kabis. Is everything else okay?"

"There have been no major screw-ups so far."

"Good. Keep track of us and I'll contact you later. Out." Gayle knew Kabis would deduce where she and the others had swallowed one of their tracking devices by its separation of a few centimeters from its partner. Inside her belly she felt the device begin to attach itself to her stomach lining. She knew the others, including Rory, wouldn't feel the tracking devices bore into their own flesh; however as a syntient Gayle could sense what was going on within her own body. Silently, she stepped over by the shuttle's exit to prepare for their departing.

William nervously pressed his hands against his stomach as he watched as Taby squirmed curiously about within her armor. "Is something wrong?"

Taby glanced at William with a deep expression of annoyance etched into her face. "My tail's shifted from its protective pouch. Someone in supply went and issued me the wrong sized pelvic tail-pouch armor."

"Tail...?" William glanced at Taby, half shocked, half surprised, her having tail had caught him completely off guard. "You've got a tail? I mean, I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't have one, is there?"

"I've never given it much thought," Taby said, somewhat puzzled by William's reaction.

"There." She flashed a smile as her tail finally slipped into a more comfortable position. She then twisted about and patted her behind. "It feels natural to me. But then, after all, I was born with it."

Klae quipped as she raised her chair up into the observation dome to recheck their surroundings, "Lakiekans don't have tails. It saves a lot of time, care, tripping, and bad jokes, so on..."

Taby whispered with a wide smirk on her face, "But it does add something to a relationship."

William managed a laugh. "What about..." He pointed to the two Sha'kals.

"Of course." Klae then added, "But theirs aren't nearly as flowing or elegant as Taby's."

"And before you ask," Gayle quickly interrupted, "I don't have one."

"Nor do I," Rory spoke up. "However, I do agree with Taby. If it weren't for a female Sha'kal's tail twitching, there would not be as many of them about. Many of the tailed worlds create some sort ritual around their tails." He gestured to Myrie and Byron. "And, of course, anything that helps in the survival of the species—goes." Rory added, jokingly, "And the Sha'kals can use all the help they can get."

Byron glared at Rory, growling deep from his throat to add further intimidation.

"Cute, Rory." Klae descended from the observation dome. "How's your sensing holding out, Tab?"

"It's a good deal less than what I had earlier." Taby tossed Klae her helmet.

William raised an eyebrow. "Ah, how far can you sense?"

"Now that I've lost my matched syntient? I can only sense finer details out to about fifty meters."

I can only sense of us and a few a few Terrans beneath us.” She hooked her helmet onto her utility belt. “Still. I miss Colonel Ti’Var even more.” Her voice nearly broke as a dark expression draped itself across her face. She stared, teary-eyed, at the deck for a moment, greatly saddened at the loss of her friend. “Earlier, on a good day, I could fine sense out past a quarter of a kilometer or more. That’s better than most syntients, let alone guardians.”

“Sorry,” he said, slowly shaking his head from side to side. “You must miss the Colonel a great deal.”

“Aye...” Taby watched as Gayle opened the shuttle’s hatch. “Fortunately, I’ve only been a guardian for a decade—it’s not like we knew each other for centuries.”

“Centuries?” William stumbled over his feet. “Just how long can you live?”

“Not much longer than you, William. Maybe three centuries at best. One and a half to two on average. Of course, a lot depends on which world you’re from. As for syntients, guardians, and pscanners, we’re referred to as syntns respectively; we’re capable of living extremely long lives.” Taby moved nearer to the exit, allowing the others to exit first. “Though in reality, and due greatly to the dangerous nature of much of our work, we often live very short lives. Colonel Ti’Var was only eighty years old.” She allowed William to exit the shuttle first. “And, of course, there is a greater cost.”

“Greater cost...?” William noticed Gayle standing on the landing pad under the harsh glare of the landing lights with her eyes closed, slowly turning about where she stood. She was concentrating on sensing all life within the vicinity.

“Children. For a syntient to parent a child is almost unheard of.” Taby touched a pressure switch on the hull, closing the shuttle’s hatch. “Like I said ‘a *greater cost*’,” she commented, more to herself than to William. “Guardians who do have children usually have them before they become guardians. Another important point to note is that a syntient cannot parent a syntient child, although a very few guardians’ children have been known to become guardians later in life. Even fewer have been born as syntients.”

“What about pscanners?”

“We often fair better than guardians in that respect,” Rory said. “Although, our children are not born pscanners, they may, on rare occasions, become guardians. Rarely are they born as syntients.”

Suddenly, the sound of a loud warning klaxon reverberated across the pad. Everyone turned and cautiously watched as a pair of elevator doors opened in the side of a spire across the landing pad. Gayle signaled Myrie and Byron. “I don’t want you two to appear too threatening to them... Hunker down!”

Myrie and Byron glanced at one and other, then lowered themselves onto their right knees on the heliport’s fluorescent orange on black striped grounding pad. They placed the butts of their assault weapons on the landing pad while holding onto the weapons’ muzzle end with their left hands as they awaited the Terran’s arrival.

“*Yet!*” Gayle bluntly added under her breath. She then waited patiently as three Terran men cautiously climbed up a set of metal stairs on the other side of the landing pad. From their clothing, two of them were obviously guards. They wore exoskeletons of simple armor which bore no resemblance or comparison to the Alliance’s own form of battle armor. The third man, however, wore a dark grey civilian suit and carried a slim briefcase. Across his chest was a double row of miniature medallions.

Gayle’s first impression of the Terran civilian was that of deception. She wondered if he had been sent probe, delay, or possibly entrap them.

Rory backed up Gayle’s line of thought by hand signaling to her that the man was quite secretive with his thoughts. William then reinforced her judgment with a nudge to her backside.

The three Terrans came to a halt with the two guards clicking their heels in unison.

“Ma’am,” the civilian spoke in a hastened, but controlled voice. “I was informed you can understand and speak our language.”

All three of the Terrans avoided eye contact with Myrie and Byron as they looked over the

aliens.

"I wear a translator," Gayle responded somewhat coldly, though she forced some semblance of warmth into her voice. "I'm Syntient Field Marshall Twenty Gayle V'shan'nos. I'm the Alliance's representative sent to negotiate the opening talks with Count Mark Olieya, Mayor of New World City."

The man held up an open palm towards Gayle. "All in good time." He nodded. "I'm Senior Agent Jon Jaryk, immigration."

"Immigration...?" exclaimed Gayle, somewhat surprised by his claim. She caught a glint in his eye. *What is he hiding?* She wondered and frowned.

Gayle, Taby, Rory, and Myrie heard Kabis break in over their communicators on a restricted synt frequency. "*Is there a sensory array about nine hundred meters from your location at two-two-five degrees off magnetic North?*"

"Mm-hum," Gayle responded softly.

"*Any snipers?*"

She sensed three Terrans beginning their long climb up the array. The built-in, self-stabilizing displays of her contact displays zoomed in on the men, thus allowing her to study their weapons and capabilities. "Mm-hum."

"*Roger that. I'll advise our fighters. Out.*"

Gayle glared at Jon while Taby studied the array's structure. "I might ask why your government would send immigration, or is this a ruse?"

"I wouldn't know about ruses, ma'am. However, since you're not from this world, our government has decided immigration would be the *proper* channel of contact. The same would apply to anyone coming here from one of our off world colonies." He took out a clipboard and pen. "I'll need a little information about you and your party."

Immigration...? Terran logic...? She pondered. Perplexed by Jon's manner, she glanced at William for ideas.

He only shrugged his shoulders.

"I need your names, ranks, and short background histories. I'll also need the names of your worlds you hail from, nationalities—or by whatever way you denote your various species within the Alliance." He gestured back to the port he and the two guards had started out from. "We can proceed with this as we walk." He pointed to the shuttle "I'll record other pertinent details along with your personal items and equipment at a later time. You may wish to secure your ship first."

Gayle's senses tingled. She sensed an approaching wave of Terran troops from below them. Across the way, the snipers were nearing their firing positions. "Sorry." She took a greater dislike to his attitude. Her imagination ran at full speed. "Need I remind you that we're covered by diplomatic immunity?"

The number of Terran troops swelled nearly to the bursting point inside the surrounding domes and Gayle was well aware of their presence.

I must get them away from here, Jon thought. *There's far too great of a chance for bloodshed in this wide open space.* He glanced at his escorts. "I respect that, however there are others who won't. I must *sincerely* implore you and all those in your group to follow me. This is not the best place for us to talk."

Gayle probed for Jon's true intentions. "I take it you that you know about syntients, guardians, and pscanners?"

"Merely that they have exceptional in mental and physical abilities." He tried to remain unemotional and mentally blank in case there was some truth to Terra's intelligent reports concerning the alien's abilities. "Please! We need to clear this area now, ma'am!"

"I prefer to remain where our backup troops can cover us!" Gayle's sensing ability alerted her all the Terran troops had halted and were probably now within their assigned positions. Through discreet hand signals, she told her companions to be prepared. She then glared at Jon, motioning to the

surrounding spires. “Better pull your troops back, and I do mean *all* of them.”

Jon looked warily about the surrounding spires. “They’re not my troops to command! I must implore...”

One of the escorting guards suddenly stepped forward, shouting as he lowered his weapon, “Enough, damn it! Get your hands up. You’re all prisoners!”

“Now, Kabis!” Gayle whispered in a terse voice.

Jon glared at the hostile guard and shouted, “No!” He shoved the guard’s weapon up and to the side with his left hand. “I’ll have no bloodshed here!”

“I’m not under your command, sir!” The Terran guard stepped away from Jon to free his weapon as Gayle rolled underneath his potential line of fire.

Terran troops poured from the surrounding structures and maintenance openings and headed towards the pad. Several Terran attack helicopters dashed into the area, hovering high with their weapons targeting Gayle’s group.

From nowhere, deafening sonic cracks washed across the pad, sending loud retorts echoing between the spires. The Terrans dropped, flattening themselves against the landing pad as five Alliance fighter craft darted mere meters above them. Twenty other Alliance fighters circled the surrounding spires along with two heavy transport shuttles. To add to their threat, the fighter’s energy weapons seared the air above the Terrans. The beams continued along their outbound paths into the voids of deep space where they would dissipate within the thin molecular medium of interstellar nothingness over a course of years to eons to come.

One of the Terran attack copters leveled its weapons against an Alliance fighter and was immediately destroyed. Its pilot and gunner plunged to a fiery death.

Gayle stood and sharply knocked the hostile guard’s weapon away then grabbed him by his throat in a near death grip. The guard frantically kicked and squirmed as he grabbed at her arm with both hands. “Snipers, Tab.”

“Roger.” Taby fired her weapon at the array while her comrades brought their weapons to bear to cover the prone Terrans. She fired a second shot. In the distance, her energy pulses punched through the array’s girders sending bright showers of sparks down upon the snipers. “That has their attention.” She chuckled but kept her pulse rifle ready, its sights zeroed in on the highest sniper’s nose.

Two Alliance fighters drew in closer to where Taby’s rounds had impacted. There they hovered and watched through their thermal gun sights as the Terran snipers begrudgingly surrendered to them.

Jon shuttered as a wash of cold air blasted across his face. “What the hell!” Before him, one of the small, four-meter long fighters hovered just above the landing pad. “Damn! What is that thing?”

“One of our light tactical ground support fighters,” Gayle said as she watched him trying to huddled even lower against the pad but found his suit and its buttons were in the way. “Keep your troops down! I’m a little pissed and I *will* use force!”

“Surely there’s no need!” With his palms facing downwards, Jon waved for the few standing troops to get low and remain prone.

“We most assuredly will!” Gayle threatened as she locked her helmet in place with her left hand while holding onto the nearly limp, gun-ho guard. “And, if you think we came here unprotected, we didn’t. We have three main battle fleets and a planetary bombardment fleet sitting in a stationary orbit above us. At my command all life on this world can be eradicated down to the lowliest bacteria.” Not waiting for a reply, she dropped the now limp guard down onto the pad.

Looking for a better solution, Gayle stomped her right foot. “Listen. This is getting out of hand and a smooth-talking diplomat I am not.” She said sternly as she leaned forward towards Jon. “What would you say to our changing our current conversation and moving onwards to a different location?” She motioned for Taby to join her. “I would like to speak with someone higher up within your royalty. They can act as a buffer between your world and us.” She extended her hand to help him stand up. “Then we’ll continue our negotiations with Mayor Olieya at a later time.”

“And what if my superiors should choose not to...?”

“Our computers have maintained almost total control over nearly your entire planet for the past several hours without your population’s knowledge. Should we need take action, we’ll start with something simple such as bringing your traffic control to a complete halt.” She directed Byron and Myrie to stand fully, thus adding their greater height and Myrie’s imposing mass to emphasize her point. “We might impede something more critical next.”

Jon stood silent, at a lost for thought, let alone words. After a moment he regained his line of thought. “I was trying to get you and your group off this pad so we could talk in private without our government or other parties interfering.”

“Good. So be it.” Gayle cleared her throat. “Guardian First Lieutenant Neokryatain and my self wish...” She glanced at one of the hovering fighters, “and Lieutenant Captain Zaddy Ulvex, request an audience with Princess Aprii Bourques and Lord Hyran Denvearson.”

“Those two...?” Jon spoke sharply and cheerfully, but without surprise. “That I can arrange. Most gladly.” He turned to William. “Might I have a word with Agent Alexski, field marshal?”

“That would be his decision,” replied Gayle.

“Thank you.” Jon walked to the side of the heliport as William followed at a slower pace.

Rory quietly whispered to Gayle. He still felt Jon was hiding something, but it might be to their advantage to allow him keep hiding it.

Jon glanced at the incoming Alliance shuttles as he contemplated William. For his own taste, William was too much of a dreamer. “Just so I’ll know here you stand, why are you helping them?”

“Sir!” Caught off guard by Jon’s question, William stood straight and silent for a few long seconds. “It’s not so much that I’m helping them—it’s more along the line where I’m trying to help us. Unlike you and your fellow Earth Centralists, I feel...” William frowned. “No doubt you know how I feel, sir.” He felt his stomach turning cartwheels as Jon remained silent before him. “Sir, I’ve found that they did *not* wish to have any contact with us for at least a few more centuries, maybe even another millennium or so.” He glanced at Gayle as she gestured orders with her hands. “However, they seem quite taken with one lone Terran discovering interstellar spatial jumps by on his own. They also felt they had to intervene before we made contact with several nearby life-forms—a couple of which who are extremely hostile to mammalian life such as ourselves.”

“They didn’t want to make contact us?” Jon paused briefly as his eyes narrowed. “*Just* how close are these other life-forms?”

“Twenty-nine parsecs, sir.”

Jon looked puzzled. “How far is that...? In light-years?” Not that he had a good grasp of how far a light-year itself was.

“Um?” William glanced at the second shuttle as its troops began to depart the two shuttles. “Around a hundred light-years. That’s very close by their standards, sir.”

“I see. Were there any other reasons they didn’t wish to contact us?” He watched, concerned, as Terran troops began surrendering their weapons under the ever watchful eyes of the fighters.

“They had hoped for us to *mature* as a people.” William was apprehensive over what Jon’s reaction might be to the thought of Earth’s immaturity. “There’s also another point I would like to say, sir. In their defense as it might be. They could have incinerated our world and we could have done not a single thing to stop them. If they wanted to, they could have enslaved us without any significant resistance on our part. Fortunately for us, they have opted for the hardest choice of all: they wish to be our friends.”

“Well, they’re probably right about us being immature...” Jon’s lips drew thin. “Although what you are saying sounds more like a scene out of some Grade B space movie.” Jon calmly took out a small communicator from his pocket. “Captain Schulva, escort your prisoner to my location.” He stared coldly through William. “Come unarmed with the smallest possible party. Also, see to that all human forces in the area that are not under my personal control are disarmed immediately!” He then glared at

the gung-ho guard laying unconscious on the pad. “And there’s a guard here I want placed under arrest. His actions nearly got us all killed.”

“*Yes sir. Will do,*” replied a deep, male voice over the communicator.

William stared at Jon for a few seconds then hesitantly asked, “You’re not from immigration, are you, sir?”

“Not really...” Jon watched as a lone fighter landed and its cockpit opened. He watched the craft revealed its pilot, Lieutenant Captain Zaddy Ulvex, who appeared to be a smaller version of a Sha’kal.

“I had a feeling you weren’t, sir.” William shuddered as the realization sank in that the Centralists would now probably target him for an intense interrogation. A thought of greater concern, however, was what they might know concerning Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran.

“Officially, I’m to check these aliens out and to limit their terrestrial contacts—to capture them if possible.” Jon added in a hushed voice, “Unofficially, I’m to have them to meet with Count Georgiev and Duke Zinn after talking with the mayor. Although I will have to admit that Princess Bourques and Lord Denvearson are a better choice.” He said in a timid, somewhat embarrassed voice, “And, I was to remain in control of the situation.” He turned and spoke to Gayle. “Field marshal, earlier one of your soldiers was taken as a prisoner. I’m having her brought here to you.”

“Thank you.” Gayle nodded. “I believe she’s Corporal Ar’Quekã.”

“That is the name she provided us with. However, I must inform you that she was slightly injured in a fall during her capture.”

Gayle’s eyes widened. “That explains the broken tail I’m sensing.”

“Pardon...?” The lines of his brow grew deeper as his eyebrows rose sharply. “Then it’s true. Syntients can sense others.” He tried to imagine the concept and all its possibilities. He signaled for the landing pad’s perimeter lights to be brightened. If she could sense their troops, then they would not be capable of hiding or stalking from the shadows then he saw no sense in allowing a few Terran soldiers to get any bright ideas. As the lights were turned on, he sighed with relief when he saw there were no troops hiding in the shadows.

“True. You’ll find it applies to guardians, and, in a different way, to pscanners.” She removed her helmet, placing it back on her belt. “Your world has just as much to learn from us as we have to learn from you.” She glanced at William. “All concepts and ideas—though they may be liberal, conservative, or even wildly absurd—are always needed. Although most of them will turn out not to be useful, a very few of them, however, might one day lead to new lines of thinking, discoveries, etcetera.” She watched as Ar’Quekã was escorted to a platform by two guards.

“I can’t see where you’ll have much to learn from us,” Jon said.

“There are many things your world has to offer. Take Erik Warren for ex...” Gayle abruptly stopped talking and stood motionless, freezing in mid step and thought.

Jon and William stared at Gayle, puzzled by her sudden silence. The two guards escorting Corporal Ar’Quekã nearly ran into her and her two plus meters of height as she abruptly froze in mid stride, too.

“Are you okay, field marshal?” Jon waved his hand before Gayle’s blank face.

“*Stand back from her!*” Taby ordered as she ran to Gayle’s side. “Damn it all! Myrie. Byron. See to the corporal!” She gestured for Zaddy to help her. “Hell of a time for a matching trance!”

“The Maukators have never had any guardians before,” Zaddy said as she ran over to help.

“Well they do now,” Taby said tersely.

Jon and William watched the commotion, trying to grasp the situation.

Seeing Myrie’s and Byron’s approach, Ar’Quekã’s escorts made no effort to stop them. With what they had witnessed, they were in no mood to start an argument with anything of the likes of Sha’kals.

Two Alliance shuttles arrived and several Vishahntiens, Sha’kals, and numerous gelf troops

poured out and promptly took up firing positions around Gayle.

William was amazed at the new varieties of aliens he saw. Some were canines, others like felines, and a few looked like rabbits, ferrets, otters, rats, and a few that he couldn't even begin to describe.

"I'll call it in." Zaddy whipped her tail out of the way to keep Jon from stepping on it; as a fighter pilot she wore only light body armor so her tail wasn't protected in an armored pouch. She pulled a tiny, wire-like microphone from her helmet collar lock and placed it at the corner of her mouth. "Commodore Ko'Rii, we have a situation down here. Field Marshal V'shan'nos and Corporal Ar'Quekä are currently in a guardian matching trance."

"The Maukators don't... Is this another of your practical jokes, captain?"

"No sir. I'm watching their trance progress as we speak, sir."

"Commodore," Taby broke in. "Guardian Neokryatain here. Ar'Quekä is fading from my sensing." She glanced at Rory who was nodding in agreement. "She *is* becoming a guardian."

"Roger. Could you put the highest ranking Terran on?"

"Yes, sir. His name is Jon Jaryk. We're unsure of his position and rank."

Zaddy handed a second, larger, microphone to Jon. "It's a voice activated and will translate for you, sir." She turned on her suit's external speaker for him to hear.

"Thank you." Jon hesitantly took the microphone from her hand. It was mounted in a grip ring to make it easier to handle. "This is Commissioner Jaryk. To whom may I ask am I speaking with?"

"I'm Syntient Commodore Thirty Kabis Ko'Rii of Dycinia. Now, listen up. I realize there's much about us that may seem strange or incomprehensible. So please, don't concern yourself over Field Marshal V'shan'nos and Corporal Ar'Quekä. What you're witnessing is the making of a guardian. Aside from Ar'Quekä having a terrible headache for the next several days and both experiencing a short, variable period of nausea, the two of them will be fine..."

Palace

Gayle was absolutely awestruck by the splendor of the long, ornate halls of the Terran's grand imperial palace. The palace itself not only served as the residence for the Terran royal family, but as the summer seat for the congress along with the upper and lower houses of the Terran government.

William and a quite tall—somewhat humanlike—black-furred panther-styled gelf lieutenant named E34-GRH523012E or Ee for short, entered through a pair of large, ornate doors. They were followed by Taby, Zaddy, and Jhade. Although not severely injured, Jhade's guardian trance and earlier capture had taken a heavy mental toll on her. Her head and mind ached from where her brain and body were rewiring themselves to form her new guardian state of being.

"How long did it take your people to construct this palace, William?" Gayle's head arched back to take in the view of the high vaulted ceilings as she entered the one of the main vaulted corridors.

"They're still working on many parts of it while having to repair many of the older parts." He estimated that they had entered somewhere around the middle of the Great Hall. "And, I believe, they'll still be working on this for hundreds of years from now. You might call it one of the largest 'make-work' projects of our world, although most of the ongoing work is now repair and maintenance. The government had it built for itself but they have the royal family reside here so they'll have someone to place the blame on whenever the annual construction cost runs too high," he said with a touch of sarcasm to his voice. "I believe that at one time there were even plans to house the poor in the ancient chambers beneath it." He held his arms out, parallel with the great length of the corridor. "From here, it's well over two kilometers in either direction."

Gayle whistled as Rory, Klæe, Myrie, and Byron entered the hall. "Looks about right."

William stared at Ee. Her black fur with its bluish sheen along with her panther-like features reminded him of his mother's South American paternal ancestors. Yet, there was a certain manner and

air about Ee which reminded him of his mother's maternal African decent. William's father was descended from Eastern European and Asian stock.

He found her yellow catlike eyes utterly fascinating. The fact that she wasn't from Terra, let alone even human, didn't matter to him.

Ee caught his stare and she quickly made a guttural sound which could never have been mistaken for a purr by William or anyone else.

William quickly turned his head away and watched as many of the Sha'kals, Vishahntiens, and various gelfs gasped in amazement upon entering the majestic palace halls.

Jon rushed into the hallway through another pair of doors. Nearly out of breath he said, "You're right, Gayle, our computers are under Alliance control. Even our most secured lines had someone intercepting and rerouting my calls." He added with a tone of annoyance to his voice, "And, they're quite persistent, too!"

Gayle and several of the others couldn't help but laugh. "You're trying to out maneuver a sentient computer."

"I was what...?" He stared out into the distance for a few seconds. "You mean I've been arguing with a computer that *thinks* it's alive?"

"No." Taby corrected him. "You've been quarreling with a computer that *knows* it's alive." She gestured by holding her fore and middle fingers slightly apart. "There's a little more than a slight difference there. It's a difference that can be sensed by a synt."

"And don't joke with them about whether they're sentient or not. The last thing you need is one of them to become a little miffed at you. Paychecks or worse have been known to go lost." Gayle sensed Jhade's body tightening its muscles as she fought off another bout of pain. "Do you want us to stop for a while, Jhade?"

"No," she said as the effects of her guardian trance continued to tear through her body and mind. "It's that old saying, 'It only hurts when I laugh'." She grimaced and faked a laugh as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Sure." Gayle nodded in agreement. "I'll feel better once you're safe at home."

"Your world or mine?"

"Yours. There's little doubt your world will want to congratulate you on becoming their first guardian." Gayle eyed a security camera following their every step, thinking, *Someone's watching us*, she thought, *but are they friend or foe?*

"I would rather miss the ceremonies," objected Jhade.

"Aye," Gayle agreed wholeheartedly. "There's entirely too much pomp and circumstance surrounding such ceremonies for my taste." She paused for a few seconds as she thought. "I'll tell you what. Give them a few days to celebrate and then we'll find ourselves a nice, quiet resort planet we can both unwind on."

Jhade nodded without smiling.

"Excuse me," Jon said, lowering his communicator to his side. "I have some news. Our government is currently trying to reinstate full talks with the Alliance. I would say more than a few nerves have been rattled in the highest echelons. Also, the Presidential Council has used emergency powers to veto several congressional blocks by the Centralist movement. However, those powers will run out against the blocked motions in a few hours time." He gestured toward an ornate set of doors as they slowly made their way along the hallway. "Of course, Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran still wish to speak with you and your friends, Gayle."

"Good," she said, with a friendly smile. "I hope there aren't any more surprises awaiting us, Jon?"

"I should hope not." Jon sighed as he opened the door to a reception room. "Earlier, I caught a glimpse of your orbiting fleet on your shuttle's viewer when Commodore Ko'Rii gave me a quick overview of the Alliance." He shook his head. "I was informed that the number of ships I was shown

was inconsequential when compared to the rest of your fleets.”

“A mere pittance. Though keep in mind there are other unions out there, many of which have even greater forces than we have at their disposal. You should, however, keep in mind that most of those ships you saw are cargo, medical, and various support craft for use after we make peace with your world. We didn’t bring an invasion force to Earth.”

Jon came to an abrupt halt as a look of deep concern fell over his face. “How much larger I mean, Kabis didn’t dwell too much on the other unions.”

“The Durvin Area Confederation is vastly larger than we are. Fortunately, their national makeup is similar to ours and, most importantly, they’re on very good terms with us.”

“Make up?” Jon opened another set of ornate doors.

“To be frank, there are many forms of mammalian and non-mammalian life in the galaxy who will *not* tolerate human forms of life such as yours.”

Her statement aroused a comical response from some of her not-so-human companions.

“Don’t laugh too hard. It works the other way too! Any time there’s a difference between two species there’s always the chance some form of discrimination may enter the equation.” She sternly warned several escorting soldiers. “Anyhow, before you are several examples of four of the nations within the Alliance.” She motioned to Taby and Jhade. “Starting with the humans, they’re *Sehrga manters*, which translates from an old Dycinian dialect as ‘tailed humans.’ Klæe, as a *Lakiekkan*, is a *Vega manter* or ‘tailless human.’ We’re designated as *Hyter uotins*, or ‘hairless swimmers.’ Those names are often shortened to SM, VM, and HU. There are also other life-forms classified as humans such as *Uotiner quavaygus*, *Tubiou rata*, and so on, however none of them are presently here.” She gestured to Zaddy, Myrie, and Byron. “They’re *Krykienus aktayers*. They’re from some of our semi-human nations. *KAs* have a tendency to still appear somewhat human in appearance. *Chykontus j’aktayer*, *Bry’konnus ryter*, and *Tahquess sehgnur* are other forms of semi-human life. There are near-human forms: *Hyzer d’goja*, *Krykus b’näka*, and *Yzer ferrus*. Several *KB* nations are in the Alliance. I can point them out should we meet them. There are still numerous other forms of life out there in the galaxy such as reptilian, a few avian, and arthropods. A few reptilian species are taking their first steps in joining the Alliance. Then...” She raised her right forefinger to emphasize her point. “When you take the genetic constructs into consideration, the numbers really begin to grow.”

“What if *HU*’s like us have children with *SM*’s or *VM*’s?” asked William. He glanced up at Ee and cracked a smile. “Or gelfs?”

Ee’s eyebrows rose and her eyes widened as she pulled her head back.

“Whoa!” Gayle, caught off guard, rolled her eyes as she turned towards William. “Aren’t you the curious one?” She gestured to Taby. “As you can see both Taby and Klæe are basically human in appearance... Humanlike people are boundless in their forms, colors, and markings. All human-based genetics are within a few percent of each other, and nearly every major life-form in our galaxy uses the double helix to reproduce with.” She nodded to Byron. “*KAs* on the other hand, although more vaguely human in form are genetically remote enough that fertilization is *nearly* impossible between them and humans.”

“Not that human would be foolish enough to try,” muttered Myrie. She inched herself closer to Byron. She was frustrated since her tail was in its armored pouch and she couldn’t use it to catch Byron’s eye. She sighed as she thought *business first*.

Gayle stifled a chuckle. “Back to the matter at hand. There is one very important detail that distinguishes you from almost all other sentient, sapient, galactic life of mammalian form. You’re *indigenous* to your world.”

“Indigenous?” Jon scratched his chin as he thought.

“Nearly all of the nations of the Alliance are remotely related to an ancient group called the *Spacers*. They inhabited our worlds countless millennia ago and affected the course of our worlds’ evolution. Most mammalian life-forms within the galaxy are vaguely derived from their respective

Spacer forms.”

William looked disappointed as he stopped himself from glancing upwards to see Ee’s face.

“We’re not related to you?”

“No.”

“The Centralists could probably use that fact as potent ammunition for their cause. They could design scenarios where we were created exclusively for Earth, or even for the galaxy as a whole. Anything that will light a relentless fire within the hearts of their followers.”

“Maybe so, but that’s just one of numerous reasons why we’re interested in your world.” Gayle smiled at William. “Seriously.”

Jon held a small, thin remote control out before him. “We’re here.” He depressed the control’s sole switch and the magnificently ornate door before them swung open to reveal a Terran couple surrounded by elite Terran guards.

Gayle sensed nine guards within the immediate vicinity, although she only saw seven. The unseen two appeared to be covering rear entrances. She decided not to mention them, but chose to keep a tendril of her mind on them.

Jon led them across the highly polished, granite floors to where Princess Aprii and her fiancé, Lord Hyran, stood. In stark contrast to the splendor their immediate surroundings, the couple were simply attired, and, though forewarned, the appearance of Myrie, Byron, Ee, and others still slightly startled them.

Ee had her troops remain in a wide arc by the entrance as she herself followed behind Gayle.

Jon executed a slow, deep bow. “Princess Aprii Bourques, heiress to the Terran throne, and Lord Hyran Denvearson, I wish to present Syntient Field Marshall Twenty Gayle d’jho Bezshula V’shan’nos of the Alliance and her entourage.” He prayed he had pronounced Gayle’s full name correctly.

Gayle offered a short, friendly bow that was little more than a nod. “Your highness.”

“I’m honored, field marshal,” Aprii said, motioning to several couches and chairs. She prevented her nervousness from showing. “Please, be seated.” She motioned to her left. “This is my fiancé, Hyran, and I’m Aprii.”

“I’m Gayle. I’m pleased and honored to meet the two of you.”

“I trust your ambassador is safe and sound.”

“He’s doing well. Thank you.” Gayle gestured to her suit. “I’m sorry about having to wear this armor, but under the present circumstances...”

“It’s quite understandable.” Aprii nodded as she studied Gayle. She had been told earlier Gayle was physically very strong.

Aside from Ee’s escorting troops, Gayle promptly and informally introduced her comrades by their first names, including Ee.

“I’m pleased to meet all of you.” As she spoke, Aprii wondered if the Alliance’s concept of royalty was the same as hers. She wondered at all the possibilities coming to light inside her mind. “I have been informed that at three of you are of royal decent.”

Gayle allowed Aprii and Hyran to sit first as the others in her group followed her lead. “Yes, though keep in mind that within the Alliance royalty rarely reigns. More often than not they serve in a diplomatic aspect between world-nations. A buffer of sorts.”

“That is much the way it is here on our world.” Aprii noticed Ee and Jade’s height stood out even when they were sitting. “Centuries back our first internationally-founded royalty was developed for diplomatic purposes. An attempt, if you like, to smooth relations between nations through marriages.” Her smile changed to a frown.

“Didn’t work, did it?” Gayle frowned and sighed, recalling the attempts of other worlds, including her own. “I know from our own history that conflicts between total strangers are often less ghastly and bloody than feuds between blood relations. Civil wars are rarely civil.”

Aprii nodded her head and said in a low voice, “Unfortunately, our attempt became a minor

contributing factor to the Hundred Years Famine War. A war that took a further two hundred years for our world to recover from. I am, however, gracefully thankful that my ancestors played a major role in stopping this war. Maybe today I'll have the honor and privilege to likewise serve my people."

"The day is still young." It dawned on Gayle that it was early morning for the Alliance but not at palace's location. "Sorry, my translator keeps providing me with possible sayings to use. I believe it's presently your late evening."

"It is, although I do see your point."

"We might as well get started." Gayle stood. "For the time being, I would prefer nothing to be said about this meeting until sometime after normal relations have been established between us. I don't want any hotheads going off."

"Agreed." Aprii glanced at her guards. "I want nothing said here today to be repeated until I say otherwise."

All the Terran guards said in unison, "Yes, your highness."

"Thank you." Gayle motioned to Taby. "Aprii, may I present Guardian First Lieutenant Tabiefloghah Neokryatain. She's the fifth daughter of the Count and Countess of Sahrkhanzhäin and she is also the great-granddaughter of Cioberon, the Sovereign High Leader of the Voeshalter world."

Taby stood and executed a short bow.

"I'm honored to meet you," Aprii acknowledged, fascinated by Taby's catlike eyes.

"And, may I present Lieutenant Captain Zaddy Ulvex." Gayle gestured with her hand. "She's Lady Ulvex, a relative of Queen Karrina of Doränjay."

Zaddy bowed. "Your highness."

"I'm honored." Aprii nodded.

For a long moment, Gayle remained silent. "Since I'm a syntient, I must advise you that Zaddy is technically the highest military rank here, Aprii. Within the Alliance my rank is merely honorary. And, as a normal being, Zaddy is considered by many worlds as the highest ranked royal, too." Gayle turned toward Jon. "Syntients, guardians, and pscanners rarely are allowed to hold permanent positions of command, and they're rarely permitted to reign over subjects. Many normal people either fear or despise us. I *cannot* stress this point enough. This comes from advice we have received from an ancient, and to this day unseen and seldom heard from race we have long known as the *Elders*. We believe they're far older than any other nation or union we know of. We have good reasons to believe they're not from this galaxy—they may well not even be of this universe. I'll explain about them at a later date when the situation's not so pressing. However, allow me add that on my world royalty—synt or otherwise—may reign."

Gayle nodded to Taby as she slowly stood to attention.

Taby quickly stood. "Your highness, I am proud to introduce the Princess of the first twenty-four houses of Tyr'Horkin, the first thirty-eight houses of Suevechii, the first nine houses of Kan'ta-Sôrenjé, and..."

Gayle glared harshly at Taby.

Taby swallowed hard as she spied Gayle's glare. She then bowed towards Aprii and Hyran.

"Your highness, may I present the Grand Empress of Laria."

"The Grand...!" Jon's eyes grew wide as his jaw dropped.

"*Hush!*" Gayle cut him and others off as she kept a careful watch on the Terran guards' trigger fingers with her sensing. She turned and spoke sternly to the Alliance members, "By order of the Alliance High Council, I'll reiterate: 'Nothing said here is to leave here until such time as normal, friendly relations are set up between ourselves and the Terrans!'"

"Yes, ma'am," Jhade said timidly, stunned at learning who her matched syntient was. Her whole body trembled briefly as her headache grew in intensity.

Gayle *coldly* stared at the Terrans, especially Jon. "Aprii."

Aprii nodded. "Not a word will leave here." She knew Hyran and her guards would remain

silent. Later, she would speak personally with Jon and William to ensure their trust.

Zaddy broke the momentary silence. “Although syntients, guardians, and pscanners normally aren’t permitted to command, their sensing and advice are greatly appreciated. Many older syntys often carry great weight in governmental decisions and policies.”

“The same pretty much applies to most of the Alliance’s royalty,” added Gayle. “As individuals, they may hold public office provided they don’t abuse their royal connections. Likewise, there are numerous public service rules pertaining to connections to business, industry, and so on for all citizens.”

“We’ve have laws and courtesy regulations analogous to that,” Aprii said. “And though I do have considerable pull within the Council, I try to keep from meddling. I have found things have a tendency to run better when I keep my hands off of them.”

“Our Emperor Pro Tem, my great...” Gayle paused, stopping herself from adding the true number of greats, “grand nephew Tret enjoys delving into such matters. Personally, I grew quite bored of politics along with its pomp and circumstance a great many years ago.”

“So far I’ve been able to tolerate it.” *Strange*, Aprii thought, remembering how she was told syntys could appear young, showing no signs of their great age. *She doesn’t appear to be even forty-years-old. Maybe she’s in her early thirties.*

Hyran interrupted, “Before we become too involved in talk, would anyone care for refreshments or something to eat?”

Gayle glanced about. She knew her comrades wouldn’t be hungry, but she allowed them time to speak up. “No thanks, Hyran. Part of our standard operations is to use hunger suppressants before missions. That’s one less thing on the mind in an emergency. However, I would love to dine with the two of you at some time after the effects have worn off.” She didn’t add that syntients, guardians, and pscanners didn’t need as many suppressants as they had greater control over their unconscious bodily functions than most normal beings.

“We would be most honored when that time arrives.” Hyran turned to Jon and William. “Would either of you like something now?”

Jon indicated no with his head. “No, sir.”

“Maybe later, sir.” William signaled his need to speak privately with his left hand. He then laid his hand over his belly. “The flight over here got to me.”

They know each other, Gayle thought as she spied William’s signal to Hyran with her sensing. *And Jon must suspect it, although he doesn’t seem bothered by it.* She glanced at Rory for conformation.

A guard quietly and discreetly delivered a message to Aprii. She smiled as she read it. “I have an announcement...” She handed the message to Hyran.

Jon submissively bowed his head. “Your highness, I wish to submit my resignation from my governmental position.” His eyes darted between Aprii and Hyran.

“So noted.” Aprii’s eyebrows rose with her surprise. She then glanced at Gayle. “Our government has officially announced contact, and I stress, with *friendly*, intelligent life from other worlds... When it’s safe, we’ll announce your arrival here.”

Jon said, “Councilman Schülger won’t take kindly to his plans being dashed.” He glanced at Gayle. “He controls a fair number of votes in both our Congressional and Presidential Councils, and has strong ties to the military. He could initiate a rebellion of an apocalyptic scale.”

Aprii could not help but smile; the message said her old rival had been caught with secret and damaging Centralist files open on his desk. “Well, the good councilman seems to have had a long chat with a Sha’kal major.” Aprii nodded towards Myrie and Byron. “A very long one...”

William snapped his fingers at his disappointment. “Now, that’s something I would have loved to have seen.”

“The note said one of his security scanners caught the visit in full holographic fidelity.” Hyran

said.

“Is that holo recording in a safe place?” asked Gayle. “If your hard-liners discover its existence, it could cause them great embarrassment. They could grow even more stubborn in their stance.”

Hyran whispered something to Aprii. She briefly glared back at him. “Jon,” Aprii said in a stern voice as she turned her head towards him. “Would you see to the disposition of that film, please? Hyran wants you to bring it to him personally.” She was mystified as to why her fiancé would trust Jon. “And be sure it’s completely erased if you can’t guarantee its safe return.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled, producing a small, pen-like tube from his pocket. “If I have to, I’ll use this.” He rolled the tube between his fingers. “Its electromagnetic pulse will erase every volatile form of tape, film, or file within twenty meters. I shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.” He returned the eraser to his pocket.

“Just stay away from the royal archives with that device,” Hyran warned.

“I’ll remove it to a safe spot, sir.” Jon disappeared through the ornate doors.

Aprii waited a moment then glanced at Hyran. “I hope you’re right, dear. With his political ties, I sincerely hope he has switch sides.” She turned and smiled towards Gayle. “Now... about this Princess Fii...”

Bad Timing

“What the...?” Surprised, Gayle spun about on her heels. “Jon’s heading back towards us.”

Byron cocked his head and listened for Jon’s footsteps with his more acute hearing. “Several people are with him. Their boots sound like they’re from the Alliance.”

“Of course they are,” Myrie nudged him in his side. “There’s a Vishahntien accent I’m hearing.”

Myrie was a little annoyed. She had built her courage to ask Byron for a date, but she knew she had to wait for the proper time and place to ask him. As Byron was an unmarried—she was somewhat surprised by the fact, although it wasn’t unheard of for a Sha’kal man to reach his twenties not wedded—she would have to move fast as a Sha’kal man’s first wife had the greatest marital and family privileges. The fact there were well over ten females for every male Sha’kal added to the pressure. Many national services frowned upon fraternizing between officers and enlisted however in the military-based society of the Sha’kals it was tolerated as this was the basis from whence future Sha’kal service personnel would be born.

One point dashing her hopes was her family wasn’t among the highest cast of their society whereas Byron’s family was. Two points in her favor were her duties to Gayle as her syntient aide and the fact she was more than thrice Byron’s mass, and he was larger than most Sha’kal men.

Gayle spoke to Aprii. “There must be a Vishahntien syntient with him. I can’t sense anyone else with him.”

“I was informed you could not sense other syntients, guardians, or pscanners.”

“Not quite,” Gayle said, growing a little tired of explanations; her day had been full of them. “I can’t sense my fellow syntients, nor can I sense their matched guardians if they’re physically close to their syntients, however I can sense pscanners.” She gestured to Rory. “Of course, I’m easily able to sense Jhade as I am her matched syntient. Therefore, so long as she remains within my sensing range, no other syntient or guardian can sense her. Pscanners can’t sense syntients, guardians, or unmatched guardians.” She gestured to Taby. “Unfortunately, I can sense her because she has lost her matched syntient. Unless she acquires another matched syntient, which is quite rare, she’ll spend the rest of her life handicapped; exposed to the sensing of any syntient or guardian, friend or foe, while her own sensing becomes a piddling form of it former self.”

“Foe...?” Aprii said softly as a look of concern fell across her face.

“It’s a big galaxy out there,” said Gayle as the ornate chamber doors opened. She quickly recognized a dark-haired Dycinian who stood almost to her height. “Your Majesties, may I present

Syntient Commodore Thirty Kabis Daniel Ko'Rii of Dycinia. He's one of our eldest senior syntients."

Kabis wave off her words. He wore his usual simple black uniform. "Excuse me, your highness. I'm trying to locate General Francisco." He gazed about, studying the guards while taking in the chamber's beauty. "We've just learned that your world still possesses older, nuclear-type weapons and that the general has one of the nuclear keys..." His eyes caught Zaddy's fixed stare and he immediately joined her in a guardian trance.

"Ah, hell!" Gayle rushed across the floor to Kabis' side then turned toward Aprii. "We've got a matching trance on our hands."

"What's going on...?" Kay pushed her way into the room, freezing in turn.

Renee followed, but didn't fall into a matching trance.

"It's Klæe," Taby and Jhade said simultaneously. Taby added as they ran towards Kabis and Kay, "They say guardian trances often occur in groups."

"Right! Don't let anyone else..."

Before Gayle could stop them, Jon and Suki entered along with two women: a Dycinian second lieutenant and a B'Vevel lieutenant captain. Byron matched to the Dycinian, Didisophilus "Didi" Ko'Mar, Myrie matched to Suki, and lastly, one of the Terran guards matched to the B'Vevel.

Gayle, with fists clenched, shook her head at the sight while muttering exclamations in her mother's tongue under her breath. It wasn't a great time for so many guardian matching trances to occur. She slowly strolled over to Aprii and Hyran, keeping a watchful eye on the Terran guards. "You may well be witnessing the making of the first Terran guardian. Your guard is matching to Syntient Lieutenant Captain Tsay Hy'Kerrs, a B'Vevel."

"Our first guardian...?" Aprii's heart leapt as she intently watched the on going trances. As several guards went over to the side of their entranced comrade, she asked, "Will Sergeant Gibbs and the others be okay?"

"Once they've awoken from their trances the syntients may be dizzy for a few brief seconds. However, their new guardians will suffer headaches for the next several days." Gayle gestured to Jhade with her open hand. "That's what my new guardian is presently going through. Her injury and exhaustion have taken some toll on her, but most of her pain is due to our earlier matching trance. Normally, the brain doesn't feel pain, but with her trance, her brain is now rebuilding itself and it's rather painful."

"I don't feel that bad. Really!" The advent of new guardians had lifted Jhade's mood.

"That's good." Gayle's voice then resounded with urgency. "But as of now, our first priority is to find that nuclear key."

"I can find General Francisco." Jon started toward the door. "By the way." He patted a silent, immobilized Kabis on the shoulder. "He already has the film."

"Thank you, Jon," Gayle said as she watched him leave. She turned about. "Might we have some water, Aprii? When these trances end, they're likely to need some."

"Sure." Aprii motioned for William to fetch some. "Is there anything else you or your group may need?"

"No, but thanks." Gayle signaled Taby and Jhade. "We just need to be ready when their trances end. They'll be weak about their knees for a short while."

"I take it, this isn't a typical day?"

Gayle sighed heavily. A look of utter futility draped itself across her face. "Six guardian reactions in one day? Not even close, Aprii." She touched a pad on her left forearm. "Command, come in...."

Hostilities

Gayle took several slow, cautious steps toward the doors, sensing that something was wrong. *Oh, so very wrong.* Taby, although she had lost the better portion of her sensing ability, easily recognized the look of a syntient sensing imminent danger. Jshade still had yet to learn what her senses were telling her.

Sensing the same situation beyond the doors, Renee placed her helmet about her head and secured it snugly to its retaining collar.

“Gayle!” Rory was nearly overwhelmed by the emotions flooding into the depths of his mind. “There’s a hell of a lot of anger coming towards us.”

“What’s happening, Gayle?” Taby readied her weapon.

Jshade followed Taby’s lead while trying desperately to decipher what her senses told her.

Gayle donned her helmet and read a confirmation report from Alliance Command as it scrolled past her vision on the projection displays of her eye contacts. “There’s a group of Terrans headed this way, and they’re in a tactical assault posture.” She readied her weapon as she turned and spoke to Aprii and Hyran, “Are there any more friendly troops about?”

“A few.” Aprii waved her guards closer. “Most were withdrawn for your arrival.”

“Then might I suggest we find some cover fast. The troops I’m sensing will most likely attack soon.”

“Damn!” Aprii said angrily. “I was hoping this wouldn’t occur.” She gestured over her shoulder. “There are two exits in the rear.”

“I’ll wait for Jon. He’s racing back to us now.” Gayle followed Jon’s flight with her sensing and discovered his aged body was reaching the limits of its physical endurance.

Shots suddenly rang out beyond the chamber doors, their echoes reverberating throughout the maze of hallways.

William ran back with a pitcher of water with the two rear guards following close behind him.

“I heard shots! Is everyone okay?”

“The Centralists are...” Gayle violently twisted on her heels as she heard the reports from more shots. “Jon’s hit!”

As Gayle jogged over towards the chamber doors to open them, Jon opened them by bodily ramming himself against them. Half crumpled over as he flew inside the chamber; he toppled over on to the floor, his life’s blood pouring from a large wound in his side. Several of his ribs were sticking out from beneath his business suit, exposed and glistening in the air. A tiny piece of his rib bone bounced and skidded across the floor for a short distance and came to a sticky halt.

Gayle slid past Jon towards the door, closing it with the momentum stored in her own body. She turned an ornate handle and heard the door’s locks engage. She then sat her pulse rifle to a low setting and proceeded to weld the doors shut as Taby knelt to help Jon.

“Command, V’shan’nos here,” Gayle radioed. “We’re in a nasty situation. We’re currently under attack by Terran forces, most likely in league with the Earth Centralists. They may well have nuclear weapons at their disposal. Note that Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran are with us.”

“*Roger. We copy, field marshal,*” the disembodied spoke quickly. There was some indiscernible gibberish in the transmission’s background. “*We’re receiving numerous reports of conflicts arising planet side. We’re dispatching units of Vishahntien-Sha’kal shock troops and several platoons of light armor to your position. We’re undertaking normal steps to buffer the fleet against nuclear and thermonuclear bursts. Field Marshal, if you’re able, escort Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran to a secured position and await retrieval. Command out.*”

“I’ll send for the rest of my personal guard, Gayle.” Aprii pulled a communicator from her vest.

“They may have trouble getting in as this whole section has most likely been cut off by renegade troops.”

“The Captain of the Guards knows the palace’s secret passages better than I do. If anyone knows a way in—or out—then he would be the one.” Aprii held her slim micro-phone out before her. “Provided, of course, my communicator still works.” She wondered if it had been Alliance or the revolting troops who had been jamming her earlier.

“Okay, Aprii.” Gayle heard Kabis and Zaddy recovering from their trances. “Everyone, let’s keep an eye on them. Zaddy has fully faded from my sensing.” She glanced at Zaddy who had already dropped safely to her stomach and at Jshade who stood by Kabis in the event he should fall.

Jon looked up at Taby through blurry eyes and spoke in a low and very *unsteady* voice, “They... *have key... intend... its use...*”

“We know,” Taby said softly. “Right now you need to take it easy and rest.”

Gayle sensed over Jon’s wounds again as she finished her welding and found that he was very near death. “Once we’re out of here, we’ll fix you up as good as new.” She then whispered to Taby, “Prepare to nox.”

Taby nodded as she opened her palm to reveal a primed noxxation vial. “Aye.”

Gayle listened to the unrest outside. “We had better use that escape route while we have the chance, Aprii. Those troops may not wish to cause you or Hyran harm but there’s always the chance of stray shots.”

What remained of Taby’s guardian ability revealed to her that Jon’s condition had taken a *terminal* turn as his heart stopped. “I’m noxxing him, Gayle.” She placed the diffusion injector against the base of Jon’s skull. She pressed a dimple on the cartridge which allowed it to release its noxxing agents into Jon body. Although Jon’s basic cellular functions were still working, the drug terminated any remnants of his cellular activity as it quickly diffused throughout him, preserving him for later medical recovery.

“Is he okay?” Aprii watched Jon grow deathly limp.

“His heart stopped so Taby noxxed him.” Gayle gazed at Jon’s bloodied body. “That’s a treatment we use to place a person in chemical-stasis until medical help can treat and revive them.”

“What if you can’t *revive* him?” Hyran asked. He looked worried.

“Well... we’ve never tried noxxing a Terran before.” Gayle’s eyes saddened. “If it doesn’t work then he would be dead now.”

“Well,” Hyran said, nearly choking. He glanced at Aprii. “Then I’ve may have lost my best agent.”

“Yours...!” Aprii glared at him in disbelief. “I’ve been fighting against him for years.”

“That’s how well he buried himself within the Centralist’s movement, love. He nearly ran the movement for them.” A slight smile broke across his lips. The thought of Jon achievements helped him with the possible loss of the man.

The heavy ornate doors began to glow, dull red. Outside, renegade troops had brought industrial cutting torches to bear against the doors.

Aprii heard one of the voices shouting and the words sent a cold chill up her spine. “So much for not wanting to cause Hyran or myself harm!”

A flash of blinding light filled the upper half of the chamber’s spires. The high vaulted windows and skylights were ablaze in an intense light. High above the city, multiple thermonuclear warheads detonated, illuminating the darkest corners of the city while searing the surfaces of her spires and domes.

“Damn! High altitude nukes! They must be trying to hit our fleet,” Gayle said as she started ushering everyone toward the rear exit. “Carrying anyone who cannot walk. Quickly!”

Pistol

<Date: 4/13/28,541 Standard.>

Kabis scrutinized the group before him. They weren't as rag-tag as some groups he had worked and fought with in years past. Early in his life he fought as a partisan in a vicious Dycinian civil conflict. The war had cost his world dearly, but it also freed many Dycinian people residing out worlds from the regime of warlords who had oppressed them for millennia.

The group before him now was mostly comprised of Terran troops of unknown fighting abilities: clerical, supply, kitchen, and such. Fortunately, there were a few members of paramilitary police, some of the Terran's elite fighting corps, and a few of Aprii's dedicated guards.

They were all located in and about a collection of old security bunkers predating the palace above them. The main bunker itself held food stores, weapons and ammo, along with a multitude of miscellaneous items.

"Anyhow," Kabis continued his talk, "there are numerous Alliance and friendly Terran infantry squads presently making their way towards us. However... we cannot be certain when they may arrive." He took a Terran weapon from a table and cleared his throat. "As for our situation, those who have high-grade body armor are to defend the main bunker from the front trench works. I also want a few of you who are expert shots to take up sniping positions on top of the main and support bunkers. We'll divide the Alliance's pulse rifles between the trenches and the bunker firing ports." He turned his head right. "Gayle, how far along are the trenches?"

"They're nearly complete."

"Thanks." He turned his head back. "Taby, Jhade, use your rifles out front. Klæe, I realize you're still hazy from your trance, but see what you can do to help out there, too."

Klæe hesitantly glanced at Kay then nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Byron, Myrie, use your tube launchers to back up the trenches. Ee, position your troops behind the front line and provide covering fire for everyone. I also want your troops to plug any holes that may form in the front line." Kabis smiled. "Should anyone run out of charged magazines or hypervelocity kinetic rounds then you are to fall back on these older Terran weapons." He held the Terran 7.62-mm fully automatic kinetic-style weapon up above his head. "Let's break these weapons out and clean them up. Be what they may they are still very deadly." He bowed to the group. "Thanks and the best of luck to all of you. Carry on."

Aprii whispered as the troops began to file out, "I should have had these shelters restocked with more modern weapons, Hyran."

Having overheard her, Kabis glanced over the bunker's weapons storage to where she stood. "You couldn't have known. Besides, the situation could be reversed. The rebels could be in here wishing you *had* restocked it." He pointed to several Terrans. "At least your personal guards carry up-to-date weapons."

Hyran reached inside his jacket. "How about this weapon?" He asked, handing Kabis a small handgun.

Kabis smiled as he flipped the tiny weapon over in his palm. "Unless there's more to this weapon than what I see, I hope it doesn't come down to this." He dropped his smile. "Of course, great things can come in small packages."

"Well, this pistol is based on a new technology our researchers blundered upon. After Erik Warren disappeared, a few university students started investigating his theories." Hyran accepted the weapon back from Kabis. "It comes from Warren's spatial jump research. If you would mind standing clear for a moment... There's a palace support pillar behind that wall. I'll set the weapon to low power and that should allow the wall to stop the shot. The high setting makes for a fair deal of splash." Hyran paused briefly and then fired the weapon into the shelter's back wall. Sparks flared and molten stone splashed helter-skelter across several crates. Although there was no report from the weapon itself, a two-centimeter wide hole was seared a half meter deep into the masonry with a loud crack.

The sight and sound of vaporizing masonry grabbed everyone's attention.

“Damn!” Kabis glanced at Hyran then turned his attention back to the scorched hole in the wall. “What are the chances of the rebels having these weapons?” he asked, shocked at the small weapon’s potential.

“If they know about these weapons, and they probably do, they’ll go after them first.”

“And, unfortunately for us, this appears to hit nearly as hard as one of our heavy pulse rifles. I’m wondering if it might be some sort of augmented dimensional pulsed-beam weapon, or possibly a hyper-gravitational one, like our researchers have been toying with for some time now. They have made some great strides since Lord Warren helped them.” Kabis waved for Taby to join them. He scowled. “I would hate to see what all damage a full sized rifle based on this new technology could do!”

“Plenty, but they’re highly unstable. They tend to blow up causing horrible damage to anything and anyone near.”

Taby briskly stepped over. “Do you think it might be related to a Spacer void sword?”

“I doubt it, Tab. The effects differ too much. This pistol doesn’t cut nearly as clean.” He pointed to her web gear. “Empty your mess kit, please.”

She complied and emptied the contents of her kit onto the top of a crate.

Kabis pointed to the kit. “Hyran, this container is made from the same material used in our armor, and though it’s thinner, it should allow us see the effects of your weapon on our armor.” Kabis motioned toward a shelf off to the right of the freshly burned hole. “Place it there, Tab.”

Taby placed the kit on a small shelf. “Ready.”

“I’ve heard something mentioned about a void sword. Just what is it?” Hyran inquired.

“Have you been informed about the Spacers?”

“Briefly. I was told that they were very ancient people. They disappeared from our galaxy a long time ago for some unknown reason.”

“Well, the technology behind their void swords has defeated our attempts at deciphering it for millennia on end.” He demonstrated with his hands as he spoke. “Think of a void sword as thin black line, about a meter or more in length that cuts through anything except another sword’s blade.” Kabis aimed the pistol as Taby stepped out of the way. “This should prove interesting—or foreboding.” He depressed the weapon’s trigger.

Everyone swallowed hard as the kit was skewered.

“There was no muzzle flash.” Taby stepped over and picked up the remains of her kit. She then handed them over to Kabis.

“Yes. In the future its damage may well exceed what one of our pulse rifles can inflict.” Kabis cautiously ran his forefinger about the exit hole, thinking as he did so. “And this was set to low power. I hope they don’t have any of these weapons they can use against us.” He turned to Hyran, glanced at the weapon, and handed it over to him. “Keep it. Use it to protect Aprii and yourself.”

Aprii frowned. “I would much rather fight, Kabis.”

“I’m thinking about your world’s future. We can’t have you dead.”

Gayle added, “And that also applies to you, too, Hyran.” She waved for Suki to come over. “This is a void sword.”

Suki activated her sword and held it so its blade was a half meter from Kabis who then raised and dropped Taby’s mess kit onto the blade. The kit fell to the ground, neatly and cleanly sliced in half by the blade.

Crates

Gayle browsed through the contents of the bunker, judging what might or might not prove useful to their plight. “Check out that box, Myrie.”

Myrie walked over to the box Gayle indicated. “It’s too marred for my scanner to translate.”

Myrie extended the center blade of her three serrated battle claws from her right glove and used it to pry open the lid. She then used the hook on the back of the claw to gently lift out one piece of the box's contents. "They appear to be some sort of protective clothing."

"They're bullet resistant vests," said Hyran. "They're no guarantee against our older weapons let alone our modern ones." He took out a vest. "Fletchets and high powered rounds will pass right through them, although they may afford protection against shrapnel for those who don't have any armor to start with." He checked the vest's size then handed it to Aprii. "Better put this on, dear."

"Company!" Gayle looked up from another box. "They're Terran."

Kabis looked about. "That trance still has my sensing screwed up. We're going to have to depend on you and Renee for our sensing."

"Jhade might be able to assist, too," Gayle said. "She appears to be a fast learner. She's already differentiating distances."

Aprii listened to a voice on her communicator. "It's okay, it's Captain Vic Provolst," she cheerfully announced. "He's bringing in twenty-one elite guards along with several other assorted soldiers and civilians. He reports they have made several attempts at stalling the rebels but haven't had much luck."

"I see trouble," Kabis said. "Do they know about us, Aprii?"

Aprii's eyes narrowed as she thought about her recent conversations with the Captain of the Queen's Guards. Her eyes widened. "No..."

"Then you had better let him know what to expect when he arrives." Kabis glanced outside the bunker, noting how the palace's labyrinth structure had been built around the shelter and other older buildings to form a large subterranean chamber. "In the meanwhile, we need to collapse some of these partition walls to open up our firing lanes. We can also add their debris to our defensive works."

"That might not be practical, Kabis," said Hyran. "These partitions may look light but they're good and solid. They're made of a few millimeters of veralight laminate. The panels are difficult to cut and we would have to tear out half the chambers down here to form a decent debris pile from them." Hyran remembered the historic tours of the palace underworld he had taken as a child. "When our forbearers rebuilt the old city after the last war, they razed most of it to construct the first generation of protective domes. They did, however, leave a few structures, such as this bunker. When the palace was built, this rather large basement was devised for city fallout shelters and storage. There was even a plan for public housing to be built down here." He gestured upwards towards the high vaulted ceiling above the bunker. "However, when the housing was finally constructed it was built outward into new domes and countryside."

Kabis pointed out through the door and above the partitions to the side of one of the massive columns helping to support the structure above them. "Then the domes are supported by the columns and footings I've seen down here?"

"And the palace, and everything else, too. Each base is over two hundred meters across. They're made of steel, concrete, and integrated with laminated meta-plastic alloys."

Kabis closed his eyes. "Yes, they're quite dense. I can tell that by the way they obscure my sensing." He used the columns' interference with his sensing to form a mental map of the area.

"Your sensing ability is able to tell you what things are made of?" Hyran asked while trying a vest on for fit.

"No. In fact, matter infringes upon my sensing so that life-forms become even less distinct than normal. The greater the mass density between myself and what I'm sensing, the more my sensing is blocked. What I'm sensing in order to form a mental map of this place are the surrounding microbes and the way the massive pillars and other things obscure them." He gestured upwards. "In interstellar space, I'm able to easily sense outward over several hundred million kilometers. Although that's from a tiny ship as its mass, along with my own, are hindrances." He closed his eyes to concentrate on a distant sensing. "Aprii's guards are nearly here."

"I had better intercept them." He started for the exit. "I'll bring Captain Provolst in first. I'll take a few guards with me... Just in case."

"Okay. In the meantime I'll contact the Alliance squads out there. We don't need them bumping into each other unexpectedly." Kabis stepped over to join Kay.

Hyran motioned for William to follow him. "Stay alert, William. Although I'm quite confident of our elite troops' loyalty there's always the possibility of dissension within their ranks or within other troops."

Preparations

From her foxhole, Klæe glanced over her shoulders back at the shelter. "Now, if we just had some inertialyzers to reinforce its walls with," she thought out loud, not noticing a Terran guard, Calvert, studying her face. The velvet-like, yellowish hair of her face had stoked his curiosity.

"Who doesn't," Taby added as she stared at the far left wall where the rebels were expected to break through. "Hell, Klæe. With thousands of rebels and a fair number of tanks bearing down upon us and all you're wishing for are inertialyzers. Girl, have I got a list for you!"

Calvert shook off his stare and asked, "What's this inertia... whatever?"

Taby glanced at him. "It's a devise used to dampen an object's momentum. For instance, it would absorb most, if not all, of the energy from a pulse rifle shot."

"You wouldn't happen to carry these inertialyzers in your suits, would you?"

Klæe's face brightened at the thought. "Oh, how I wish. No doubt some lab techs are working on miniaturizing it cheaply, but for now having inertial units in personal armor is a dream."

Calvert glanced upwards, starry-eyed. "I've always dreamed of seeing other worlds."

"Watch it; you might get your wish one day." Taby chuckled. "You'll find that space travel can be very boring. With the exceptions for combat and emergencies, days—sometimes weeks—are spent in transit between a planet and a jumping-off point for spatial jumps. Although there is a new jump drive out that allows us to jump from and to a high planetary orbit."

"Jumps...? You mean..." He held his hands out, closed except for his right forefinger. He then pulled his right finger down while extending his left forefinger. "Disappear from this solar system and reappearing in another...?"

"Something similar to that," Klæe said as she tried out her new found sensing ability. "Now, that I'm a guardian, I'll have to endure intense pain during spatial jumps, unlike when I was a normal being."

"They're painful?" Calvert asked, concerned.

"Damn painful!" Taby gritted her teeth at her own memories of spatial jumps. "Though it pretty much only affects syntns. Normal people won't feel much unless the jumps are executed fairly close near a large gravity source, such as a planet. Situations that are exceptionally painful for syntns are low orbital jumps where a ship materializes within the upper reaches of a planet's atmosphere. When a jump is engaged or exited that close, normal people are doubled over in pain while syntns are often seriously injured... or even killed."

Gayle bounded across the basement, kicking dust up in her wake. She jumped down in the trench. "Okay. Here's the plan we have in the works," she said as she knelt down on the bottom of the trench. "The rebels are using small groups to hide their true line of attack by generating noise and communications chatter from several directions. Fortunately, they don't fully realize we can sense their movements, especially that of their main force." Gayle looked at the Terrans in the ditch with Taby and Klæe. "What we have planned is to surprise their first attacking wave. We're making stun and fragmentation mines from a cache of plastic explosives we found. Your group has been detailed to prepare positions for the stun bombs." She spoke to a Terran officer, "Lieutenant, you probably have well under half hour. Can your group quietly advance forwards through three or four partitions and

ready those positions?”

“We’ll have trouble with those walls, ma’am,” said First Lieutenant Kathy Akbar. “Veralight’s hard stuff to cut.”

“We’ll handle that job again. We took the first two layers out earlier with void swords.” She glanced at Taby. “I want the next line of standing partitions in front of the trenches dropped so they won’t be hurled back at us by any back blast. That will also serve to expand our fields of fire.”

“Yes, ma’am, Kathy said. “Just point out where and how many traps.”

“Okay.” Gayle pointed along the corridor to their right. “Tab, Suki’s busy, but others will be along in a moment with void swords, so I want you to start cutting a small path through the outer partitions so we can start placing the traps. By then Didi and Renee should be here to help drop the front partition. And, keep track of your energy usage, too,” she added as Taby walked to her left with her pulse rifle draped over her shoulder.

Taby stopped and turned about. “No problem.” She lifted the handle end of a void sword from her right thigh pocket.

“I didn’t know you had one of those.”

Taby shrugged her shoulders. “You never asked.” She gestured towards the partitions. “I’ll cut some paths out several layers for the mines to be laid and then I’ll come back to help the others clear the inner partition. No doubt some will use my cuts as a way of working their way in to us. We’ll need to mine them, too.”

“Good.” Gayle turned and addressed the others as Taby ran out to continue on with her assignment. “We’ll need at least two defensive lines of mines: an outer ring consisting of stun bombs and one or two inner rings of fragmentation bombs made with rocks and debris. Just make damn sure they’ll disperse their shrapnel out and away from us. That’s why I want this last set of partitions dropped, especially the closer section to our right. Removing them will add many meters of blast buffer and open our fields of fire. If we can delay the rebels until Alliance or friendly Terran troops arrive, then we might avoid a nasty fire-fight. Unfortunately, our relief groups have to fight their way in to reach us and other groups to Princess Aprii.” She pointed behind to the bunker. “Remember, above all else, we’re to center our defensive posture on Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran.”

Gayle read off data as it was displayed on her contacts. “Here’s an update on the situation outside: the Centralists have attempted revolts in most major cities. Almost all of these revolts have been squashed or otherwise contained, except, that is, here at New World City where most of your world’s government resides and where they can likely inflict the most damage.”

In the distance, molten blobs of metal and ceramic debris engulfed Taby’s armor as her void sword cut into the next line of partitions.

“We have wire and detonators.” Gayle looked over the group. “Who here knows something about Terran explosives?”

A tall sergeant stood. “I’ve been trained in demolitions, ma’am. I’m Staff Sergeant Sam Krushner.”

“Okay, sergeant. Stay here with me.” Gayle watched as Taby stepped through the hole she had made in the wall for the passage. Taby ran forwards to the next partition to continue the passage.

Gayle glanced over at Kathy. “Taby has a hole through the first wall, lieutenant. Have your troops follow her and ready the positions for laying the inner ring of fragmentation charges.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kathy turned to her troops. “Third squad will remain here and stay alert. First and second squads follow me.” She withdrew her entrenching tool from her kit as she started jogging over towards the passage Taby made. Her selected squads quickly followed her.

Didi and Renee approached, their swords drawn but not activated. Gayle turned and ordered, “Cleared those partitions.”

“Right away,” Didi said. She glanced at Renee. “Start at the far left and I’ll take the far right. We’ll work our way in towards Taby’s opening.”

“Aye, ma’am.” Renee began the long jog to her left as Didi took off towards the right.

Gayle noticed the bored, listless faces of the Terran sitting around and feeling useless. “To play it safe, I want several Terrans to stay with each member of the Alliance as they cut down the partitions. There’s no telling when an attack may start, so we need to be ready.”

Klae slung her pulse rifle across her shoulder as Kay joined her. “Orders?”

Gayle pointed towards the ground. “Remain here and cover this trench. It protects the main bunker.”

“Roger.” Klae moved alongside Kay as Gayle stepped off to the side to make a quick inspection of the trench works with Sam in tow.

Kay asked, “How do you feel, Klae?”

“I’m fine. I don’t know what that aspirin was the Terran doctor gave me, but it actually helped my headache a good deal, although it still feels like I’ve got a vice clamped about my head.

“It sounds like this aspirin is helping your transition. We’ll have to check into this aspirin drug later for further synt use.” Kay stared at a partition sections as it was felled by Taby. “I wonder if it might be a help in spatial jumps.”

“Maybe. I know that Jshade said she’s been able to concentrate better since she took her aspirin.” Klae waved for an eager Calvert to join them.

Kay leaned against the side of the trench. “The people of Terra may have already found their first item to export.”

“Export...?” asked Calvert as he joined up with them, confused as to what they had been discussing.

Time’s Up

Gayle sensed the approach of an old friend as she checked the charge and kinetic pellets remaining in her pulse rifle. “A few of those Terran and Alliance squads are nearly here, Kathy. Fortunately they have three syntients, two guardians, and two pscanners with them, though one of the guardians is currently unmatched.” She activated her communicator. “Kabis, some of those squads are almost here and Séla’s with them.”

“*Séla...! Roger that,*” said Kabis, pleasantly surprised. The sound of crates being moved about could be heard in the background of his reply. “*Damn if that trance hasn’t screwed up my sensing... Would you mind updating them when they arrive. I’ll say hello to Séla later.*”

“Roger.” She sensed the Centralists forming a three pronged assault posture as they continued to march small groups about in an attempt to deceive and confuse. “They’re preparing an assault...”

“*I can’t miss something that big, Gayle. Good luck. Out.*”

Gayle glanced at Kathy. “What the hell is that rumble I’m hearing?”

Kathy lifted her head above the trench works to listen. “They’re Mark 84 heavy assault tanks.” She cringed and dropped back behind their cover.

“Tanks...? Container like?”

Gayle’s earpiece mistranslated.

“Negative. They’re armored combat vehicles.” She gestured about them. “The weapon it mounts won’t have the slightest trouble punching through these defenses. Nor, will it take long for it to destroy the bunkers.”

“Just what we need...” Gayle suddenly smiled at the excuse her computer provided. It had needed to question the Alliance fleet’s main computer which in turn had checked with a much slower Terran computer. “I’ve got a proper translation now. Military terms are not one of the translation words or phrases to be missed.” She waved for Myrie to join her. “Maybe we can take some of their tanks out. We have launchers that should stop them.”

Myrie hopped into the trench and crouched next to Gayle. Several surprised Terrans went out of

their way to provide her the extra room she needed.

“Myrie, I want you and Byron to keep an eye out for armored assault vehicles. Position yourself to our left and have Byron take the right.” Gayle spoke into her communicator. “Ee, we have heavies headed our way.”

“Roger, field marshal. We have twelve launchers at the ready.”

“Thanks. Out.” Gayle glanced at Kathy.

“How many are we facing?”

“I not sure.” Gayle faintly sensed groups of three soldiers moving together at a pace of fifteen kilometers per hour. “A good dozen or more.” She abruptly frowned as more tanks moved out. “Make that three dozen plus!”

Kathy listened for a few seconds. “Sounds like a company’s worth. Better keep an eye out for their infantry and fire support vehicles.”

“I believe they’re trailing the tanks.”

“Right.” Myrie darted off and as she made it to Byron’s side to pass on their orders as the peace was abruptly broken.

Loud, sonic cracks reverberated throughout the basement. Deadly shrapnel flew as kinetic rounds slammed into the shelter. A second salvo, this time of shaped charges, splashed across the face of the shelter. Fingers of molten steel and rock stretched out across the trench works as flames and sparks rained down upon the defenders.

Somehow, through the hell storm of fire and death, Myrie safely dashed back to her position as Byron readied and aimed his launcher.

Kathy suddenly winced as a searing pain ripped through her left leg. A shard of near molten steel had slashed and burned its way through her thigh.

Rebel troops poured down shattered paths cut through the walls by the salvos. Elsewhere, other walls were blown by satchel charges and guided aerial torpedoes. The rebel tanks shifted from their firing positions by several tens of meters off to one side or the other, then fired off a third salvo of kinetic rounds through more of the untouched partitions.

“Ready the charges, Sam!” Gayle then turned and looked at the gaping hole in Kathy’s leg. “Hold still...! What I’m about to do may burn some.” Gayle pulled out a small canister from her armor, popped off its protective cap, and placed its nozzle into the wound in Kathy’s leg. Pinkish-colored foam spewed from the can into Kathy’s entrance wound, forcing congealed blood and shredded flesh from the exit hole behind her thigh.

“That doesn’t feel that... Damn...!” Kathy nearly passed out from the blinding flash pain as the foam’s medicine began to take effect. Then, as suddenly as it had burned her, the pain in her leg disappeared. She found she had an odd, non lack of feeling in and about the wound in her leg. Where the foam was, she had a limited sense of feeling. “Damn that hurt! What was that?”

“It’s called flesh-foam. Think of it as a fancy internal bandage.” Gayle heard the soft *thump* of Byron’s launcher firing followed by the loud report of a rebel tank being torn asunder by its own exploding ammunition. Grimacing as she sensed the tank’s crew burned alive inside the vehicle she said, “One down!”

A salvo of high explosive rounds splintered the outer layer of the shelter’s facade killing two of Aprii’s guards. Myrie’s launcher decreased the rebel tanks by one while Kay quickly noxxed the two dead Terrans.

Several of the assaulting tanks exposed themselves through the shattered partitions and Ee’s troops launched a deadly salvo of retaliation, decimating eight of the rebel vehicles.

Sparks from impacts, like those from Hyran’s weapon, splashed across the face of the defensive stronghold, cutting through stone, metal, and flesh alike.

“Keep your heads down! Armor is useless against that fire!” Gayle warned. She spoke on her communicator, “Kabis, the rebels have those new weapons. How’s your situation?”

"We're getting some horrendous splintering off the walls. Better take those tanks out damn quick!" he replied as dust and gravel kicked up beside him.

"Roger, about a dozen are down." Gayle heard a loud thump from an impact in the distance followed by the clatter of a tank turret tumbling the length of a corridor. "Tally another. Myrie just tagged another." She raised her hand, preparing to signal Sam to detonate the stun bombs as she sensed the rebel troops coming into range.

Byron hit his third rebel tank as one of the new weapons cut into his pelvis. "Byron's hit, Gayle!" Didi shouted as she low-crawled from her trench, exposing herself to enemy fire. "I'm going to him."

Gayle turned to Kathy. "They're a matched syntient-guardian pair. As long as he's in the vicinity of her, she's the only syntient who can sense and treat his wounds. How's your leg?"

"Fine. As near as I can tell," Kathy said as a loud explosion erupted. "I hope that was a rebel tank."

"It was." Gayle then said in a cold tone, "I sensed its crew die."

Kathy grimaced at the aspect of sensing the death of another. *That must be one of the negative aspects to being a syntient*, she thought. To her amazement, she found she could not only wiggle her toes, but could move her entire leg—not fully—but movement none the less. "Hey! I can move my leg."

"Sure. Although, flesh-foam cannot fully replace muscle tissue, but it does come close." Gayle glanced at Sam and dropped her hand. "Now!"

Sam squeezed the firing trigger and *nothing* happened. "Damn! Misfire!" he said through clenched teeth. He traced along the detonating wire with his eyes. "The line's been hit." He jerked the dead wires loose from the trigger and connected a second set of wire leads. "I wired backup." He recharged the system then depressed the firing switch.

The earth and chambers shook as the remaining partitions in the area, many bodies, and two armored personal carriers were shattered. Pain, death, dust, and debris ripped through the rebel ranks.

"Hot damn!" Sam shouted, beaming at his handy work. He suddenly stopped as it donned upon him that some of the dead and wounded might have been his friends. He said a quick prayer asking for forgiveness before continuing on with his duties.

Kathy covered her self as dust and debris fell on her from the basement's high vaulted ceiling. "Is everyone all right?"

"Sh... Quiet." Gayle held her hand up to hush everyone as she scanned about with her sensing. "A few rebels are retreating but most were stunned by the blast." She rolled herself over as a wave of dust washed over the trenches. "Toss me a stun grenade, Jhade."

"Coming." Jhade removed a grenade from the gear of a noxxed guard, saving her own, and pitched the guard's to Gayle.

"Heads down." Gayle lobbed the grenade behind the partially shattered shards of a partition and debris twenty meters in front of the trenches. A rebel soldier quickly headed back for his lines, only to fall as the blast stole his consciousness. "Lay some suppressing fire about a hundred meters to our right by that column footing. I want to keep their heads down."

The rebel tanks temporarily halted their fire as their comrades retreated back through their lines of fire.

"More Terran and Alliance squads are fighting through to join us." Gayle smiled, elated at their arrival. "I'm also just able to sense a large number of our shock troops approaching from behind the rebels. Judging from their relative speed and body positions, they're in heavy assault tanks and personnel carriers."

Kathy removed her helmet. "I don't hear a thing, Gayle."

"Our tanks have gravitonic drives... virtually silent. They don't carry the noise of pounding metal tracks. Our tanks also have a high degree of sentiency, so only one in five actually carry an

armored crewman who acts as their commander. There is probably a fair number of supporting combat robots following our tank, too.” Gayle glanced about their position. “Okay, I want half of us keep an eye on the rebels while the rest tend to our wounded.” She crawled to the end of the trench where she could see Didi. “How’s Byron?”

Didi tossed an empty canister of flesh-foam away. “Embarrassed, but he’ll live.”

Byron responded with a deep, low growl.

“Don’t feel embarrassed.” Didi patted Byron on the shoulder. She joked, “But night games are definitely off your agenda for the next week. If that would have hit a little to your left, you would have been waiting on forced cloning or regenerative therapy to speed up your guardian regenerative abilities.”

“Damn!” The reality of his guardianhood donned on him. “I forgot about synt regeneration.” Byron’s face grew tense with the realization that he would probably never father children. Not from of his ill placed wound, but from his guardianhood. He suddenly felt depressed.

Gayle cautiously raised her head above her foxhole. Beyond, she saw the stunned, wounded, and dead bodies of nearly two hundred rebels, including several whom carried the new hyper-weapons. She said as Vic, the Queen’s Guard’s captain, crawled into the trench further down along the line. “They’ve left some of those new weapons behind.” She waved her hand to get the other’s attention. “Let’s be quick and collect those newer weapons.” She sensed then turned about and grimaced at the grisly sight of the Terran and Alliance squads as they arrived. From their decreased numbers, wounds, and battle damage it was apparent that they had a most difficult time fighting their way in.

Two Vishahntiens and a Lakiikan dropped into the trench. Séla, hopped in next to Kathy. At over four hundred kilograms, Séla had trouble squeezing in next to Kathy. A Kly syntient dropped into separate foxhole to answer a call from Kabis.

“Hard day, Gayle?” Séla twisted her body about to slip deeper into the trench.

“We’ve both seen worst.” Gayle sighed. “Séla, this is Lieutenant Kathy Akbar,” she pointed thirty meters to her left, “That’s Vic, captain of the Queen’s Guards.” She glanced back at Kathy as she gestured to Séla. “And this is my friend, Guardian Field Marshal Forty-two Séla Hêrsue d’Môr. Séla’s an El’Lygressher. That’s a nation aligned to the Alliance through the Rhymer Federation.”

“Field Marshal Forty-two...?” Kathy tried to grasp the Alliance rank it might represent.

Séla waved Kathy off. “Think nothing of it.” She then motioned to the taller Vishahntien. “This is Syntient First Lieutenant Zuza Sue Loew-Sing and her guardian, Major Aalar Ro’Farquikay. Behind them is Syntient Third Lieutenant Myra La Gultiana.”

Zuza held out a small handle-like rod. “I carry a void sword.”

“Good. We’ll need it, sooner or later.” Gayle gestured passed Kathy to Jade. “And she’s my new guardian, Corporal Jade Ar’Quekã.”

“A Maukator? I didn’t realize they had guardians.”

“There’s always a first.”

“I know how that feels.” Séla turned towards Jade. “I hope you’re feeling better.”

“I’m much better now. Thank you.” Jade wondered where Séla’s matched syntient was. “Did you become separated from your match?”

“Hell, I haven’t had a matched syntient for...” She thought for a second. “Nigh on two thousand years.” Séla’s laugh echoed out from her large helmet. Her tone grew serious as she said, “I’ve managed to lose seven syntients in my life.”

The Terrans’ jaws fell slack as they listened to her

A thousand years of life was rarity for even the best syntient or guardian, but to have had seven matched syntients was a near impossibility. As for the Terrans, to have lived for a span of a thousand years was unthinkable.

With fear in her eyes, reaching deep into her soul, Jade nervously asked, “Gayle, how many guardians have you had?”

“You’re my third, Jshade.”

“The others?”

Gayle slowly shook her head from side to side then turned to Séla. “Who’s the Kly syntient? I can’t make out his face”

“That’s Syntient General Urs Ka’Zanie. Once the fighting’s over, he’s to remain behind as the Alliance’s liaison officer for synt affairs.”

“I was wondering who would get tapped for that job.” Gayle looked up as Urs dropped into their trench. “Urs, long time no see.”

“Gayle.” Urs sat as far down in the trench as he could and leaned against his weapon. “I take it they have you in the role of a diplomat again?”

“Same old story...” She noticed Kathy’s fixed stare. “Urs, keep your eyes on me.”

He laughed. “You’re a handsome woman, but not...”

“No!” She shouted as he started to turn his head about. “Keep looking at me, you’re gaining a guardian.” She turned her radio on as his eyes widened and the light sand colored portion of the tiger stripe pattern on his face paled as he sensed Kathy’s mental change. “I want a couple of volunteers to help the general and the lieutenant back to the bunker so they can finish their trance in safety.”

Blinded

A sea of thick, boiling, choking, black smoke clung to the high ceiling, slowly descending as the rebel tanks continued to burn. The smell of burnt flesh along with that of vomit and feces saturated the fetid air.

“Stay alert, Cal,” said Klæe as she knelt by him. “We’re to gather up rebel weapons, not play doctor.”

“Uh...?” Calvert ran his hand over the flesh-foam patch on his arm, comparing the feel and texture of the patch to his own skin surrounding the spot where he had received a nasty grazing wound. “How are they going to replace this patch? It appears to have bonded itself to my skin.”

“They don’t normally replace a patch as small as yours, so don’t pick at it. Just leave it in place and it’ll provide a growth matrix for your real nerves, blood vessels, and muscles. Just remember that doesn’t mean you can go without a medic’s or doctor’s care.” Klæe adjusted her helmet’s magnifiers so she could watch the action unfold across the palace basement. “Our shock troops are attempting to maneuver the rebels away from our position. If we’re lucky the rebellious troops will wise up and lay their arms down.” She rolled out over the top of their foxhole.

Calvert glanced back at some excitement going on where Gayle was and then he jumped out of the trench to aid Klæe in collecting the rebel weapons. “I wouldn’t count on it. Religious fervor can drive soldiers to extremes. They may become more willing than ever to die for their cause.”

She frowned. “I said ‘hopefully.’ I seriously doubt if we’ll be that lucky.” She drew herself up behind a pile of rubble then cautiously took a quick peek around the debris. “These rebels seem to be dead.” She motioned to several bodies lying twenty meters away. “Most of them are unconscious—hopefully for a good while.”

“Can you be certain?”

“No,” she said hesitantly, shaking her head. “I’m not that sure of anything I’m sensing, yet. I’m still learning.” She brought several noxxation vials out of her pocket for use. “But I can sense which ones are dead.”

“You lead. I’ll follow,” he half joked as she headed for first dead rebel. “There’s one of those new weapons over there, however it appears damaged.”

She glanced at the smashed weapon. “Grab it. Its parts may prove useful.”

He grabbed the weapon and extracted its magazine and was surprised to find it appeared almost identical to the Alliance’s.

“Think of it as a fancy battery,” she said as Terran privates Missy Akakkion and Sal Tallovich quickly low crawled over next to them.

Missy spoke to Klæe, “Field Marshal V’shan’nos wants the two of us to stick with you, sergeant.” She opened her visor and favored Calvert with a large, friendly smile. “Sal and me are here to help the two of you secure prisoners.” She held out a large bag of twist ties for Klæe to see.

“Good.” Klæe looked over her new helpers. “Secure the unconscious rebels.”

“Are you still going on that recreational trip I overheard you talking about, Cal?” Missy flashed her eyes at him again.

“I’m thinking hard about it, and after today I think I’ll need all the rest I can get.” Calvert grew a bit nervous with Missy’s arrival.

“I’m thinking about taking one, too.”

“Anyhow,” Sal said, ignoring Calvert and Missy. “In which direction are you heading, sarge?”

“Over there.” Klæe pointed to several bodies piled against a support column and then crawled over to a couple of dead rebels who had died clutching each other. “I believe our stun bombs caused more damage than we had planned for.” She pulled several more nox vials out for use.

Sal stared at Klæe. “Why should you concern yourself with these rebels?” Although his facial shield hid his expression, his voice reverberated with his skepticism.

She stared back into the black lens of his visor. “They might be our enemies today, but tomorrow... Well who knows?” She held one of the noxation vials up. “Remove their helmets so I can nox them and then collect their weapons and gear.”

“Yes, sergeant...”

Shots rang out from across the basement and Klæe’s world spun about. She found herself face-down and hard against the ground. A loud ringing sounded in her head while all of her senses felt dull and dampened. Kinetic rounds from a machine gun had slammed into the back and right side of her helmet.

“What...? What’s happening...?” Reality dimmed and through blurred and dimming vision she saw Calvert lying next to Missy and Sal crumpled next to her on the ground. Sal was alive but out cold from where a round had glanced off of his helmet. Missy was in deeper trouble. “Cal! Help her!”

Off in the distance a new group of rebel tanks proceeded to fire at will as rebel troops waited for the bunker’s defenses to soften up.

Calvert lay in Missy’s pooling blood. As he raised his hand up before his face and her blood ran down his forearm and dripped onto her lifeless body. “Damn them!” He anger grew as he glared back towards the rebels’ position. He pulled Missy behind a dirt pile, nearly losing his rifle in his haste as Klæe used her sensing to crawl blindly towards them.

“I’ll get them, Calvert!” Taby shouted as she rushed to help. “Are you all right, Klæe?”

“No! I can’t see... My head’s ringing like a bell.” She tried to reach around to feel the back of her helmet but found her strength failing.

“Don’t move, Klæe!” Taby radioed as she removed Missy’s helmet, “Synt down! Kay, Klæe has a head wound.”

“I’m already on the way,” Kay radioed back, having sensed her guardian’s condition. “Her skull’s fractured, so see she doesn’t move about.”

“Roger.” Taby felt the air sear just above her as she placed a noxation injector against the base of Missy’s skull. “She’ll be okay once we get her out of here, Cal.”

Calvert glanced at Taby with a determined stare and took a deep breath. “Fine. I’m going to finish collecting weapons.”

“Don’t leave yet; I’ll need help in getting them back to the trenches.” Taby glanced at the three large tears in Klæe’s helmet. “Once the rebels finish regrouping, their fire won’t be so haphazard.” She watched as Myrie’s and two of Ee’s trooper’s launchers spoke, sending a high explosive rounds into a group of rebels.

Kay's inexperience in ground combat showed in her rather high low crawl as she approached with Jhade and two Terran guards. "How do you feel, Klac?"

"I can't see," Klac said, slowly waving her hand before herself.

"Keep your neck straight!" Kay warned as she pulled out an inflatable neck brace. "You have some fractured vertebrae, so let's not the doctors' job any harder."

"Lieutenant." Sergeant Kala Caldecott pointed back towards the shelter as she spoke to Taby. "They would still like those hyper-weapons. This day is far from over."

"Calvert, go with her. We'll handle of this."

"Yes, ma'am," Calvert agreed, now quite intent on revenge. "Do you want us to nox the rebels?"

"If it can be done without exposing yourself. Yes." Taby wiped the dust from her visor. "Jhade, go with them and handle the noxing, and I'll join you in a few minutes." She pointed to Sal. "He has a concussion, so be careful as you drag him back to the shelter, Delia."

"Yes, ma'am," she said as she watching Jhade, Kala, and Calvert ventured off.

Taby pulled Missy's arm about her shoulder.

"*Attention everyone,*" Kabis radioed urgently as he dropped into the bunker from an overhead observation portal. "*The rebels are on the move again!*"

In a cloud of dust, Kay watched the observatory walls collapsed under the impact of rebel kinetic shells, sending a shower of debris down inside the bunker and onto Kabis and those around him. Stunned Kay asked, "Are you all right, dear?"

Kabis coughed as he clear of the worst of the dust from his face. "*Fine.*" He watched as Kay and the others made it to the approach to the bunker's entrance.

Suddenly, Renee staggered back from her firing port and fell back against a row of crates. She trembled as she stared off into the distance. Gagging and coughing, she slipped down to the floor. Blood was flowing from underneath her armored jacket, across the crotch of her pants, and dripped on the floor between her thighs.

"Renee!" Kay dashed quickly to her friend's side. She unzipped and opened Renee's armored vest, then tore the front of her uniform jacket apart. "Damn!" There, a centimeter above Renee's bra and just left of center on her chest, Kay saw a small hole allowing precious blood to escape with each beat of Renee's heart. "Medic! Synt down!" She glanced down and saw where Renee's chest was thoroughly soaked with blood. Too much blood to have come from the small wound in the front of her chest. Kay knew there had to be a nasty exit wound on Renee's backside. "Sorry," Kay said as she pulled Renee's vest off in one brutal motion.

"Mom..." Renee weakly whispered. "Is that you, mom...?"

Kay closed her eyes as tears welled up in them. "Yes, dear. I'm here." She popped the safety lid off a canister of flesh foam as she leaned Renee forwards against herself so she could get to the wound in Renee's back. She prayed she wouldn't have to nox her friend for doing so would likely save Renee's life, but it would almost certainly do so at the cost of her syntienthood. Kay trembled terribly as she took a deep breath and said, "My child... It's time for my little darling to take a little nap."

"Mama..." Renee's voice grew more strained and childlike.

"Yes, dear." Kay desperately fought back her emotions as her tears blinded her. She grabbed and held her longtime friend and bridesmaid close to her. In her hand she held a prepped nox vial.

"Mama..." Renee's body trembled violently. "Mama... I'm... coming home."

"Guardian," "Palace," "Bad Timing," "Hostilities," "Pistol," "Crates," "Preparations," "Time's Up," and "Blinded" are sections of text from the story *Panocide*.

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