

## Panocide: The Past – Section Six

### Reunions

<Date: 4/29/28,603 Standard. The Intercontinental State of the World Address held within the Honored Guest Annex of the Terran Imperial Palace and presided over by Raul Cernia, President of the World Presidential Council. In attendance was Princess Aprii Bourques, first born of Queen Myrii Seng Du'mont Bourques and Prince Jon Charles Verling, and Lord Hyran Denvearson, first born son of Duchess Anna Chin and Lord Robert Denvearson.>

“How nervous do I look, Klæe?” Calvert couldn't stop his hands from shaking from his nervous anticipation.

Smiling, she stepped back to study him. “Definitely a terminal case of nerves.” Over her right eye, she wore black patch to prevent light from entering while the optical part of her nervous system healed.

He looked over Klæe's newly acquired bluish-black naval uniform. On her shoulders she wore the purple epaulets with the yellow piping of a guardian. “I still don't see why you had to transfer to the navy. And your rank, lieutenant third grade, it just doesn't sound right.”

“It's just tradition for a guardian to follow his or her matched syntient's path.” She shrugged her shoulders. “When we translated our ranks into your equivalent Terraglish forms we had to find something between the Terran ranks of ensign and lieutenant junior grade. Lieutenant third grade was selected for now as the best-fitting name. As our languages influence each other a better definition might be one day come to light.”

He noticed Suki and Kay talking in the distance. “Suki doesn't seem to say much. I could swear that this is the first time I've seen her talking with someone.”

“Now if I could just get you to follow her lead,” she quipped, then stifled a laugh.

“Ha!” He presented her with his tongue. “Just to satisfy my curiosity, why are all the Vishahntiens I've seen women. Don't they have any men?”

Klæe stared at him for a moment. “Of course they have men. Where do you think all their vast numbers came from,” she said, jokingly. She then continued on in a serious tone. “Your world had better take note since this seems to affect many worlds as they mature. Your world could already be heading down the same road the Vishahntiens.” She gestured to Suki and Kay. “Thousands of years ago the Vishahntiens had a preference for male children, just like some parts of your world does now. As they became more technologically proficient, they were able to medically increase the numbers of their male offspring. Needless to say, nature struck back, producing more females and forcing them to take more drastic steps for more male children. By the time they caught on to what was happening, their women outnumbered their men nearly three hundred to one. Since then that ratio has rose to over a thousand to one.” She shook her head. “Over generations Vishahntien '*maleness*' became separated from their Y chromosome, becoming a composite of several recessive genes. All of these genes must be in place or the child will be female.”

Calvert's his eyebrows *inquiringly* shot up. “This might sound stupid, but can't the Vishahntiens make use of men from other worlds?”

“Well, sex for its own sake has never been a problem for them. Not that they need any help in finding a husband from another world. It's reproduction. Call it impossible! Although Vishahntiens are of the same Spacer stock as Dycinians and Lariens, they're no longer genetically compatible. You will, however, find there are quite a few mixed Dycinian-Lariens around.”

“What about Earth?”

“You're indigenous to your world, though your world is apparently quite compatible with the Dycinians, Lariens, and others. Alas, your world is just as incompatible with the Vishahntiens, so

they're still out of luck.”

Concerned and curious, he inquired, “How about the other worlds out there...? Can they not be of help to them?”

Klae only shook her head in response.

He shuttered as a chill ran up his back. “Damn! No wonder the Vishahntiens felt the way they did when we shot their ambassador down.” He shook his head from side to side. “I have to admit they did an excellent job of restraining themselves and maintaining their composure.”

“Yeah.” She parted the drapery to gander a look at the Alliance visitors who were in a small annex located next to a larger chamber where Terra’s highest officials waited. “I still don’t see them.”

“Who?”

“My parents.”

“Hey, we’ll have to have your parents meet my father. He’s in the main auditorium, tenth section back and fourteenth row.” Calvert grinned deviously at the thought of his father’s reaction to meeting aliens. “It’s been five years since my mother past away and he’s given some thought to marrying again. Maybe he should get out and meet some Vishahntiens.”

“Calvert, I had better warn you of something before your father, and especially you, accidentally find out—the Vishahntiens have three sexes.”

“Three...?” He stared at her in dismay.

“It’s probably not what you think, so don’t let your imagination get carried away. Actually, they have are two female sexes.” She turned him about by his shoulder to look at Suki and Kay. “Most Vishahntien women carry two X chromosomes like Kay, however a small percentage have an XY combination like Suki. Like I said, only a very few carry the complete and correct set of XY chromosomes with the proper recessive genes become male.”

“You mean Suki’s... Something like a man...?” He had seen more than enough Vishahntien women over the past few days to know that they were all definitely female.

“Cal... If you say that to her she’s likely to hammer your face around to your backside. No, she’s a woman by any standard.” Klae glanced about to see if they had drawn any attention and was relieved they hadn’t. “There are a few nations out there who have more than two female sexes.” She gestured to Urs. “The Kly have three female sexes. However, we have only found a couple of nations who have two male sexes. Maybe evolution leans towards multiple female sexes. Or, maybe the stronger male sex, be it brains or brawn would eliminate the weaker male sex... Anyhow, I digress. As for the Vishahntiens, all the incomplete XY combination entails is a second female sex that is shorter in stature, has a tail, and has a few physical differences from the first female sex.”

“A few physical differences?” He grew more confused and more curious.

Growing weary of the subject, Klae scratched the bandage on the back of her head. “Since they have an XY combination they have been called ‘failed males’, but don’t mention that to any of them,” she warned. “Anyhow, as curious as you are, I’m sure you’ll find out about their sexes, and those of other nations, in no time.”

“Not if Missy has anything to say about it.” Calvert dropped his smile and then regained it.

“Oh, yeah. How’s she doing?”

“She was up and walking about yesterday. She’s supposed to arrive here before the ceremonies start.”

“That’s good.” Klae watched Suki and Kay approaching with an elderly Larien. “There’s a *field marshal* approaching.”

“Another one...?” He didn’t bother to turn around. He had seen more than enough field marshals and commodores to last him the rest of his life.

“Cal, I talking about a *non-synt* field marshal.” She took a closer look. “He’s Field Marshal Ten Kärík G’Kanna-nos. He’s charged with all surface troops within this sector—including your world.”

Calvert nervously turned about, then followed Klae’s lead and saluted.

“Private First Class Calvert Urdang,” Kärík said as his fingers traced about the lid of a box. “I have something here for you.” He smiled, winking, as he lifted the box’s lid to show Calvert two smaller ornate boxes inside. “By chance, would either of you know where Sergeant Caldecott is?”

“I believe that she’s currently with Field Marshal V’shan’nos, sir.” Klæe pointed towards the auditorium’s backstage. “She’s making arrangements for Princess Fii, her husband, and their newborn daughter.”

“Thank you, guardian.” Kärík bowed slightly then turned and stepped over to Kay. “Will you be staying here, syntient?”

“Unless you should otherwise need me, field marshal.”

“No. I’m just strolling about and meeting old acquaintances before the presentation.” Kärík caught Suki’s attention and motioned for her to remain with him. He then said to Kay and Klæe, “Should you see anyone who was at the shelter’s defense insure they remain here.”

“Aye, sir.” Kay and Klæe saluted.

Calvert added his own salute.

Suki added further to Kärík’s instructions in the Vishahntien language.

“Aye.” Kay nodded towards Suki and then turned her attention back to Kärík. “Anything else, sir?”

“No. Syntient Ko’Rii will update you later. This presentation should be underway within the half hour.” He returned their salutes, then left, heading toward a pscanner who had just stepped out from behind a partition.

“A half hour,” Calvert said disappointedly. His face soured.

“Yeah.” Klæe watched as Kärík and Suki vanish behind the partition. “You have to admit he gets around pretty good for a three hundred year-old man.”

“Three hundred... Jeez!” Calvert’s eyes grew wide. “And he’s not a syntient? I should hope to grow that old.”

“I’ve got a great-grandfather who’s approaching four hundred, Calvert,” Kay said. “And he’s not a synt, either.”

“As with a great-grandmother of mine,” Klæe added. “It shouldn’t take your world too long to catch up with us in life spans, Cal.”

Calvert whispered, “Times are a changing... They are definitely changing.” He couldn’t help but smile, happy to be in the middle of it all.

“Aren’t they ever,” Klæe said. “I was just thinking back to before we arrived. Since then we’ve gain better data on hyper-spatial dynamics, and, better still, aspirin.” She touched the left side of her head.

“And, in addition, there are two more nations entering the Alliance.” Kay turned towards one of the entrances as a sensed presence caught her attention.

They were startled as a small child screamed upon seeing a room full of aliens. She ran screaming from the room with a look of great pain and terror etched deeply into her young face.

Klæe glanced to where the child had quickly exited. “That must be Jon’s daughter, Mia. William’s also with them,” she added for Calvert’s benefit. She then sensed William jumping out of Mia’s way as she ran back to her father. “It’s odd, Kay... The first time I fully sensed Jon was after he had been noxxed...” She shuttered. “It’s eerie to sense him up, about, and *alive*, if you know what I mean.”

“I know, Klæe.” Kay watched as Jon enter, firmly holding his daughter’s hand. William followed closely behind them. “When I was an eleven-years-old I visited the farming planet Kōryya. At the time a small boy had became lost in its northern back country. Since I was the only available syntient, I had to track down the body. A few days later I visited him at a rejuvenation ward where he was recovering.” She stared off into the distance for a few seconds. “An experience like that leaves a hell of an impression on a young girl.”

Jon entered and then knelt and straightened his daughter's dress. "Now I want you to be a good little girl, Mia—and be polite." He continued to softly talk to her, and with a great amount of encouragement on his part, managed to alleviate enough of his daughter's fear to where she would follow him across the floor.

He glanced at Kay. "I'm pleased to see all of you." He smiled. "You'll have to forgive my daughter. When I was working undercover, I had to send her to all the *correct* schools and to allow her to have only the *correct* friends." He sighed, "I have to admit that I still find myself often thinking along those lines."

"We read Lord Hyran's report. You had to fully engross yourself in Centralist doctrine to maintain your cover," Kay said. She knelt with a friendly smile before Jon's daughter. "And how are you, Mia?"

"You're... one of those aliens."

Jon stood still as Mia shrunk back against his leg.

"Yes I am, Mia," Kay whispered. "And if you were on my world, would you not be the alien to us?"

Mia hesitantly nodded.

"Now that wouldn't mean that you're a bad person, would it?"

"No!" She tightened her grip on her father's leg.

"Well, the situation is as it is and I'm on your world."

"But you're different." Mia's eyes darted between Kay's tiger-like pattern and Klæ's velvety rich, yellow facial hair.

"Of course. We're all different. We're all individuals. And just like you, most of us are good and decent people."

Mia stared at a Sha'kal in the distance. "But... some aren't... really very human."

"True," Klæ responded, gesturing towards the Sha'kal. "But they're still intelligent people just like us. They have feelings like us. Just because someone looks different shouldn't put a stop to trust and friendship." She pointed to Kay. "We're different, yet the two of us are friends."

"I... know what you mean..." she hesitantly said, "but my teacher has been saying..."

"Darling," Jon softly stroked and ran his fingers through his daughter's hair. "A few months ago your teacher was telling you our world was the cradle to the universe's only intelligent life." He quickly glanced at Kay and Klæ then back to his daughter. "We'll talk more about this and other matters once we're home, Mia. It'll take a while for both of us to fully comprehend all that has happened."

Kay sensed the healing on Jon's side. "So, how does your side feel? Okay?"

"Much better, thank you." He patted his force-cloned ribs. "The doctors estimate that in another week I'll be in much better shape than before I was shot."

"That's good to hear." She turned and spoke to William, "And you?"

"I can't complain. They have me playing a minor liaison role. I've even grown use to the trips up and back from your orbiting ships."

"It sounds like you're not having any trouble adapting."

"Well, it has been said more than once that I've had my head in the clouds. And, Ee has also been a great help." William glanced behind Kay and Klæ. "Tab's here."

Klæ, caught off guard by Taby's approach, spun about. She spotted Taby's new rank. "Congratulations, Lieutenant Captain."

"Thanks, Klæ. You, too." Taby held her hand out before Kay. "And congratulates to you, Lieutenant Third Grade."

"Me...?" Kay said as Taby dropped a pair of epaulets into her hands. "I'm not open to promotion for months."

"Conflicts tend to speed things up. And Gayle mentioned something about, 'You're not harming

anyone on our side either'..." She smiled to insure Kay knew she was joking. "Anyhow, Kabis said he'll be down later to make your promotion official." Taby turned to Calvert. "Are you ready?"

"I'd rather be back at the barracks—or at the mall."

"Sorry. No such luck, Cal. You and Sergeant Caldecott have an important prior appointment with Princess Aprii."

"H..." Calvert remembered Mia was present. "Heck... I'm satisfied with getting my hide out and away from those rafters. Hanging up side down, entangled in cables with rebels taking pot-shots at me didn't make my day." His lip trembled and his body shuttered with his nightmarish memory of upside down battle.

"You still haven't come to grips with it, have you?"

He whispered, so as not to be heard by Mia, "I can handle most of it. The bloody fighting. The bodies plummeting hundreds of meters. Even the mass suicide attacks. But it's the incessant back and forth swinging motion of my body beneath that catwalk with rounds and energy beams flashing, splashing, and slashing all about me still has me unnerved."

"That's the cost of your blunting the rebels' attack. Just remember the old saying," Taby said, "'Time heals all wounds'." She pulled a strand of hair away from her face. "I'm still in shook from having to stand helplessly nearby and watch you dangle." She spoke to Kay, "It's time to get things moving. Do you know where we're to go?"

Kay pointed. "Out that exit and hang left."

"Thank you." Taby gestured to the palace's stage. "If you don't mind, I'll steal Cal away and escort him into the main auditorium."

"Oh..." Nervous and embarrassed, he glanced upwards as though he was praying for a miracle to get him out of the proceedings.

"Cheer up." Taby smiled. "Missy's waiting there for you."

"Oh, yeah..." He glanced at Taby and beamed. "Good. Thanks."

A loud order for everyone to stand to attention reverberated through the room. As everyone stood to attention, Marc glided into the room on a hovering medical transport chair. His legs were raised out in front of the chair and secured in place as he was still undergoing regenerative therapy. Then a call cried out: "Make way for the most honored and revered mortal remains of Captain Serba Ugani!"

An elderly Vishahntien commodore slowly entered. In her hands she carried a small box draped in black cloth. Hanging over the leading edge of the box was an ornate, golden medallion suspended from a black ribbon with gold threads woven through it. Atop the box, several more medals were presented in neatly aligned rows.

Marc saluted, saying, "Captain Serba Ugani was the pilot who fought bravely and then gave up her life when she placed her fighter beneath the shuttle craft to cushion its crash."

The commodore stepped forwards and all the Alliance personnel snapped smart salutes.

Klae prodded Calvert and he quickly snapped to and saluted.

Marc slipped off to his right and the commodore quietly followed.

"Whoa," Kay whispered. "The Varlinsk Sar Keer Legion of Honor." She bowed her head. "She has honored her family greatly."

"Aye," Klae agreed. She thought back to the small boxes Kärík was carrying. *Nah*, she thought as she shook her head. *Cal and Kala went through hell in the fighting that took place on the catwalks above the bunker, but surely the Alliance...* She allowed the thought to drift from her mind.

"Kay! Over here!"

Kay spun about as she heard a familiar voice. There she saw Renee sitting in a wheelchair.

"Renee!" Breaking out in tears, she took off running towards her friend as Ee entered behind Renee.

"Damn, girl! I thought I had lost you." Gingerly, Kay bent over and embraced Renee. "When did they awaken you?"

“Earlier this morning.” Renee patted her blanket covered legs. “I had to promise the doctors I wouldn’t stay out partying all night. I have to get back to the hospital ship right after this ceremony is over so I can continue my spinal regeneration treatments.” She frowned as she slapped the armrests of her chair. “I still have another week before the docs will allow me to attempt walking.”

“I’m just glad you’re still alive.” Kay glanced up and looked at Ee. “I’m glad to see you, too, lieutenant.”

“Same here, syntient.” Ee stepped around Kay and Renee and briskly strolled over to William who was walking towards her. As they met, she bent over, kissed him, and then rubbed her nose firmly against his.

“Whoa...” Wide-eyed and stunned, Kay glanced at Renee. “I wonder if he’s popped the question.”

“Aye,” William said as Ee stood fully erect and towered above him. He didn’t have to reach too far down along her side as he placed his arm about her waist. “We found a beautiful mountain top and I asked my dear Ee to marry me.”

Ee flashed a rare smile. “I have also been asked by Princess Aprii to remain as part of her personal guard. Of course, after we’re married, I promised William I take him around to some of the major worlds and sites of the Alliance.”

“Nah.” William shook his head. “I just said it would be nice.”

Ee almost broke out in a good chuckle as she shook her head. “I agreed under duress.” She raised her right digitigrade foot off the floor as she glanced down at him. “You kept running that feather between my toes....”

### **Syntient Aide**

“No, ma’am,” Gayle said with Jhade standing behind her. Gayle was growing tired of discussing religious issues with an elderly Terran. Jhade was tired from merely listening to them.

Gayle saw a Dycinian sergeant waving his hand to acquire her attention. She gestured towards the Dycinian. “Would you excuse me? I’m being hailed.”

“Sure. Maybe we can talk some more at a later date.”

*I should hope not,* Gayle thought. “I’ll be here for another three or four weeks. If I’m not here at the palace just give our embassy a call. They’ll know my schedule.”

“I’ll do that, field marshal.” The woman waved farewell.

Gayle and Jhade walked over to the Dycinian, shaking several hands along the way.

The sergeant met them halfway.

Gayle sensed and looked over the man carefully. “Aren’t you the sergeant at the hospital who brought me a replacement earpiece?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He promptly saluted. “Sergeant Dowrick Chi’Vin reporting for duty.”

“Duty...?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m to be your new aide. I also carry information concerning DAC.”

“Ah...” Gayle’s face soured. “Don’t tell me that... Not you... DAC.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but those are my orders.”

“Right.” She sensed about for an empty room. “Follow me, sarge.” Jhade followed along as Gayle and Dowrick started walking. Gayle opened the door, allowing Dowrick and Jhade to step through first. “What’s up with DAC?”

“High Command wants to keep their interference to a minimum.” He waited for the door to close behind them and then bit his lip. “Here’s something I’m sure you already know about: Representatives of the Durvin Area Confederation will be here shortly. We’re to wear badges using their rank designation for elder synts for the next few days.”

“Not that damnable first, second, third synt crap.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded. “DAC presently wishes to form closer contacts with us, so they’re sending an ambassador here to witness the Terran’s entrance into the Alliance.” He handed Gayle a Durvin-type syntient designation tag which bore a seniority classification under the black, grey, and white Larien flag. “The tag’s worn on the right upper breast, Tenth Syntient V’shan’nos.”

“I know,” Gayle said with disdain. “I’ve been to DAC several times before.”

Gayle stared off into empty space for a brief moment. *Why, Gayle asked herself, would DAC suddenly want to form a closer relationship with us? She clenched her teeth. They’re planning something... But What?*

Dowrick handed Jhade a tag with a green and red Maukator flag. “First Guardian Ar’Quekä, if it’s not too late, congratulations on becoming Maukator’s first guardian.”

“Thank you, sarge.”

He pulled a pair of purple epaulets with green piping from his pocket with his rank mounted on them. “And, my syntient aide shoulder boards.”

Gayle stared at Dowrick until he became uncomfortable.

“Do you know who I really am, sergeant?”

He averted his eyes. “No, ma’am.”

“Well, no doubt you realize I’m very old, but I have another distinction....”

### **Legion of Honor**

Calvert, with Missy sitting besides him, glanced across the stage at Aprii and her guests. “I think she’s even more nervous than I am,” he whispered to himself. He quickly glanced about glad the auditorium’s curtains were drawn closed. By the podium, Gayle greeted numerous Terran politicians, celebrities, and notables. “Gayle doesn’t seem too bothered by these proceedings and all of the attention she’s receiving, Tab.”

“I’ve got news for you, she can’t stand crowds. That sort of applies to syntys in general.” Taby waved her hand before her, gesturing out past the wide expanse of curtains to where the audience waited. “It’s a bit disorientating to sense so many people crammed into such a small area.”

“Mm...” He nodded, remembering. “She mentioned something about disliking of ceremonies and such earlier.”

“Also, if there’s one thing we try to avoid it’s the spotlight. We prefer a low profile. Even in the Alliance there those who mistrust or are just plain hostile towards us.”

“There are...? I would have thought that a society like yours would be tolerant of all.”

“You don’t know people very well then. Anytime someone differs from the ‘accepted’ norm, there’s almost always someone who’s ready to take up arms in some mislead cause.”

“We saw something akin to that earlier.”

Missy said, “I remembering hearing someone say back on the hospital ship that the Vishahntiens and Sha’kals once mortal enemies of each other.”

“The history of this galaxy is well bloodied with the first contacts between nations, especially when they’re of quite different species. The only truly bloodless first contact in the Alliance was the Dycinians and Lakiekans. Their worlds are located in the same system so they had audio and visual contact with each other long before they first met in person.”

Hyran and President Raul Cernia entered, surrounded by three dozen Vishahntien and Terran guards. As Vishahntiens were physically more like Terrans than Sha’kals, Vishahntien guards were used to help alleviate Terran fears.

“Well.” Taby caught sight of one Vishahntien in particular. “I see who’s to be our guest speaker tonight... Zyriena Sulī Utani.” She turned back to Calvert and Missy. “She’s Vishahntia’s Grand Unified Empress, and unlike most Alliance royalty—she reigns.”

Aprii, Hyran, and Zyriena stepped backstage with the guards as Raul remained centered on

stage. Within the main auditorium the audience waited.

The assembly fell quiet with the curtain's parting. A presidential fanfare played as Raul was introduced. He wasted no time and promptly introduced Aprii. Gracefully, Aprii walked to the podium then stood silent, allowing the moment to further grasp the audience's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, my dear President Cernia, honored guests, and the good people of this world and other worlds, welcome. Welcome one and all." She bowed slightly then took a long, calming breath. "I'm sure almost everyone here knows of the recent events having taken place, and the profound implications they hold for our future." She waited for the clamor of whispers to die down. "Before I introduce tonight's first guest speaker, let me say that many of us will have trouble grasping the full significance of the new age our world has entered. I know I do." She glanced at her teleprompter but ignored the words it presented. "It is unfortunate, but recently well over ten thousand of our comrades, from all sides, died in a needless fight." She took a deep breath. "I'm pleased to announce that of those who were killed, all but thirty-one are now alive and well."

Commotion broke in the press pool as they scrambled to send their stories. Shock, joy, and confusion spread throughout the auditorium.

"Please, by no means does this mean that death has been defeated. It is merely an advanced medical technology we now have access to." Not waiting for response die down, she continued over the din. "We have been welcomed to start along the road to joining with an alliance, a group of world-nations referred to as the Alliance." She stepped to the side of the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply honored to present Zyriena Sulī Farling Shómas Jara Utani. She is my peer. She is the Grand Unified Empress of the Vishahntien nation."

All fell silent as a tall tiger-striped woman walked across the stage. She wore a simple black, almost military style, long-sleeve shirt with matching pants.

Zyriena nodded whispered to Aprii, "I wish you and your world the best of luck."

"Thanks, and I wish you and your world the same." Aprii nodded in return.

Kärik, carrying his box, stepped out onto the stage and walked over to them. "Ready, your highness."

Zyriena nodded then turned toward the audience. "I am greatly honored in being selected to bring greetings to the people of Terra from the nations of B'Vevel, Dorānjay, Dycinian, Greshur, Kezhretien, Kly, Lakiekan, Lantänger, Larien, Maukator, Rychtaevier, Sha'kal, Ü'Ñnyyae, Vishahntien, and Voeshalter. I would also like to mention another nation who will soon be joining the Alliance, the Rhy'Karrin."

Her voice grew somber. "These are trying times for all. However, it is in these times that people, societies, and whole worlds can grow. We can learn from what we have recently experienced; we need not enter our future with our eyes closed. However," her voice brightened, "before I speak of the great tasks which lies before us in our now common future, I must revisit and honor the past." She signaled Kärik, "Field marshal, if you would."

"Yes, your highness." As he signaled the rear stage curtains to open, revealing Calvert and Kala standing in center stage, surrounded by Missy and numerous VIPs from Terra and the Alliance. Between Calvert and Kala stood the Vishahntien commodore with the remains of Captain Ugani.

Zyriena snapped to attention. "Before I get started with today's affairs, I have two awards to present and a great deed to retell. The Alliance has an award called the Varlinsk Sar Keer Legion of Honor. It is our highest honor. Over the past several thousand years this medal has been awarded over one hundred seventy thousand times. Staff Sergeant Kala Caldecott and Private First Class Calvert Urdang are the three hundred twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth recipients who have *survived* to receive this, our highest of honors."

She bowed her head. "I'll start with the tale of one who made the ultimate sacrifice to save our ambassador to your world...."



## Bea

Raul stepped back to center stage and raised his arms to hush the crowd.

“Please... Please, ladies and gentlemen, I have three more guests to introduce and we can begin to call it a night.” He clasped his hands before his chest. “Now for someone who might well harbor great hope for our future.” He held his hand out to his left in a welcoming gesture. “I wish to present Princess Fii O’Jii-Warren of Lantänger and her husband Lord Erik Warren who is from our world.”

Many in the Terran half of the audience gasped as Fii stepped onto the stage, her large squirrel tail swaying about behind her. In her arms she cradled her blanket-shrouded daughter, Bea; a child who was half Terran and half Lantänger. Erik proudly stood to her right.

The Alliance members in the audience immediately stood and applauded. Most Terrans overcame their initial shock within a few seconds and quickly joined the Alliance in applauding.

Raul continued to applaud as he shouted into his microphone. “Four days ago, our world was linked to other worlds by more than trust and friendship; through this child we are joined to another world by blood!”

Fii gestured with her chin for Gayle to come over. Gayle quickly stepped over and the two began to undo Bea’s blankets.

Smiling, Fii glanced at Erik. “You have fumble fingers, dear.”

“Aye,” Erik responded, half dazed by the bright lights and the great numbers of people he found himself standing before.

“She so cute and adorable,” Gayle said as she collected the last of Bea’s blankets.

Fii placed her right hand under Bea’s diaper and used her left hand to support Bea’s head and back as she held her daughter up high for all the worlds to see. Bea’s small tail slowly swayed from side to side as it poked through an adjustable hole in her diaper.

“She’s named for my father’s grandmother and my husband’s mother. She is the one hundred fiftieth granddaughter of Emperor Saul O’Jii of Lantänger.”

A Larien officer snapped to attention and shouted, “All hail Princess Bea! Long live Princess Bea! Long live the people of Lantänger! Long live the people of Terra! Long live the Alliance!”

## Surprise!

<Date: 6/8/29,421 Standard. Just after oh-two hundred in the morning local time at the O’Hare Public Spas, one kilometer northwest of the Terran Imperial Palace.>

Ee stretched out beneath a filtered sun lamp, finally allowing herself to take a long deserved break after a hard day’s work. Her work had been a long day of actually training Aprii’s personal guards, instead of paperwork for once, while learning everything she could about Terran history, science, economics, customs, and so forth.

*She remembered the words of her father that it was not enough for a genetic construct who wished to serve as an imperial guard to know one self and to know one’s enemy, but one must also know the hearts and minds of those who one will serve and protect. The enemy will yearn to know all they can discern about your charges and so you should likewise know your charges to help protect them as best as you can possibly can.*

*Damn!* She shuttered as her heart sank as she grimaced. *The fifth anniversary of my father’s death is in four days. I need to find a church or temple where I can observe his passing.* “Father...” She closed her eyes as they grew moist. After a moment of remembrance, she used a small towel to wipe her eyes, and she then resumed her sunbath. Her wedding to William was coming up in a little over two weeks and she was determined to save her tears for those two events and not waste them while she sat alone.

Ee kept her mind clear for five minutes of extraneous thoughts when she heard the giggling and

laughter of two young Terran women. Within seconds she could smell the two women and found they were relaxed and didn't have the scent of fear or nervous anticipation about themselves. Of course, they would have no idea she was there sunbathing, either.

"Great..." She glanced at her watch and saw it read 0211 hours. She readied herself for either a stream of questions or shrieks.

One of the young women ran ahead of the other. "Can you believe the nerve of Bert? He walked straight up to Sue and asked her if she would like to... you know. I mean, we were all standing right there next to Sue. She nearly died of embarrassment."

"Poor Sue." The second woman slipped underneath a handrail onto the women's sun deck to catch up with her friend. She nearly tipped over a warning sign designating the area beyond for "women's only" nude bathing. "Yeah, Bert's such a dip. It's bad enough his face looks like a pizza let alone his having a bad hair day everyday."

"Tell me about it." The first woman grabbed the other by the arm to stop her as she spotted the towel-draped back of Ee's chair and her lit sun lamp. She then spoke to Ee. "I'm sorry. I thought there was no one else here. Would you mind if we joined you?"

"No problem here. I'm just catching up on a long overdue rest."

"I know what you mean," the second woman said. "My economics professor kept hounding us about what the possibilities about interstellar trade will mean to our world. How am I supposed to know what these people from other worlds might want or need?"

The second woman asked, "You don't mind if we sun topless?"

Ee opened her eyes. "Sorry. I don't quite follow you."

"You know, bare-breasted. So as to can catch all the artificial rays and such."

Ee sat up and slowly turned around on her lounge chair.

"Uh..." The first woman dropped her towels as well as her bikini top as she spied Ee. She briefly glanced at Ee's flat, black-grey colored chest and its four black nipples then stared at Ee's black, somewhat vaguely humanlike feline face. "Uh... You must be one of those aliens we heard about." She raised her right hand and waved slightly. "I'm Bev." She turned to her friend. "This is my best friend, Amy."

"Whoa...!" Amy noticed Ee's large digitigrade feet. "I mean, hi!" She glanced back at Bev with a confused look.

"I'm called Ee." She nodded slightly. She then smiled without showing her teeth so as to not shock the women. "I usually don't bite."

Amy and Bev blinked several times before they caught on to Ee's joke. Ee's words not matching up her lip movements didn't help them, either. Bev laughed as she walked closer and turned on a sun lamp above a chair beside Ee. "I guess I should next ask how often is 'usually'?"

"Only as duty calls."

"Oh, you're with the military?" Her eyebrows shot up.

Ee raised her chin proudly. "It's no secret. I've been delegated by the Empress of Laria to guard your Princess Aprii."

Amy activated a lamp on the far side of Bev. "The Lariens are grayish in color and looked like us, right?" She placed two circular adhesive patches over her nipples to protect them from burning.

"They are, but I'm a gelf. That is, I'm a genetic construct... a genetically modified being." Ee chuckled. "Somewhere back in time long past my ancestors were designed in a lab and grown in a test tube. Of course since then, as my mother would say, 'nature has taken its own course'."

Amy and Bev watched as muscles rippled beneath Ee's black, velvet-like fur and skin as her arms stretched up and behind her head. Amy sighed and whispered, "I would love to get out and see other worlds." She turned the intensity on her lamp down and then discarded her towel. She gestured to herself with her hands. "Of course, I'll have to lose these tan lines first."

Bev asked, "How much does it cost for a civilian to travel between worlds?"

Ee leaned back against her chair. "I'm not sure. Warren, a man from your world, has drastically moved jump points in closer to planets. Since time spent traveling to and from these points constitutes a major expense, the overall cost of personal travel has likely drop substantially over the last half year. Fortunately, no travel or cruise service personnel lost their jobs as there are now even more people traveling between worlds with the cheaper rates."

Amy frowned. "Now you sound like my economics professor. I just want to see these other worlds; my father can pay for the trip."

"I take it your family has money?"

"Some." Amy placed a couple of cucumber slices over her eyes. "We're better off than most." She raised her head slightly. "And, not as good as some."

"I might worry about money if I live until retirement." Ee closed her eyes as she heard another pair of feet entering the spa. "Currently I'm in the service of the empress."

Bev sat up. "I heard she's actually quite old. Is that a fact or just another rumor?"

"She's a syntient." Ee's nose twitched as she caught the scent of a Vishahntien woman approaching the spa's sun deck. "They have been known to live quite long lives."

"It's probably not what it's all cracked up to be."

"I don't know..." Ee stood. With her height of well over two meters she towered over Amy and Bev. "Is that you Renee?"

Renee half ran up the stairs then saluted. "You and that nose, Ee."

Amy and Bev sat up in their chairs and look over their shoulders.

Ee returned the salute. "I'm off duty, as you can see." Except for a skimpy, black G-string bottom piece, she was naked. She raised and held her arms out from her sides. "Care to join us? The sun light's artificial, but it still feels mighty good."

"Sure." Renee walked to Ee's side and beckoned her to lean over. She pushed her mirrored glasses back up on her nose then disabled her translator and whispered in Larien, "I was just passing by when I sensed something you should know about."

Ee disabled her translator. "And...?"

"It's probably not my place to say." Renee looked quite concerned.

Ee looked annoyed. "Go ahead and tell me."

Renee briefly glanced at Amy and Bev then whispered in a fainter voice, "You're with child... Actually, children."

"I'm what!" Ee threw her arms up in the air, but quickly composed herself.

"Easy, Ee!" Renee motioned for Ee to remain calm with her hands. "You should be delighted, especially since their triplets."

Surprised by Ee's outburst, Amy and Bev stared at each other. All their lives they had only heard one language: Terraglish.

"You must be mistaken!"

"Let's see..." Renee glanced at the ground and raised her right forefinger. "Your belly swells, and being a gelf, your breasts develop and grow heavy with milk, and you'll probably puke your breakfast up numerous times along the way." She looked up at Ee. "No, I would say that pretty well sums it up." She hugged Ee and patted her back. "Congratulations."

A pained look fell over Ee's face. "I have a career to think about."

Renee shook her head. "Aside from a short time lost on the job, this won't stop you from training Aprii's guards." She decided to take Ee up on her offer and undid her uniform jacket. She figured if she was relaxed, then maybe Ee would relax. "Besides, your children could start the tradition of imperial guards for this world."

Ee sighed as she sat back in her chair and thought. "What am I going to tell William?"

"Congratulations might be a start."

"No, no, no..." Ee shook her head as she grimaced. "William's a Terran and I'm a gelf. We're

not supposed to have children between us!”

Renee slipped her boots off and laid them aside. “Ee, ninety-nine percent of your genetic makeup is Larien. There’s only a select amount of Zumas panther in you. Your child is half Terran and definitely William’s.”

“And, Larien and Terran genes have tested as very compatible, but Larien Zumas gelfs and Terrans tested as very incompatible.” Ee pressed a towel over her face as she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “So obvious,” she mumbled into the towel. “You can’t always trust a breeding compatibility test. Mother Nature will so often find her own way.”

Renee activated her translator and spoke to Amy and Bev. “Sorry for the secrecy. I just informed Ee about something she probably didn’t really want to hear.”

Bev wrapped her right hand with her left and pressed them against her chest as she asked, “Is she going to be all right? It’s not serious or life threatening is it?”

“No.” Renee removed her tee shirt. “She just learned something that has upset her future plans.”

“Ouch!” Amy and Bev spotted the massive surgical scars on Renee’s chest. “That looked like it hurt,” said the two together.

Renee glanced down at the large pink scar spoiling the whiteness of her chest and belly. “It’s worse on my backside. It blew my spine out.” She twisted about so the two could see several massive scars ruining the orange and black tiger-stripe pattern of her back.

“Uh, yucky.”

Renee eased back in her chair. “I took a nasty round through my heart and spine when I was helping to defend Princess Aprii in the bunker under the palace.”

Ee slowly raised her face from her towel with a moan, although she kept her ears down.

Renee kept from smiling. “Feeling better?”

Ee growled as she glanced at Renee.

Amy and Bev felt goose bumps crawl across their skin in response to Ee’s growl.

Ee then engaged her translator. “Yeah.” She then glared at Renee. “You’re not joking with me, are you?”

“No...” Renee quickly shook her head from side to side. She sighed, “But thinking about it, I should have waited to tell you at a better time.”

“Nah.” Ee waved Renee off. “Another syntient might have said something at a less opportune time.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Besides, I did ask you to tell me.” She glanced upwards at the night sky, wondering if her pregnancy might actually be for the better.

Bev studied Renee. “Are you one of these syntients I’ve heard about?”

Renee lowered her glasses. “I am.”

Bev was forced to look away when she caught sight of Renee’s eyes. “Whoa!”

Renee put her glasses back on as Amy uncovered her eyes. “What did I miss?”

Bev held her hand out. “You don’t want to know, Amy.”

Amy sat up. “If she’s a syntient, I really do want to know!”

Renee faced Amy. “If you must know...? This is why I wear these glasses.” She pulled her glasses away from her face.

Amy looked into Renee’s eyes and suddenly felt sick at her stomach. “Holy...!”

“Told you.” Bev laughed. “That is one weird sensation!” She glanced at Renee once she had her glasses back on. “Were you born that way?”

“Yes. A syntient is born in one of several tens of thousands births. Sometime in the future I expect even your world will have syntients. You already have guardians and pscanners.”

“I saw a report on the net at school,” Amy said. “They reported on some of the abilities you have.”

Renee ran her fingers along the scar on her chest. “In a few more weeks you won’t be able to tell I was even wounded. Luckily, synties have accelerated healing and regenerative abilities.” She stood

and pulled her tail around before her. "Here's an old story for you two... When I was a little girl of four, my tail was caught in a door and torn off." She ran her fingers through the long guard hairs of her tail then stroked its end across her face. "Within two months I had grown it back with no sign of it having been ever lost." She giggled from its tickling as she turned loose her tail and sat back down. "However, it did itch like all hell while it was growing back." She gestured to her backside with her right forefinger. "The medical assist I received in regenerating my spinal cord, backbone, and sternum hasn't really itched at all. Modern medicine."

Ee sat and contemplated what sort of reaction there might be to a gelf being impregnated by a Terran. A few minor factions within the Alliance were hostile to gelfs. A few others saw them fit only for use as cannon fodder for military use. She thought, *Renee mentioned the possibility of starting an imperial gelf guard line for the Terrans. I could be the start of a fifth line of gelf imperial guards.* She nervously glanced at Amy and Bev. Bracing her mind, she thought, *it's time to test the waters.*

Clearing her throat, Ee said, "Did either of you two catch the news were a Lantänger princess gave birth earlier?" Her pointed ears perked up a little.

"Oh, yeah," Bev said. She reached up and turned her sun lamp down a tad. "I thought that was great. And, the kid she had, Princess Bea... She's so cute."

"Yeah," Amy agreed, adding a nod. "But changing the kid's diapers has got to be interesting."

Renee gestured to her own tail. "My mother changed mine all the time." She laughed, but very briefly as her mending breastbone was still easily irritated. She gently rubbed her chest. "At least I don't remember her complaining."

"Did you hear about the old man Princess Fii married?"

"I believe Lord Warren is only sixty-two."

Amy looked confused.

Renee added, "The princess is, after all, a quite youthful seventy-nine years old."

"Whoa!" Bev fanned herself. "I think I'm going to like this Alliance of yours."

"I don't have the faintest idea what the currency exchange rate between your world and the Alliance, but Warren must now be one of the wealthiest men on your world."

Ee cleared her throat. "I read yesterday were Lord Warren was easily the richest Terran on this planet, and he's probably in the top one hundred wealthiest people in the Alliance." Her eyes squinted as she glanced up at the glass ceiling. "I believe Gayle still has him beat out, though just barely."

"Probably not for long." Renee fumbled with the control panel for an auto-waiter control on her chair.

"Who's Gayle?"

Ee smiled. "She's the one who helped Fii show Bea to the audience and the worlds of the Alliance.

"The grey-skinned woman? I believe she held some very high office."

"Yeah. She's a field marshal."

"Field marshal?" Amy's jaw dropped. "Whoa!" She assumed a field marshal's rank was high.

Bev added, "You two have some important friends."

Ee propped her right heel up on the upper part of her left foot. "It's part of the job, and one hell of one at times." She briefly watched Renee poking again at the control panel of the auto-waiter. "I believe they cease service at midnight."

"The spa starts service again at six in the morning," said Bev. "However, you can call for delivery from one of the local all night stores for food or drink."

Disappointed, Renee stared at the controls for a moment.

"Anyhow..." Ee stretched out on her chair. "There's another one of us who will be bearing a Terran-sired child soon."

"Ah, that's great. Who?" Amy pulled out a cell phone out of her bag and waved it in the air for Renee to see.

“Me.” Ee gently slapped the taunt muscles of her stomach.

“Ooh.” Amy’s eyes widened. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“William Alexski. He’s my fiancé. He works for your government. We met while defending Princess Aprii.” Ee thought for a few seconds. “No doubt you probably haven’t heard of him.”

“Nah.” Amy shook her head. “I can’t say I have.”

Bev said, “I bet he was surprised.”

“He doesn’t know yet.” Ee gestured to Renee. “And, until she told me a few minutes ago, I didn’t have any idea, either.”

Amy pointed to Renee with her cell phone. “You can sense her baby?”

“There are three of them: two girls and a boy. They have just recently implanted themselves in the lining of her womb, so they’re still just mere pinpoints of life.”

“Cool.” Amy clasped her hands together about the phone. “It simply must be great to sense people.”

Renee rapidly shook her head from side to side as she frowned. “You don’t want to know what you had for supper.”

“Oh, yucky.” Amy stuck her tongue out as she made a disgusting face. “On second thought.”

Thinking, Bev held her right index finger up. “You said you were a genetic construct. I hope there won’t be complications with your children.”

*Here we go*, Ee thought. “Physically, there’s always a risk with any birth. We are, after all, from totally different worlds. But, it’s the social and cultural part I’m concerned with.” She sat up and turned towards Bev, then rested her elbows on her knees. “Every world, culture, and society in the galaxy has its dark side. If my children were lucky, the days of racism and genocidal hatred are in the past on this world. Mostly likely, however, there are remaining undercurrents of mistrust and hatred between people and other cultures... here as well as elsewhere.” She pressed and held her hands over her belly. “Especially when there is a mixing of blood between worlds.”

Amy sighed, “Come to think of it, my father was a little disturbed by Princess Fii holding up a fairly humanlike baby sporting a tail.”

Bev said, “My parents didn’t mind. They thought the kid was really cute.” She gestured over her shoulders. “Back at the university, Tomas and Beck, those two want-to-be skinheads, were trying to roust up some of our fellow students to confront some of your Alliance comrades.”

Ee nodded her head. “That’s exactly what has me worried. It only takes a few hotheads to start something that could get a lot of innocent people hurt or worse.”

Bev shook her head and smirked. “Not in Tomas and Beck’s case... Mick Myers put their lights out. They were making fun of Mick’s mother who happens to work for a Dycinian lawyer.”

Ee’s ears drooped. “And one day those two will seek revenge. They may do this Mick Myers, his mother, or possibly target someone else from the Alliance harm.” Thinking, she ran her fingers across her chin. “A new world, but the same old story.”

Bev shuttered as a dark thought created an icy chill which quickly dashed up her spine and stood her hair on end. “We have never hesitated to strike out against our own kind in the past. God only knows what some of our radicals may try against you and your Alliance.”

“It’s your Alliance, too.” Ee glanced off towards the spa’s entrance then slowly turned her attention back to Bev. “We are always walking on a mighty thin tightrope.” Sniffing the air, she turned her head a tad and said to Renee. “Gayle and Jhade are approaching.”

“Thanks.” Renee finished reading a small screen on the auto-waiter’s controller and then touched a three button sequence and a small tube of coconut scented sun screen was presented to her. “All right. Yes!” Elated, she glanced at Amy and Bev. “I can’t sense either Gayle or Jhade. They’re what we called a matched syntient-guardian pair.”

“I heard something about that.” Amy watched as Renee opened her lotion tube. “Although, I don’t think I’ve caught one tenth of one percent of all that I’ve seen and heard on the news channels.”

“Tell me about it.” Renee chuckled. “And, I’m from the Alliance.” She squeezed a dab of lotion onto the back of her hand. “Ooh... Smells good.”

Bev held up a bottle of her own lotion. “If you like that free stuff, you’ll love this.”

“Sure.” Renee held her hands out and Bev gently tossed her lotion over. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Gayle stepped onto the spa deck. “I see you two have made yourselves at home.”

“Definitely,” Ee answered back as she slowly stood and saluted. “Ma’am.”

Renee also rose and executed a salute.

Gayle returned their salutes then turned and faced Amy and Bev as Jshade came to a halt by her left side. “Hello. I’m Gayle and my friend here is Jshade.”

Amy and Bev noticed the dark shades Gayle and Jshade wore.

“Hi. I’m Bev.”

“And I’m Amy. I take it you two are a matched syntient-guardian pair?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Gayle turned her translator off and spoke to Ee in Larien. “Has Renee or another synt told you...?”

Ee nodded.

Gayle gestured to Amy and Bev. “Do they know you’re pregnant...?”

Ee nodded again.

Gayle laughed as she reactivated her translator. “Well, there goes my topic of conversation for tonight.”

Bev studied Gayle for a moment then snapped her fingers. “You were on stage with Princess Fii and Bea. You’re the Larien field marshal!”

“Glad to meet you, too.” Gayle firmly shook Bev’s hand.

Bev asked with a heavy tone of concern in her voice, “Should you be out unprotected?”

“I’m not in any great danger.” Gayle patted a pistol on her right hip. “I can sense nearly anyone who might approach us. And besides, Ee’s here.”

Amy and Bev shivered as they heard the silky smooth slide of metal across metal. Ee ran the cutting edges of two wrist stilettos across each other. Then, just as quickly, hid the blades from view.

Gayle sat down in a chair across from Ee. “I feel quite safe at the moment,” she gestured up and outwards with her palms, “so for the time being the two of you are quite safe.”

Jshade took a seat on a chair on Gayle’s left.

The expression on Gayle’s face grew sober as her full attention fell on Ee. “If you should choose to do so, I can make your assignment to this world permanent...”

“Sure.” Ee bit her lip. “William wants to get out and see other worlds, but that’s what vacations are for.”

“Speaking of such, Jshade and I have just returned from the ski slopes on Gwadius Nine.”

Jshade added, “We were at the beaches on Phoix before that.” She turned towards Gayle as she undid her collar. “Are we staying for a while? I’m going cook if I stay here in this uniform.”

“Sure. I need to go over some details with Ee.”

Jshade started removing her uniform as Renee got with Amy and Bev to discuss the possible delivery options of food and drinks through Amy’s cell phone.

“Anyhow... congratulations on your new assignment, Ee.” Gayle eased back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t want to just drop this on you, Ee, but something is coming up soon in the way of security concerning Princess Aprii... Things have changed.” She ran her left hand up and down her upper right arm to spread some lotion.

Ee looked at Gayle without any emotions showing. “And...?”

Gayle cleared throat as she disabled her translator. “You may not know it, but Princess Aprii and Lord Hyran are already married.” She leaned forward as Renee stopped talking to Amy and Bev to listen in. “Five days from now they will be publicly married and that afternoon Aprii will ascend to the

Terran throne.”

“That’s awfully quick. Why the rush?”

Gayle glanced back at the palace. “Because Aprii is now with child.” She drew a long breath. “And, as the situation currently stands, as part of the imperial guard, Aprii’s, Fii’s, and your children will be raised and schooled together. I know you and your family—this world is now more than your job—it’s now your future.”

“Reunions,” “Syntient Aide,” “Legion of Honor,” “Bea,” and “Surprise!” are sections of text from the story *Panocide*.

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