

Panocide: The Past – Section Eight

Haréré

<Date: 5/27/29,690 Standard. Location: the East Park Housing Projects on Terra.>

Jira, a twelve-year-old yellowed-furred tigress gelf spread a deck of fortune cards out in a long line across an old weather-beaten table. All the cards were facedown. Several of her younger gelf friends stood about the table watching her actions and listening to her predictions.

“Okay, Misha.” Jira gestured to the line of cards. “Pull five cards out but don’t look at them. Leave them facedown on the table.”

Misha, a large ten-year-old canine, carefully slid five cards out. “Now what?”

Jira touched the backside of each card he had withdrawn. “Good selection.”

“It won’t be as good as my fortune,” said Hera, a ten-year-old lioness gelf.

“We’ll see,” said Jira. She flipped the first of the cards over. Seeing jewels and gold displayed on the card, she said, “The wealth card.”

Misha grinned. “I’m going to be rich.”

“Like I said earlier, that all depends on what the other cards say. Wealth can come in many forms.” Jira waved her palms over the four remaining cards. She selected the card on the opposite side from the first card she had selected. “The life card.”

Misha asked eagerly, “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. Like I said...” Jira flipped over the left of three remaining cards. “The change card.”

“Change him into something useful,” said Haréré, a nine-year-old rabbit gelf.

“She would if she could,” said Hera.

Jira flipped over the right card. “Fame.”

“Yes.” Misha’s emotions let the word slip out.

“Quiet, please.” Jira flipped the final card over. “Glory.”

Misha looked on nervously. “Well...?”

Jira closed her eyes. “In the years to come you will leave this ghetto and find fame and fortune in a new life...”

“Yes!” Misha jumped up and down several times.

“But be careful, Misha.” Jira held her right hand up to hush him. “Your future fame may carry a dark side. Even bad guys can have lots of money and do good deeds to appear like they’re good members of society and caring to the populace.”

Misha smiled. “My mama would kick my tail if I did anything to embarrass her.”

“Do mine! Do mine!” shouted Haréré.

“Quiet, Haréré!” Jira gathered the cards up in a pile and reshuffled them. “I can’t rush this.”

Haréré drew closer to the table and said in a meek voice, “Okay.”

Jira spread the cards out across the table. “Choose five wisely.”

Haréré hesitated for a moment then selected five cards.

“Let’s see what your future holds.” Jira flipped the center card over. “Life.”

“Okay...” Haréré leaned over the table.

Jira flipped the second card over. “Persistence.” She turned over another. “Strife.”

Haréré grimaced. “That’s bad.”

“Maybe not...” Jira flipped another. “Fruit of Plenty.”

“Plenty of what?” Haréré nearly toppled over onto the table as she leaned forwards over the cards.

“Geez, girl! Back up some.” Jira waved Haréré as well as the others back and away from the table.

Several more children joined the group to see what all was going on.

“Last one.” Jira turned the last card over. “Wealth.”

“I’m going to be rich!” Haréré leapt as high in the air as her rabbit’s legs would boost her.

“No! It means you’re going to have a lot of children.” Jira shook her head. “For God’s sake, you’re a silly rabbit.” She spied Haréré’s harsh glare. “Don’t eyeball me, bunny! I’ll grind that cute powder-puff tail of yours to pulp and I’ll come nowhere close to breathing hard when I do it.”

Basic

<Date: 6/7/29,699 Standard. Terra.>

“Come on, you wimps! Move! Move! Move!” Drill Sergeant Mar Zhomos urged her charges along. She gestured forwards to a group of gelf rats, rabbits and a few lightly built felines and canines constructs as well as a few normal-born trainees. “Do you all see those little soldiers up there waiting on you...? They’re laughing at you under their breath. They’ve probably been standing about there for a good ten minutes waiting for the rest of you to show up.”

Recruit Feloss, a large feline, glanced at another and through her heavy breathing said, “Wait until we get back to something requiring upper body strength... I’m going to grind those rats and rabbits in the ground.”

Recruit Kurdge grinned at Feloss. “You’ll have to catch one of them first.”

She said as she snarled, “Sooner or later they make mistakes, and when one of them does... Boom! I’ve got the little fur ball.”

“Quiet, maggots!” ordered the drill sergeant. “Quick time...! March!” She jogged ahead so all of her charges could easily see her. “All you big boys and girls get a chance to take a swat or two at one and other. Good luck hitting the small wiry ones. You may have size and strength on your side, but they have quickness and agility theirs. Remember today’s lesson. You may one day be honored to serve the Alliance in its defense. At that time while engaging the enemy, you will come up against many soldiers of differing sizes, shapes, and abilities.” She glared harshly at Feloss. “Everyone has strengths and everyone has weaknesses. You’ll have to discover their strengths and weaknesses to exploit them while hiding or bluffing your own weaknesses... Platoon, halt!” She brought them to a stop as they reached the faster runners. “In case you’re wondering why some of your fights might be mismatched, you will hopefully learn a few lessons on how to protect your comrades, large and small, in combat. You need to learn each others weaknesses and then learn how to protect those weaknesses from the enemy. Your and their lives depend on all of you working together.”

A second drill instructor walked over to Zhomos’ side. Unknown to the recruits, this second drill instructor was Zhomos’ husband. Whereas she was a large feline gelf, Sergeant First Class Kurgess Jokar was a small Lakiekan man.

He turned and faced the trainees. “I am Sergeant First Class Jokar. And, before you laugh, you’ll only get pain and misery from me. So there will be no jokes. We’re not here for that. Understand?”

“Yes, drill sergeant!” responded the group.

“Now...” Jokar glanced at the smaller recruits. “Everyone, fall in!”

The recruits quickly reformed the formation so that every member was in their assigned slot.

“For fast runners you all move too slowly!” He gestured to a fighting ring. “Some of you may be catching on to your purpose here today... You’re here to learn how to work together. How to fight together!” Jokar briefly grinned ever so slightly. The smile was even quicker to disappear. “We don’t have the enemy here to fight so you will have to do so with one and other. In this you will learn to bond together and fight together. You’ll learn the strengths of your buddies and how to best use them to accomplish the mission.” He slowly walked about before the recruits. “You’ll also learn your buddies’ weaknesses and to help protect them from the enemy. Patriotism is highly lauded to get you to fight for

your worlds. So is defending your mother and your families—even the girlfriends and boyfriends you left behind back home.” He raised his right hand and extended his forefinger skywards. “But no...! You fight for those who are fighting alongside you! They are your sisters and brothers-in-arms! They are the ones who will save your butt in battle and they’ll expect you to do the same for them...”

Jokar noticed a trainee briefly turning her attention elsewhere and he rapidly stepped before her. Putting his face right in Haréré’s face, he shouted, “If you don’t pay attention in combat you can get your buddies killed! I’m sure they won’t appreciate that!” He pointed to the ground and ordered, “Dropped and give me fifty, private!”

Haréré immediately dropped to the ground and quickly ripped out ten pushups. The next ten were slower in coming. She had to fight for the following ten.

Jokar motioned for one of his new drill instructors to approach. “Keep an eye on this one, Sergeant Firth. Her mind is elsewhere.”

Haréré glanced up at the new drill sergeant and to her horror saw Jira glaring down at her. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot as she saw the glare in her old antagonist’s eyes.

Sacrifice

<Date: 5/27/29,700 Standard. The Trunj Incursion by the Krylian Empire.>

A platoon of Vishahntien and Sha’kals soldiers treaded their way up a steep hill as a torrential rain fell on them. Krylian forces and their aligned Malkin soldiers opposed them from the ruins of an ancient castle not far from a desolated town and its industries. As the castle once a summer home of an elite prince the castle wasn’t built to be a truly defensive position but any cover was better than no cover at all. Tagging along with the Vishahntien and Sha’kals were army troops comprised of normal birth and gelf soldiers.

“Cover the windows and arrow slits!” shouted a rather tall Sha’kal man, Sergeant I’Taop. “We don’t want any more run-ins with snipers!” He directed several Vishahntien women to check and prep the castle’s main gate for explosives planted by the enemy and then to blow the large doors with their own explosives.

The not-so-distant sound of ground-churning artillery drew nearer. Four hundred meters away, another platoon of Sha’kals and Vishahntiens and assigned troops scurried for hiding places as death descended upon them from the sky. In this area, the Krylian artillery was claiming a deadly toll among the assaulting Alliance troops.

“No signs of booby traps, sarge,” said one of the Vishahntiens. “We’re planting charges for the doors now.”

“Good.” I’Taop pointed out several windows on the castle’s second floor. “Let’s get some troops up there and start clearing the upper part of the castle.” He gestured for several of the smaller soldiers to make their way up to the windows with the help of a few of the larger Sha’kal women.

One after another, two quite large and tall Sha’kal women lifted several small feline, rabbit, and rat genetic constructs up to the windows. Two Dycinians were also among them.

Immediately a firefought broke out on the second story.

“Pop that door!” I’Taop fired at several windows and slits to help keep the enemy’s heads back.

A small object was flung out of a third story window by an unseen hand.

“Grenade!” shouted several soldiers together with little harmony between them.

Haréré was about to climb up one of the large Sha’kal women to access a window when she dropped her weapon and launched herself towards the grenade as it splashed and rolled in the mud. *Ah, stupid! What am I thinking?* Haréré, now a private first class, asked her self as she passed the zenith of her leap and started to bodily fall towards the grenade. She tried to think of her mother, litter mates, and siblings as she waited for her life to pass before her eyes, yet all she saw was some of her fellow

soldiers who able move fast and clear the area and those who couldn't move fast. Hitting the ground, she embraced her grenade and her certain death. The slower moving Sha'kal women and those who were just having the reality of the situation dawn on them could only watch and hope Haréré's tiny body would suffice to diminish the grenade's blast and fragmentation.

I'm dead... I'm dead... I'm dead, she thought as she clutched the grenade tightly to her stomach. Her chest tightened as the fear of death passed through her. Her heart was beating faster than it ever had before in her life. "Ah...! A...! Ag...!" Haréré cried out as she started breathing harder as her throat constricted. Her heart raced even faster. Her teeth showed themselves in a grimacing smile of distress. She then closed her eyes and swallowed hard as she accepted her fate and impending death. Silently, she waited what seemed an eternity as she continued to cradle the cold grenade against her stomach.

"Not the smartest thing to do." I'Taop reached down and pulled up Haréré up from the mud by the scruff of her collar. "It's a dud, soldier."

"Oh, God! I'm alive. I'm still alive!" Haréré opened her mud-caked eyes and looked about.

"Yes you are... Don't make a big deal about it." I'Taop removed the grenade from her fear-stiffened fingers. "Now keep quiet before you attract in more fire from the enemy." He examined the grenade as his helmet combat camera zoomed in on the fuse and striker. "Well, I'll be..." He turned the grenade so she could see it better. "A piece of shrapnel jammed the striker before it could activate the fuse." He stuck the remains of a grenade pin from one he had thrown earlier in between the striker and fuse. He handed her the freed piece of shrapnel back to her. "Your good luck charm." He knelt beside her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded yes. She tried the best she could to keep her body from trembling.

"Good job." He gestured towards the castle. "Now get back to work!"

"Yes, sarge." Haréré stood up, pocketed her lucky charm, and retrieved her weapon. Her powerful legs hurled her body back to where she was in line again to enter the castle.

Searching

Deep in the lower levels of the castle and its surrounding land, Haréré and several other soldiers of small stature slowly made their way through endless catacombs and storage rooms. The passages were either too short, too tight, or both in places for larger Alliance personnel to follow.

A Voeshalter syntient, First Lieutenant Kaziki Teokrymana, lead the way. She had informed the group they were on a rescue mission, albeit the status of any possible hostages was uncertain, and that they were definitely going to come across the enemy. Before them she could barely sense the presence of hundreds of enemy soldiers through the intervening rock so the likelihood of their encountering the enemy without much warning was quite great.

Kaziki stopped at an intersection and motioned for a canine gelf to bring up an urban corner gun.

Hunter eased his flexible weapon's business end around the corner and used its camera to display an image in Kaziki's dropdown viewer. The view clearly showed numerous Krylian guard bots defending a wide portion of the corridor. She knew she could toss an EMP grenade to scramble the bots' "brains" but that would also serve to alert the bots' controller something was up. The larger of the bots also demonstrated there was a much larger opening on the Krylian side of the catacombs.

Kaziki signaled by hand to the others they needed to find another way to gain their target.

One of the Dycinians manning a thermal viewer pointed out a temperature difference of a passageway that had branched off a hundred meters back at another intersection. His thermal viewer showed a passage that lead off to their right and rising above them.

Kaziki signaled for all to retrace their steps back past the last intersection they had passed so she could take the lead in the attempt to circle around the enemy. Quietly she followed her charges back

through the tunnel. Then, when the branching in the tunnel was reached, she led them along the new tunnel.

They silently crept through the darkness as the mountain physically—and mentally—encroached inwards on them. They bided their time as they pressed onwards towards wherever the tunnel might lead them.

As they reached two kilometers further along the tunnel, the smell of rotting flesh made the dank air even heavier to breathe—even through masks. Kaziki didn't need to bother telling the others what possibilities lay ahead for them. Even the noses of the humans could pick out the stench of death through their combat masks. However, unlike the others on her detail, her senses made out several mass graves of the indigenous people within the depths of the mountain.

Dack, a short Terran man, and Muros, a rat man from a colony of Laria, lead the group through the tunnels. Hunter followed closely behind the two. Haréré and a grey vixen named Twitty brought up the rear.

Kaziki was barely able to sense a few of the other Alliance groups searching other tunnels to see where they might lead. It was the tunnel she and her group were in that she kept her attention focused on.

Haréré felt Twitty bump against her backside as she stopped. She thought “Twitchy” would have been a more appropriate name for the vixen named Twitty. Twitty was not a true hermaphroditic gelf from the Sha'kal world, yet she had a somewhat close appearance to one. The Terran nurse who had overseen her birth had called her a twitter, a reference to the ancient Terran Germanic tongue for a hermaphrodite. Her mother changed it to Twitty. Twitty had no more testosterone in her system than any other normal female of her designed species, unlike many female hyena gelfs—especially the spotted varieties—and such whose blood was often overflowing with it. Of course, her looks made her the focus of many, and often cruel, jokes in the women's showers especially since every other part of Twitty's bearing and appearance was all female.

Haréré was Twitty's only friend she could consider being remotely close to. Haréré grinned. At least the two of them didn't always get on each others nerves. She thought back a few days when she and Hunter were having a little fun together. Twitty patiently waited outside Hunter's room to go shopping with her. At the time Haréré was screaming quite loudly as several orgasms rocked her while she and Hunter were “tied” together with his knot.

Kaziki stopped and raised her fist.

Hunter knelt and used his weapon's angle-viewing flexi-sights to look about a corner and verified all was clear. Dack and Muros then continued onwards through the corridor.

“They're close,” warned Kaziki. However, she was not sure what all lie in the way of tunnel and rock between them and the enemy she sensed. “Less than one hundred meters straight ahead.”

Haréré noted Twitty looked her normal—well nervous—self.

Touching her mask to Twitty's, Haréré said through the physical contact, “Whenever we get out of this place I'll grab Hunter and we'll find you a guy and spend a night wearing them out.”

“Sounds like a plan, Haréré.” Twitty knew their plan would most likely fall apart before it even got started. They almost always did. If Hunter didn't show up then the two of them would most likely end up getting drunk, finding a place to sleep it off, and awaking up the following morning with the two worse hangovers on record. She removed the contact between their helmets.

Twitty was usually hit on far more times for dates than Haréré was. Twitty had the cuter face, more shapely body, and a pair of decently-sized perky boobs. Haréré dimensions were all slim and flat while Twitty's initial looks got the men's attention. However, and she knew quite well, it was when she got a man alone then that “touching moment” fell apart very quick. She knew hyena men often liked their women to be large “down yonder” but she personally found they weren't to her taste. She felt she was pretty much out of luck and never prodded Haréré along in her sensual dreams to ardently find men together for their weekends off.

She has too much sex on her mind, thought Twitty of Haréré.

Kaziki whispered, "I'm sensing three Skyvhaltis and three Delvannas up ahead."

Hunter took the lead. They moved onwards and Hunter raised his hand and signaled he had a target in his sights as he looked about a bend in the tunnel.

Kaziki let the others know several Krylians, Malkins, and S'gyries were drawing closer from behind the others. No doubt the enemy had at least one syntient in the area as many enemies were heading towards them.

A shot rang out, shattering the rock a little above where Hunter was viewing around the bend in the tunnel. Hunter responded by launching a 50 mm grenade towards the enemy.

The blast deafened all and severely wounded two of the Delvannas.

Hunter felt his world go numb as a bullet slammed into his gas mask and facial shield, tore through his snout, and splattered Dack with his shattered teeth and bone as well as his blood.

"Hunter!" cried out Haréré. Her on-and-off lover had just had a good part of his snout blown away. Her stomach felt quite queasy.

"Easy, Haréré. I have him." Muros saw to Hunter's wound as Dack laid down suppressive fire to cover them. Dack launch a couple of low concussion, high fragmentation grenades in quick succession. The tunnel didn't shake nearly as bad as it had in the first blast.

"Do what you can for Hunter, Muros," said Kaziki as she moved forwards with Haréré following right behind her. Twitty keep her weapon aimed rearwards less the enemy sneak in behind them.

Muros sparingly use a can of flesh foam to patch up Hunter's smashed snout. "That stopped the bleeding. Can you breathe?"

"Yeah," Hunter said in a hoarse, muffled voice. His eyes watered up with tears as the flesh foam burned while it integrated with his flesh. He mumbled something unrecognizable through his muzzle as he stood up and checked his weapon. Carefully he mumbled, "Haréré, I'm good."

Haréré glared worriedly at him. As there was nothing she could do to help she tried to put Hunter's wound out of her mind.

"Try not to talk, Hunter," said Kaziki as she tossed a proximity-triggered flash-bang device down the tunnel. She silently listened to a radio update. "The other tunnels we're exploring are all blocked so the others are heading towards us to help punch through here. No more grenades. We need to hold this tunnel intact. This is the only known opening we have on their left flank so we can't afford to lose it."

They all ducked as a burst of machinegun fire ricocheted along the tunnel.

"They're massing... Take up defensive positions!" Kaziki sensed about. "Third squad should be the first to arrive. Second squad's much further behind us."

Twitty's stomach turned over. Like the others, she didn't like fighting in tunnels. Muros appeared to be the only one there who felt halfway comfortable with being in dark tunnels—not that he wouldn't mind being somewhere else at that moment.

Kaziki whispered to Hunter, "Medics are on the way."

He nodded.

Kaziki sensed a Delvanna approaching the flash-bang device. As the device went off she leaned about and unloaded several rounds into the man. Then leaning back against the tunnel wall, she glanced at Hunter and said, "Their reinforcements are going to be here before ours."

With his wound Hunter couldn't grimace but Kaziki sensed his muscles attempt the gesture.

Muros rolled across the tunnel's floor and took up a position behind a pile of rock and bricks that had tumbled down from the tunnel wall. He was somewhat exposed but he had a great view long the tunnel.

"Careful there," warned Kaziki. "I hate paperwork and condolence letters."

"I don't plan to be the cause of extra work for you, ma'am." He took aim at a dimly lit figure,

even with light amplification, in the distance tunnel bend.

The very air erupted with a roar as the sound of several hundred rounds screaming through the dank atmosphere followed by their staccato impacts. A Krylian Gatling-style gun of a high speed weapon had opened fire.

Muros touched his weapon's trigger and the Krylian weapon ceased its firing as its operator fell over backwards. "Now might be a good time to get our butts back to a more defensible location."

Kaziki nodded in agreement. "They must have a good sized opening inside their lines... maybe some stairs. I sense more of them descending for us." She turned about and faced where they had come from. "There's an intersection less than a hundred meters back where we'll have some freedom of movement and the enemy will be in a tight squeeze." She reported her plan to the company commander.

"What did the old man have to say?" asked Haréré.

Kaziki motioned for them to fall back. "We're not to give up any more ground once we set up our new position."

More shots rang out from the enemy.

Dack said, "I'll cover while the rest of you fall back.

"Right. When I say for you to move, you move," said Kaziki as rock shattered above her head. She glanced at Haréré and Twitty. "Cover us at the next bend. Go!"

Haréré dashed down the tunnel at a rapid clip. Twitty followed as fast as she could which was still faster than most of the others could run.

Kaziki sensed Haréré and Twitty take up positions and promptly had the others join her in falling back. She added, "I recall there are a few crates there as well as two side tunnels so make use of them."

Suddenly Kaziki turned her attention back towards the enemy. She sensed two soldiers who appeared to be speaking with someone who wasn't there. Bringing her weapon to her shoulder, she crouched low and took aim into the darkness between the two enemy soldiers. She gently squeezed her weapon's trigger and a round tore down along the tunnel, passing between the two soldiers.

Kaziki heard the bullet impact the flesh of the person she couldn't sense. She had struck an enemy syntient dead on in the chest. It was not an immediate fatal shot, she couldn't sense the syntient's body, but whoever she hit wasn't going to be back on their feet for quite some time.

Sensing the enemy rapidly moving about, Kaziki glanced over her shoulder and shouted, "Move!" She jumped to her own feet. "I just took down their syntient and they're going to be pissed."

The enemy emphasized her point by opening fire with nearly everything they had.

Kaziki was glad they didn't initially open up with the Krylian Gatling gun. However, a round clipped the bullet resistant armor covering her right leg. Tumbling to the wet ground from the bullet's impact, she heard the Gatling open up. She was suddenly covered by rock shards as the Gatling's bullets chew away at the tunnel's walls. Scrambling across the tunnel's floor she managed to clear a bend in the passage as the Gatling gun's rounds plowed into the floor where she had first dropped.

"Go!" Kaziki motioned for the others to run. "Speed is essential!" She used her open hand to give Hunter a little assist forwards, but not so hard as to possibly trip him up. "They're getting reinforced before we are."

Hunter grunted. He was carrying three times the gear as any other member of the team. He managed to mumble out, "Big gun... Slow move..."

"Good point. It'll take them a little while to maneuver it through places in this tunnel if at all."

He handed her an APERS mine.

As they made it to where the tunnel opened up and split off into three other tunnels, Kaziki stopped shy and planted the device in a crevice. She withdrew its remote from its side and armed the device. "Duck when I say duck." She pushed some dirt over the antipersonnel device to help conceal it.

Hunter smiled as he nodded his affirmation. He then trotted over to the tunnel on his right where

he joined Haréré and Twitty.

“Our reinforcements are coming up through the middle tunnel,” said Kaziki as she moved towards the left tunnel where Muros and Dack had taken up positions. “Leave it open for them. We’ll protect the flanks. We can catch the Krylian underlings in a cross fire, but they’re no doubt expecting that.”

“How long until our reinforcements arrive. Ma’am?” asked Twitty.

“They’re in the tunnel now though it may take them a few minutes to get here.”

A flash-bang grenade skittered across the floor and Kaziki closed her eyes. The effects of the bang left her dazed and confused. Several more flash grenades followed to ensure Kaziki and her charges were well stunned.

Remembering the entrance from tunnel the enemy was attacking from located Kaziki tossed one of her own flash-bangs back at them.

A reinforcing Delvanna soldier stepped on Kaziki’s flash grenade as it went off. The bang partially dazed the enemy while crippling the Delvanna foot.

Hunter tossed another flash-bang grenade to back up the effects left over by Kaziki’s.

All fell silent as the soldiers on both sides took a moment to attempt regaining their senses. The flash-bangs did their work all too well inside the confines of the tunnels.

Teary-eyed, Kaziki glanced at Hunter, shook her head, and whispered, “No more flash-bangs unless they use them.”

“I’ve got no problem with that,” said Muros. He shook the cobwebs from his head and steadied himself for the next onslaught.

The wait was short. Kaziki signaled danger as five enemy soldiers made a mad dash into the wide spot in the tunnel. The attacking soldiers weren’t prepared for the crossfire they encountered from Kaziki’s team, however the soldiers to follow them would now know better.

Six enemy soldiers ran into the widening tunnel and alternating rolled to the left and right. As the others opened fire, Haréré leapt up and kicked a Skyvhaltis man squarely in the face, dropping him to the floor and unconsciousness. Rolling, Haréré rolled and surprised a Skyvhaltis woman as she entered. Haréré’s blade severed the woman’s tendons behind her left knee, dropping her to the tunnel’s floor.

Haréré jumped to safety as a Delvanna man emptied a machine pistol in her direction. Hunter put a round in the man’s brains for his effort to kill Haréré.

“Damn! Haréré, you’re going to get your tail shot off!” warned Twitty.

Haréré grinned. “I don’t have that much of a tail for them to shoot off!”

Twitty shot a Skyvhaltis as he tightly hugged the tunnel’s side. “It’s what’s attached to your tail that should be your concern.”

Several enemy soldiers charged the tunnel and Kaziki set off her APERS charge. The explosion wasn’t much but the shrapnel it hurled outwards cut a wide swath through the enemy stacked along the tunnel.

“Whoa!” Hunter pulled his head back from the sight of several enemy soldiers who were nearly turned into hamburger. He felt his stomach turn over inside it self.

A single round from a burst of fire round slammed through Kaziki’s chest, severing her spinal cord. Kaziki gasped then moaned. She felt no pain and she knew very well her wound was certainly fatal. Unable to breath from the blood rapidly filling her throat, she could only watch Haréré prepare a nox vial for her as her very life blood filled her chest cavity and drained from her body through the wound and her mouth.

Judgment

<Date: 6/17/29,700 Standard. Location: the Alliance military base on Shöntios Four.>

Haréré felt her stomach crawling about the pit of her pelvis as she was lead inside a darkened chamber by two escorting military police officers. She still had a slight limp from shrapnel she had taken from several grenades and artillery impacts during the Trunj Incursion. Earlier that day she had been told to drop her work, put on her dress uniform, and to report immediately to headquarters. Four days earlier she had felt the officers were watching her closely so she tried to do her best at all times and to keep herself out of trouble. She grimaced; it appeared trouble had gone out of its way to find her.

As Haréré was escorted inside a small auditorium the lights slowly brightened. As her eyes adjusted she was able to make out three high ranking officers sitting behind a simple wooden table draped with a dark green cloth.

“Private First Class Haréré Ngami, please stand before the bench,” ordered an unseen male voice. “You have been called before this tribunal concerning your actions on or about 27 May 29,700 Standard during the Trunj Incursion by the Krylian Empire.”

Haréré’s stomach gained additional knots atop its already existing knots. The day in question had been a nightmarish one for her. Many of her friends had been wounded or killed—some could never be revived and were permanently lost. Twitty was mangled but had survived to be rejuvenated. Dack was near death but quickly rebuilt and rejuvenated. Her dear friend Hunter and Muros were both killed and later revived. At least medical technology had brought the three of them back to good health. Kaziki, on the other hand had been recovered from the dead, however her being noxxed had cost her sentient abilities. Kaziki was now a normal Voeshalter woman.

Saluting, Haréré said, “Private First Class Ngami reporting as ordered, sirs.”

“Parade rest,” ordered a female voice with a Vishahntien accent.

Haréré tensed. She had said *sirs* not *sirs and ma’am*. Cringing internally, she assumed the parade rest position with a rapid movement.

“Relax, private. You’re not on trial here. We’re only reviewing your actions on the date in question. Anything action of yours outside of the Trunj Incursion is not of interest to us.”

Haréré wondered if she had been demoted. Her mind was thrashing about topsy-turvy.

“Yes, ma’am.” Haréré fought with her own mind to maintain her control over her demanding reflex for fight or flight, and flight was trying its best to win out.

The Vishahntien woman officer stood. “I’m General Utani.” She gestured to a man to her right. “Lieutenant General Hernandez of Terra.” She gestured to the woman to her left. “And Lieutenant General Von’Tanoss of Laria.” She seated herself. “The combat auditors have pieced together the combat footage from yours and the helmets of others showing your behavior and actions under fire. Some footage from the enemy’s cameras has also been included from where we were able to retrieve it.” She smiled then frowned. “You may find this interesting... And it may raise a few nightmares in your mind, so please let us know if you need to take a break from the proceedings should your memories become too much for you.”

If I do then I would be showing weakness, she thought. Instead, she nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

A Vishahntien woman carried a chair over and placed it beside Haréré. She then quietly disappeared.

“Please be seated, private.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Haréré looked at the chair and slowly seated her self. “Thank you, ma’am.”

General Hernandez said, “Questions concerning your actions have come to a head. We’re going to review some of your actions that day.”

Haréré tensed. “Yes, sir.” Her fingers made out the shape in her pocket from her good luck charm she kept with her from the battle of the Trunj Incursion.

A holographic image formed between Haréré and the three generals.

Haréré saw her self leaping through the air towards a grenade.

“Is this you?” asked Hernandez.

“Yes, sir.”

“What were you thinking at this moment?”

“While I was in mid air... I could only think that I was doing something that was going to get me killed. It was just plain stupid...” Haréré touched her left fingertips to her temple. “Very stupid...” She lowered her hand. “As for the time right before I jumped I can’t say. I just reacted.”

“Saving the lives of your friends?”

“I don’t know... Maybe.” Haréré shook her head while shrugging her shoulders. “No reason... I just jumped on the grenade.”

“I see.” The image changed and showed Haréré removing Kaziki’s helmet and noxxing her. “Somehow the enemy missed you when you went to the aid of your syntient officer.” He advanced the visual archive to show a Skyvhaltis woman spying Kaziki’s syntient marked epaulettes. The recording then showed Haréré leaping out into the open and firing a blast to the right temple of the Skyvhaltis woman before she could shoot Kaziki in the head to lessen the chance of her recovery. Haréré then rolled over to Kaziki’s side, taking a flesh wound to her right thigh in the process. Quickly, she tore off one of Kaziki’s epaulettes and replaced the remaining one with one of her PFC epaulettes so the enemy might take her as not being a syntient. Then, returning fire, she darted back over to Hunter and Twitty.

Haréré closed her eyes. She knew within the next moment Hunter was going to take a bullet in the top of his shoulder that would tear along his body and exit at the base of his tail.

Hernandez skipped the scene, sparing her the sight of Hunter’s death. She was most thankful as she unconsciously closed her eyes for a few seconds. She could only privately thank God and the doctors Hunter was still alive and back among the living.

Muros’ death was skipped as well as Dack’s receiving a near-lethal burst of machinegun fire to his chest.

The view jumped to a point past where Twitty had suffered a nasty belly wound. Haréré watched her feet move along from Twitty’s point-of-view as she helped a bent-over Twitty through a tunnel to where it merged with a flight of stairs. A sudden spike of fear slashed through her as she realized her team was to have held onto their position and not retreat. Her pulling Twitty and herself out of the position was a direct violation of higher orders.

Haréré sat and silently sighed. She now knew why she was there—she had abandoned her post!

The scene shown by Haréré’s camera displayed her dropping Twitty at the base of the stairs then leaping atop a large Malkin woman. Her stabbing and slashing blade made grisly work of the woman’s neck.

A Malkin man raised his weapon towards Haréré but her powerful right leg shattered the man’s left elbow. With his aim thrown off, his weapon ripped up the side of the tunnel. A rapid second round house kick from Haréré’s right foot spun his head about, shattering his neck. Grabbing Twitty, she led the two of them up a set of twisting stairs.

Haréré heard the enemy closing fast on their heels. Stopping for a second, she removed a fragmentation grenade from Twitty’s utility belt and hurled it down the stairs. The screams they heard let her know she had inflicted some damage to the enemy.

Hernandez commented, “You took out six of the enemy with that grenade.”

The view cut to where Haréré was dragging Twitty’s unconscious body out onto the floor of a high castle tower. The view became jittery as Haréré looked over the side of the tower’s stonework to the vast distance to the ground below. Looking up she saw several communication arrays. Her holographic self said, “*Maybe they won’t use the heavy shit against us with these dishes and antennas up here.*”

As her holographic self looked back down at the ground, Haréré felt her self grow queasy with the unsteady view her combat camera had provided to the hologram.

Dust and rock debris came into view as a sniper’s round slammed against the parapet beside her.

Pulling back behind the safety of the stonework, she saw the tower's access door open. She leapt towards the door, rolled, and came up underneath the man who was stepping out with a drawn assault weapon. Haréré's upward motion knocked the man back and over the side of the parapet.

Haréré didn't look over the edge to see what the man's inevitable fate was. No sense being an easy target for snipers.

Her attention was suddenly taken over by the sound of a boot grinding dirt and gravel against stone from a Malkin sniper who was running around from the over side of the tower's turret. Spinning and kicking, she caught the sniper squarely in his gonads. He dropped his pistol which was one of Haréré's primary concerns at that moment. With his pistol out of the equation, Haréré plunged her knife deep into his chest. With the large man leaning against her, she watched as his life slowly left his eyes. Shaken, she lowered his limp body the rest of the way to the floor when she was absolutely sure his was dead. Her body was almost completely covered in the man's blood.

Back in the auditorium, Haréré turned her head away.

The hologram paused.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The hologram proceeded onwards and in the projection, she pocketed the sniper's pistol and recovered his rifle. On the turret's floor she spied several boxes of spare rounds for the sniper's weapon. Then kneeling down, she checked on Twitty's condition.

Hernandez took the holographic recording ahead several minutes. The view showed a scene looking alongside the sniper scope of the rifle Haréré had recovered. Hernandez magnified the face of a woman Haréré had in her sights. "Do you know who this Krylian woman is, private?"

Haréré studied the Krylian's face. "No, sir. All I know about her is that she wore a lot of gold and I knew that all hell would break loose when I shot her... And then, possibly, it might take some pressure off my other friends who were spread out about the castle."

"I imagine so... She was Marshal Treka My-Dylakie, commander of the Huryom Sector of the Krylian Empire." Hernandez smiled at Haréré. "With one shot you completely disrupted the Krylian's expansion plans into our Dreytor Sector. Then for the next two hours you randomly sniped at the enemy below your position."

"They were doing their best to kill me, sir. I still don't know why they just didn't blow me and... Private Twitty Shöberkerres out of the tower."

"In part, you said it earlier... It's because their only short and long range communications antennas were located on the tower you chose to defend." Hernandez had the computer bring up a post battle picture of the Krylian's communications array atop the tower. "Their regular troops are not trained to fight onwards without Khan's distant hand maintaining control over them. The best they could do was to take pot shots at you, toss the occasional grenade and charge the tower's upper door from time to time." He leaned towards Haréré. "Somehow you managed to survive."

"Yes, sir." Haréré shuttered. "That's what I was designed and trained for." Somehow she was managing to feel a little better about her situation.

General Von'Tanoss said, "We counted the number of enemy bodies you had hit with your *borrowed* rifle. There were one hundred thirty-two confirmed kills. There were another forty-nine kills that the ballistics was inconclusive over. Of course, this doesn't include the kills you had in the tunnels or in the bunker you assisted in taking afterwards. We know of at least four dozen enemy soldiers you wounded during the course of the battle."

A video of Suki slashing her way through the tower's access door popped up into view.

Von'Tanoss added, "Fortunately, you didn't take out your rescuer."

The video showed Suki ducking Haréré's vicious kick.

"And you are a most fortunate and very lucky soldier." Von'Tanoss gestured and another video clip from earlier showed Haréré seeing the access door opening to the top of the tower and proceeding

to time a kick to hit the emerging enemy soldier when instead a grenade flew out the opening door. By chance Haréré's foot intercepted the grenade and knocked it back where it bounced about and then down inside the tower's stairwell.

Hernandez said, "Ancient Earth at one time had several cultures who believed that in carrying a rabbit's foot they would gain good luck and fortune." He gestured to her digitigrade feet. "You have very lucky feet."

Haréré nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then there's later that night when you recovering from your wounds at the medical bunker where you assisted the 38th Light Urban Assault Corps in taking repealing the Krylian counterassault."

A cold chill surged upwards along Haréré's spine. "I don't recall much from that incident, ma'am."

"So we have been informed."

The hologram projected a view of Haréré dressed in hospital smock dashing across a field as strobe-like flashes from weapons' fire lit up her progress. Parts of her body, arms, and legs were shaven and covered in bandages.

Crying out like a banshee, Haréré dove into the Krylian line with a machete in her right hand and a pistol in her left. She shot a man in his face, rolled, and came up jabbing the machete into the groin of a Malkin woman. Swinging about, she literally disarmed a Delvanna man. She then pumped two rounds into the chest of a Krylian man as her powerful legs propelled into another group of enemy soldiers and out of the camera's view.

Hernandez said, "Do to the time and place of the Krylian counterattack, there were very few combat cameras recording the event. However, numerous eyewitnesses have left a detailed accounting of your actions that night. In essence, you opened a hole through the enemy's line and created so much disruption in their rear echelons that our field commanders on scene were able punch a wedge through their line and separate their forces. Within ten minutes their assault lost momentum and collapsed."

Utani said, "You were discovered by our troops wrestling with a Malkin man for control of a knife. As you had broken nearly ever rib in the man's chest he didn't put up a fight went captured as our troops pulled you off of him."

Vague, nightmarish images of the night battle flashed through Haréré's mind. She trembled as details of the night became clear in her memory.

Hernandez asked, "Are you okay, private?"

Haréré opened her eyes. "Yes, sir."

"Very good then..." Utani stood with Hernandez and Von'Tanoss joining her. Utani said, "Please rise."

Haréré cautiously stood.

"Private First Class Haréré Ngami, for your numerous acts of valor during the course of battle in the Krylian Empire hostilities in the Trunj Incursion, you have been recommended for the Terran Medal of Honor, the Sha'kal Grand High Valor Medal, and the Hero of the Alliance Medal of Valor along with numerous other awards. You have also been recommended for the Vishahntien Varlinsk Sar Keer Legion of Honor. Earlier as we reviewed your case the three of us saw no reason why these recommendations and proceedings should be halted or further investigations sought. We recommend our findings be forwarded to the respective governments for further review. Vishahntia, Sha'kal, Terra, and all the governments of the Alliance, to honor you and all those who paid the ultimate price, have recommended you for the Terran Medal of Honor, the Sha'kal Grand High Valor Medal, the Hero of the Alliance Medal of Valor, and the Vishahntien Varlinsk Sar Keer Legion of Honor medal." Utani and her fellow officers saluted her. "From all of us we salute you and all those who fought beyond the call of their duty. Congratulates, Corporal Ngami. The ceremony for your awards will be announced once the respective governments and their institutions have made their final reviews and decisions."

Returning their salute, Haréré had to force her body to breathe.

Friends Reborn

Walking out of the tribunal Haréré felt her whole body tingle as though it had suffered a massive electrical shock. She felt like she was standing back as she watched her body walk by itself from afar. Her head buzzed and her senses were numb.

She managed to get enough of her brain cells to work together so as to allow her recognize Suki walking towards her.

“Field Marshal.” Haréré saluted.

“At ease.” Suki returned the salute. “I brought a couple of friends to see you.”

“Who...?” Haréré looked about.

“Me for one!” Twitty stuck her head about a corner leading off the main corridor of the headquarters building.

Haréré caught the odd glint in Twitty’s eyes. “You’re a guardian!”

“Yes!” Twitty darted forwards and wrapped her arms about Haréré as Suki silently left the area. “Yesterday... Right after you left my hospital room. Kaziki and her matched syntient dropped by to see how I was doing.”

“The lieutenant’s now a guardian...?” Haréré felt a little overwhelmed by the day’s events.

“You saved Kaziki’s life by noxxing her, but at the cost of her greater senticiency. But now she has it nearly all back again.”

Kaziki stepped out from behind the corner along with her matched syntient Lieutenant Captain Joemmie Schröner. Joemmie was a very thin 210 centimeter tall ferret-like woman from the Alliance aligned world of Vertis Prime. Her brown eyes were hidden by a black on white mask and she bore a very long banded tail.

Haréré saluted. “Madams.”

“No.” Joemmie reformed her salute. “Thank you. Your actions led to my gaining two guardians.”

Twitty said, “You should be happy. You don’t look so good.”

Haréré rubbed her temples. She thought about Hunter getting religious and dedicating his life to the priesthood. At that very moment he was heading for a monastery to begin his new life. She knew she would miss him—especially when it came to sex. “My brain is swamped... No, make that burnt to a crisp” She shook her head. “At least the army’s sending me home for a short while. During that time the worlds of the Alliance are looking over my medal recommendations.”

“That’s great!” Twitty jumped up and down in jubilation. “You haven’t been home since you first joined up.”

“No...” Haréré grimaced as she shook her head. “My mom will spend all of her time worrying about my possibly returning to combat and quite possibly getting killed. She does enough worrying for a dozen mothers.” A chill shook her body. “If she ever sees the footage of me in combat she’s going to freak. She wants me to get out of the army, quite partying, and raise her some grand kids for her to spoil.”

“That’s sort of one of the basic tenets of being a mother,” said Kaziki. “Have children and then pay them back by spoiling the grandchildren.”

“Maybe later, but not now.” Haréré sighed. “At this point I just want to enjoy life.”

Twitty quipped, “If you keep jumping on grenades or jumping enemy soldiers who are several times your mass that might be a rather short period of time.”

Haréré raised her arms from her sides. “I still have no idea why I did all that, aside from trying to save my friends. All I know is that I was lucky several times over.” She rubbed her palm across her belly then stuck her hand in her pocket and felt her good luck charm. “I’m not going to try for a second time.”

“You should go and see your mother,” said Joemmie. “The army’s likely to have you touring all across the Alliance when you get all of those medals.”

“Worse than that...” Haréré feigned a grin. “The army’s pushing for me to reenlist.”

“I don’t really see you as a lifer,” said Twitty. She, now being a guardian, knew she was likely to be in some form of government service for the rest of what could be a very long life for her own self.

“Maybe I will...” Haréré cocked her head to the right. “In twenty to forty years and I’ll have a nice pension to help brace up a hopefully cushy civilian job my service can earn me.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m thinking it over.”

“And your mother...?” inquired Kaziki.

“Well...” Haréré looked hesitant. “At sixty years of age I have a few good decades or so left to consider her grandchildren.”

“You can remain in the service and still take time to have children.”

Haréré glanced at Joemmie. “I can advance further if I don’t have children hanging on my bootstraps.”

Twitty grimaced. “I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into, girl.”

Haréré shook her head. “Not really, and yes, I’m still thinking this decision through.”

“It sounds like you may have already made up your mind,” said Joemmie.

Haréré averted her eyes as she rubbed the fur of her forehead. “Most likely...”

“They promoted you to corporal. You could serve as my sentient aide for two or three years.” Joemmie grinned. “That’ll add some nice points to your service record.”

Haréré glanced at Joemmie’s lieutenant captain insignia. It was not a rank that typically deemed a syntient aide.

Joemmie long body bowed forwards. “I’m a baroness on my home world. I can nominate any noncom I wish for the position.”

“Haréré,” “Basic,” “Sacrifice,” “Searching,” “Judgment,” and “Friends Reborn” are sections of text from the story *Panocide*.

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