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“Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

Chapter Three

“Welcome To Hasmalan”

Arch Commander Jenna D'mol, the captain of the doomed *Killark Feddri* and current chief of Golden Gate Security, looked up from her reports when Jacob and Hank made their way into the operations offices of the Golden Gate community, discussing something that sounded important to her. Both men seemed to be in a good mood, so maybe they had heard something from communications. She hoped for the sake of the crew marooned up on *The Golden Gate*, the news was favorable.

“Good news, I take it?” she questioned, pulling her reading glasses off of her face and putting them down on her desk.

“We just spoke with *The Dark Claw*, directly this time. Seems they will be in orbit before the end of today.” Hank explained.

“What about the crew up on *The Golden Gate*?” she asked, thinking about the eleven personnel stranded up in orbit.

“They said they could get them off the ship.” Colonel MacLachlan stated with a smile. “They claim to have the ability to bring the Big Boy shuttle with our personnel onboard into a bay on *The Dark Claw*. Must be a very big vessel to do that. What puzzles me is, the female we spoke with who said her name was Denise, she made it sound like it was no problem. She also speaks perfect English. Kind of a California English to me.”

“You don't think it's an Earth vessel? Is that it?” she mused. “If they have no accent, they are not likely Comeri. You should know that from being around us, we all sound like Russians trying to speak English. Might be Elazi or maybe Bil. I have heard many Bil that speak English with no accent.”

“The Elazi? Can you explain that again?” Jacob asked as he sat down the edge of the desk that used to belong to the late Naval Commander Phil Frankton.

“The Comeri have a normalized direct trade with the Elazi. They are sort of newcomers to space travel in a way. They appear to be related to large felines with a bit of wolf mixed in. They made First Contact with Earth after your launch of *The Golden Gate*. They are good people, Jacob. If that's who they are, we can be assured they will help with this situation.”

“I hope so.” Hank offered up. “I gave Denise the codes to open the outer loading hatch on the Big Boy and she says they will bring bottled oxygen mix with them to create an atmosphere

inside it. She proposes to bring our personnel onto the shuttle, then detach it and somehow they will bring it onto their ship.”

“If she says they can do this, I have no doubt they can. Might be a military ship with rescue platform capabilities. There is an Elazi Deltrey Class Heavy Cruiser named *The Dark Claw*.” Jenna gave thought to that; she was sure that was the case.

“Well, we will see what happens. I sent a message to Chief Valdez for them to expect some company.”

Master Chief Petty Officer Leonard Valdez looked out the command center port viewing window of the Golden Gate when something blocked out the sunlight at the wrong time of day. After a moment to realize what he was looking at, he gasped. “What in the hell is that?” he blurted out, observing the biggest ship he had ever had sight of in his life, coming into view. This thing dwarfed *The Golden Gate* by magnitudes.

“Leo, what’s got your attention?” Petty Officer First Class Robert Haskell asked, floating over to see what was going on. “The Skipper said we were having company coming over. Is that them?”

“Bob, you gotta see this to believe it.” Leonard replied. He rubbed his hazel-brown eyes, then looked again, just to confirm what he had observed. It was a ship, and it was huge. He then motioned his ship-mate over to look out the portal and see this gargantuan ship for himself.

“Damn, Leo! What the . . .?” The ship in question looked absolutely massive. Some movement on the hull, what appeared to be a tiny little bay door opening up, followed by a very small craft leaving that tiny bay, headed their way. As the small utility craft approached, that gave them some scale to the size of the mother ship. “Man, that ship has gotta be close to a mile long!”

The small ship grew larger as it made its way over to them, giving them some visual scale to the mother vessel. That utility ship was large but probably not large enough to hold the Big Boy. It stopped off their port side and a smaller ship or a piece of equipment made its way out of the back of that vessel. This piece of equipment was about four feet thick, eight feet or so wide and about twenty-something feet in length, a bit longer than the Big Boy based on the size of the two suited beings operating it.

The two handlers were tethered to the equipment and one seemed to have a pad or tablet of some sort, controlling it. They slid out of sight below *The Golden Gate* and after a few minutes, a thump was felt through the hull. About ten minutes later, the display by the access hatch indicated the aft door to the Big Boy shuttle was being opened from the outside, using the pass code for it. Some time passed by before the display indicated the door was closed with good integrity checks being displayed. After another five minutes or more had elapsed, the indicators showed the shuttle had atmosphere.

“What do you think, Leo? Company?” Robert asked, knowing this was probably their ride off this ship.

“Invite them in, I guess?” Leo offered up. The displays were indicating the Big Boy was being powered up from its sleep state so their ‘company’ must have been given some direction from the Colonel.

“What the hell, Leo. Let’s invite our guests onboard.” Bob agreed. Leo triggered the inner hatch on *The Golden Gate* to open and they stood by while the hatch on the Big Boy swung out of the way. Once the zone was clear for passage, a female voice chimed up through what sounded like suit speakers.

“Permission to come aboard?” she asked. They could hear the smile in her voice, so maybe this wasn’t a bad thing to have happen.

“Permission to come aboard, Ma’am.” Robert replied.

The armor-suited female drifted carefully up onto the bridge, making sure of her handholds as she went. Another figure, much larger, did the same right behind the first. After the two beings were fully onto the Golden Gate, the shorter one removed her gold plated reflective bubble helmet to reveal what appeared to be an anthro female cougar smiling at them, only toned rust-red like a fox.

“Hi, I’m Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan from Elazia.” she stated, offering her hand to Valdez. “We’re here to give you a ride down to the planet.”

“You speak English perfectly.” he replied, hesitantly taking her hand and shaking it. Leo was having one of those moments when he felt like he should be running away from this alien, but her command of the English language and her demeanor were a polar opposite of what he expected.

“Chief, I should be able to speak English perfectly, since my father is human, from Northern California.” she replied with a smile. “This is my Adjutant, Sa’Vesi Venna Kevvit’lan.” The two men looked up to see the tall ebony femme remove her helmet, smiling at them after she shook out her long black head of hair.

“We’re going to fly your shuttle back to *The Dark Claw* with a rescue platform. If you all would prepare yourselves, we can be onboard our ship in a few minutes.” Vesi stated.

“You . . . you speak English very clearly.” Bob stated, clearly in shock.

“Thank you! I worked very hard to learn a neutral dialect, which seems to be the Northern California dialect.” she offered. “We would like to get going if you would, please?”

“Yeah . . . okay.” Valdez nodded, getting his mind back into gear. “We have a few of our personnel that are on sleep cycle right now. Um, what can we bring with us?”

“We can come back up any time to get whatever you need. Let’s just get you on our ship and dirtside for right now.” Denise offered up.

“O . . . okay, we’re on it.” Bob Haskell put forth. “Ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes.” the ambassador agreed. Once the stranded sailors were out of earshot, Denni turned to Sa’Vesi. “Do you think this was the reception we received the first time we met the humans on Earth?”

“More than likely.” the tall one replied with a smile. Vesi punched the button on her sleeve console for general comms in orbit and made her announcement; “We’re secured to the Big Boy shuttle with a standard clamping arrangement, awaiting load-out of personnel.”

Sa’Vesi and Denise had a very quiet audience watching them as they drifted away from The Golden Gate, not under the Big Boy’s power. Sa’Vesi had a tablet taped to a console, using it to guide the rescue platform attached to belly of the Big Boy shuttle. She carefully brought them about to port, then gave the thrusters a small burst to begin heading toward a docking bay on *The Dark Claw*.

“Ambassador, you say you’re half human?” Leo asked.

“Yes, my father was born on Earth. Roseville, California to be exact.” Denise had heard this more than once from people that couldn’t discern the minute tells that said she was not full blood Elazi in makeup. The slightly smaller ears, her facial features being somewhat muted, softened by her human heritage, little things that belied her mixed parentage.

“And your mother is from Elazia? Do I have that right?”

“Two for two.” She turned to look at the Petty Officer, who was probably still in shock. “My mother met my father on Earth, up in the hills above Auburn, California. They were married on Elazia and I came along a bit later. By the way, I do love the mountains above Auburn.”

“I know where Auburn is, I have family near there. Well, maybe I still have family there.” Robert offered. “So, do you know where we are in relation to the Sol solar system?”

“That, we’re still trying to work out. Once we land, the ships’ distributed computers can be freed up to do nothing but crunch the star patterns and figure out our location.”

“Ma’am, what were your people doing on Earth, exactly?” a sailor asked from the back of the cabin.

“We had made first contact with Earth, about two years after your launch.” Denni explained. “Our people had shared how to mitigate selenium buildup in the croplands and how to make cheap but effective desalination plants. Well, this Army General Abraham Calhoun decided he didn’t like our presence and we needed to get off the planet. He forced the issue big time by firing a howitzer at one of our ships. That breached the Singularity Drive of *The Great Hope* that was down on the planet at the time.”

“Singularity? As in, a black hole?” That seemed very confusing, since that was just pure science fiction when *The Golden Gate* left Luna’s orbit.

The ambassador turned to the sailor that had asked that question to answer him. “It’s not exactly a black hole. We call it a singularity but it’s actually more like a small star, held in check by a heavy magnetic containment bottle. Well, there was a butt-load of energy released when the containment was breached. This happened at Castle Air Force Base, where we were renting it from the United States government. It left a crater over a mile in diameter, the explosion was heard as far away as Washington, Utah and New Mexico states and it caused violent fault movements all up and down California. A substantial portion of the San Francisco East Bay is now submerged under the bay itself.”

“Wow . . . So, Oakland is . . .” The person that had asked the question was shaking his head, not wanting to believe what he had just heard.

She nodded. “Sadly, Oakland, Fremont, San Jose, Berkeley, Vallejo, Castro Valley, they are all under water in places. When Sa’Vesi and I were there last, they were just getting the Barack Obama bridge from the East bay hills near Fremont over to Redwood City finished. General Calhoun was eventually found guilty of that action against us and he was sentenced to life imprisonment.”

“Not to change the subject, Ambassador, but how many languages do you speak?” Leo questioned. “I have to say, listening to you speak with my eyes closed, I would swear you were from somewhere in California.”

“My father made sure I spoke clear English with no accent. I even took a language finishing school class on Earth. That managed to get me a job teaching English to the troopers going to Earth on rotation. I also speak a few other Earth languages and a few languages from the planets near my home world.”

“Parlez-vous Français?” Robert asked out of curiosity.

“Nous parlons Québécois.” Sa’Vesi replied. “I don’t speak proper French fluently but we both speak Spanish, Russian and I can speak decent Mandarin Chinese. Just don’t ask me to write it. Denise can also speak Proper French and some Afrikaans, if I remember right.” That made a few people chuckle. “Well, let’s stick this thing in the landing bay and I’m sure all of you would like a shower, a change of clothes and a hot meal.” That thought made Leo smile widely.

“We wouldn’t turn down that hospitality. We’ve been stuck up here for five and a half months, ever since the Big Boy lost reaction matter containment.” the Chief replied. “In fact, our other shuttle named Bertha lost her containment on the ground and we’re not sure why the pressure vessels were fracturing like they were. Doesn’t matter now, we’re getting to put boots on gravity-controlled soil soon enough.”

“Well, *The Dark Claw* has about ninety percent of Earth’s gravity. How about that?” Sa’Vesi put on the table.

“It has gravity?” Leo asked carefully. “Wait a minute. You mean, gravity that’s not caused by acceleration gravity?” That made no sense at all to the Chief.

That question made Denni chuckle. “Well, how would you work in Zero G effectively? I think you can answer that question yourself. The Comeris invented Gravimetric Deck Plating some time ago. Conductors of aluminum and copper, woven together into coils and placed in a certain pattern in the deck plating. Small generators distributed around the ship send this crazy mix of signals through the coils, making gravity.” The tall one tapped Denni on the arm to get her attention.

“Best thing is, most ships have a ‘Null Point’ somewhere.” Vesi interjected with a smile. “This ship has a null point just aft of the number one armory. This room is rather large and in the middle, this cable is hanging from a frame with a magnet on the bottom to hold it in place. When you walk up to the cable, you can feel yourself getting very light and as you carefully climb the cable to the right spot, you realize you’re floating. That spot is big enough for about a dozen or so people.”

“It’s so popular, you have to sign up in advance to use it for a two *Heth*, um, roughly a two hour block of time.” Denise added. “They give you a timer to put on your wrist to let you know when your time is up. Sa’Vesi likes to read Earth romance novels while floating.”

The Sub-Commander had to give her attention back to piloting, just so she could carefully land their combined crafts smoothly. “Once I set us down, we will be in gravity. Right now the rescue platform is kind of canceling out the landing bay gravity for us. I have to ask, will you all be good when the gravity comes back under your boots? I mean, if not I can keep us floating until the ones that need a stretcher are off the shuttle.”

“We should be good.” the Master Chief answered. “I made sure all of us did resistance training every waking cycle. Nobody has lost much muscle mass, as far as we can tell.”

“Okay, then. Gravity is back.” she stated as the ship shuddered just a bit when it sat down on the deck. “Welcome to *The Dark Claw*.”

Chief Valdez stood up, then grabbed the back of the seat in front of him for support. “Whoa, need to get my ship legs back again.”

“You will be good by the time we land this ship.” the ambassador offered up. Denni could see the blue lights over the now-closed hanger bay door, indicating a safe atmosphere outside. She pressed the button to operate the hatch on the shuttle and hopped out once it was open. “Everybody watch your step. We have a ladder coming for you.”

A medium gray Elazi male in a tan jumpsuit with red sleeves, an equipment handler, pushed a ladder up to the edge of the platform and locked the wheels for them. “Govant-ah. Hemish ta venato gom drattin vellin-im sekahm Korra’karrami.” he bid, giving them a sharp salute afterward.

“What did he say?” Petty Officer Haskell asked.

“He welcomed you to *The Dark Claw* and wished you a safe stay with us.” Vesi replied. “Looks like the Skipper and the XO are coming out to meet you.”

Chief Valdez looked over in the direction the tall ebony one was looking to spot the two figures headed their way, wearing formal uniforms. One was female and she seemed to be wearing some bandages. Once within range, Denni and Sa'Vesi came to attention for them. The two officers stopped in front of the small retinue of personnel where the female Elazi looked them over before looking straight at Valdez with a smile.

"Master Chief Valdez, I am Wing Commander Na'Risa Tavvet'lan, Skipper of ship." she carefully enunciated. "This is Division Commander Temmet Hone'lan, he is XO. Welcome to Dark Claw. I apologize for poor English, learning program not work well for me."

"Pleased to meet you, Skipper Tavvet'lan. Your English is good enough for me." Valdez replied as he shook her hand, the one not in a cast. "Thanks for getting us off of *The Golden Gate*. We appreciate it greatly."

"Master Chief, if you and shipmates would follow my personnel, please?" she asked, indicating another male, a buff-toned one wearing a gray jumpsuit with purple sleeves.

"I'm Specialist Grade Eight Ronmet Kannen'lan, billeting and fabrication shop tech." he offered. "If you will follow me, I will get all of you into the visiting personnel quarters where you can shower up. I will get you some clean jumpsuits and when everyone is ready, on to the galley for some hot food."

"Chief, I talk with you later, eh?" the Skipper put forth. "Get clean up and food first." Once the crew from *The Golden Gate* were off toward some hospitality, Na'Risa turned to the ambassador and her aide. "I still not well. Return to sick bay, be there if you need see me." She then turned carefully and walked off toward the medical facilities.

Tem looked over at Sa'Vesi, getting her attention. "Vesi, could I have a word with Denni in private, please?" The tall one nodded in understanding so she went off to meet with the person in charge of that landing bay. Once the tall ebony Sub-Commander was out of hearing range, Temmet made his feelings known. "Denni, I was on edge while you were doing that stupid stunt! You could have gotten yourself killed!" he blurted out.

"I knew what I was doing. I have had the training when I was at *Post Fonteneauz*, looking for things to add to my resume." she defended herself. "I'll bet I have more *Heth* on a rescue platform than you do. How many do you have?"

"I don't have any time on a rescue platform. Never had the chance to go on a rescue detail." he replied.

"See? I have about three *Heth* of experience. That's more than you." she pointed out. "Now, you're off rotation and so am I. Have you had anything since first meal?"

"I haven't had time to eat yet. Been busy worrying about you out there in the deep cold." he put forth.

"Let's go by my suite so I can get out of this light-weight tin can and put on a tunic, then we can go eat. I'm hungry because I missed mid-meal having fun with Sa'Vesi."

“Why don’t we go by the galley, get our meals from the fast line, then we can go to my cabin. You won’t need to get a tunic that way.” he countered with a sly grin. That idea made her smile back in return.

“Now you’re talking, Tem. Let’s go.”

“Hey Bob! Did you know we can use as much water as we want to?” Leo shouted. The Chief was covered in lather, enjoying a chance to get clean for a change.

“That’s what Ronmet said, wasn’t it?” the red-headed Petty Officer stated in return. “How can they recycle water endlessly and have it be so clean?”

The Master Chief stepped out from under the shower head. “I heard the only thing not generally recycled for drinking, cooking, showering and such was that blue water in the heads. I guess that stuff is recycled separately. Makes sense to me. I think I heard the shower water is kept for showering only, except in emergencies too.”

“I like how they have this divider for females to use the facilities in a semi-private way.” Petty Officer First Regina “Gina” Anderson put forth. She looked over the top of her divider at the showers across the way. Another divider, a wall sort of, kept her from seeing the men showering from the shoulders down. “I’m just glad to have gravity under my feet again.”

“You and me both, Gina.” Leo replied. “So, that Ronmet technician seemed like he was trying to get cute with you. Anything to that?”

The dainty little blonde femme with the short female military cut smiled at them over the barrier. “He was just telling me more about that null spot. Seems a nap in that zone is worth the effort to sign up.” She started toweling off her hair while she continued. “He also says, there’s four meals a day or rotation as they say. First meal, mid meal, last meal and late meal. Late meal sounds like it’s kind of like box-nasties on one of our ships. Prepared sandwiches and other things.”

“An alien race with box-nasties.” the Chief commented. “I know there’s differences between our races but damn, they almost seem like they came from the same mold as us.”

“Well, keep in mind, we’re the alien race to them.” she offered up. “I’m going to get dressed because I’m starving for something that I can sink my teeth into. I’m sick of protein paste out of a tube.”

A little bit later, they were all dressed in clean light blue jumpsuits, waiting while Gina signaled for Ronmet to return. Using a script provided to her, she pressed the orange button on the comm panel by the door. After a moment, the blue light came on. “Govant-esh. Hergan ta vesti gom?” a male voice asked.

“Govant. Desabti va erbgisha Golden Gate. Ta gom decindi-esh Ronmet Kannen’lan.” she replied, reading the text slowly to make sure she pronounced the phonetics correctly.

“Va Gesh.” the male voice stated, then some clicking was heard.

“This is Ronmet. Are you ready for a meal?”

“Yes, we are all showered and dressed. We will be waiting for you.”

“Give me about five *Munar*, I’ll be there.” The connection dropped so Gina turned to see all of her crew mates looking at her.

“Since when do you speak their language?” Leo asked.

“Ronmet knew we would need to reach him so he wrote this out for me phonetically. He even added the responses I might hear. You know, I almost think I might want to crew this ship.”

“It is tempting, isn’t it?” Robert replied. “I would wait until I had a chance to see how good the food is before making a hard decision.”

“Okay, looks like the sporks are recycleable.” Leo put forth, digging into some delicious spaghetti with meatballs. “Ronmet says the meatballs are made from some kind of an animal called a *Targ*, I think. I dunno, it’s just incredible. Best spaghetti I’ve had on shipboard ever.”

“Well, the cooks here know how to make a really good vegetable taco.” Gina stated. “The vegetable part looks like fried potatoes and it does taste that way. There’s onions and a type of lettuce from their planet and they have catsup, too.”

“You didn’t! Catsup?” Petty Officer third Class Bill McClintock blurted out. He was one of the first of the community-born personnel to join the combined corps.

“I most certainly did.” Regina stated. She looked up and continued with what she was going to say. “Vesi, back me up on this.”

“Catsup on tacos is an Elazi thing but it is good.” she stated as she sat down with them. “What would you put on a taco, then? Don’t say mayonnaise.” she smiled at the young sailor’s look on his face when he realized her size was not just her regular light armor.

“Ma’am, I would put hot sauce or a picante sauce on my tacos.” he replied. “We make a really good picante sauce from planet-grown tomatoes and peppers.”

“That is acceptable.” Sa’Vesi agreed. “If you ask in the serving line, they keep the Tabasco behind the counter. Keeps it from wandering around the ship. I guess I should point out, we will probably set up a diplomatic liaison between the ship and the community, once we’re down on dirt. I’m not sure what laws you use so we will have to get our people up to speed as to what they can and can’t do.”

“You will have to speak with Commander Jenna D’mol. She’s our security lead.” that got the attention of the tall ebony one.

“Jenna D’mol? She’s a Comeri femme that’s not very tall, pale complexion, dark brown hair, lavender eyes and walks with a limp?” Sa’Vesi questioned.

“You know her?” Leo asked. The Elazi femme had just given a spot on description of their security chief.

“I have had the pleasure of meeting her when I was young, about twenty solar cycles old. She is a close friend to my mother, they served on Pharrpoint Station together in the security detail. Father took me to the station to visit my mother so the commander took me on a back stage tour of the inner workings of the station. She’s also a very good practical joker.”

“Yep, you know her.” Petty Officer Haskell confirmed. “You’ll hear about this anyway, so, the Comeri hadn’t been on the surface for even a year and she takes one of the Killark’s klaxons and puts it under Commander Jacob Muncie’s desk, then she rigs a switch to make it go off when he sits down. Rumor has it, he had to change his shorts after he got off the top of his desk.”

“That would be just like Jenna.” Sa’Vesi agreed. “I will tell The Ambassador who she needs to talk to. One thing I would like to know, though. What is the duration of that wormhole?” she asked Leo.

“The days here are about twenty-two and a half hours long so some of us have to reset our watches every day. Thirty days to a month except December, which is thirty-one. There are twelve months to a year, like Earth. Duration of the wormhole when it’s open long enough to go through is one thousand, one hundred and ten days and a few hours.”

“Like, thirty-seven Earth months?” she questioned.

“It is open for a shorter duration from time to time, maybe long enough to shoot a beacon through just about once a month. You can tell by the way it’s sparkling around the edges, just how long it will be open.”

Petty Officer McClintock sat his taco down and looked over at the tall one. “Ronmet said you ran into the wormhole? How is that?”

“It opened right in front of us, before our navigator could do a thing. We weren’t squared up with the event horizon so we hit our superstructure on the edge of it. The whole ship rang like a bell and we suffered a huge Delta-V loss event all at once. The ambassador and I ended up on the chow hall floor from it.”

“I hope we’re not going to ask too many questions, but I overheard Ronmet tell another crewman, you’re landing the ship to do repairs? Is that true?” Leo asked.

“He’s correct. Like I said earlier, we did some damage to the superstructure when we impacted the event horizon.” she confirmed.

“You *can* land this ship? Isn’t it too big to do that?” the Chief asked.

“We can land it, but we have to do so carefully. We have repulsors, basically the opposite of gravimetric plating, that allows us to land and not use up a huge amount of reaction material.”

“We will just land, like a shuttle can land on the ground?” Chief Valdez asked. “I mean, you have landing gear on this giant ship? I saw how big it was when we were coming aboard. I have to say, seems impossible to me.”

“It has twelve sets of landing legs, not wheels since it will do the final maneuver as a straight down move. The legs will compensate for uneven terrain, like a rock protruding up or a hole in the ground. It should be pretty uneventful.”

“So, when will we land?” Gina asked.

“Just after sunup, tomorrow. The Skipper says we should try early, so we have all day to take several more attempts if the first one fails. I’m pretty sure the first attempt won’t fail, I know the navigators that will be on duty. They are good at what they do.”

“Can we watch?” a Seaman First asked from the end of the table.

“If you get there early, go up to deck one, the observation deck at frame one hundred and twelve. You will have a panoramic view of the whole thing and a few of the video screens will be showing the underside of the hull.”

Denise was laying across Tem’s lap, face down while he was seated on his settee and she was enjoying a candied fruit snack while he took his time brushing her back fur for her. He could tell she was in that mood by the deep breaths she was taking on each stroke.

“The chef makes great candied Kebra, doesn’t he?” she mused in a breathy bedroom voice, enjoying the intense flavors of the treat in her mouth and the intense stimulation from having her back fur attended to.

“He does make a good treat.” Tem agreed. “Tomorrow, we need to be on the bridge early. First attempt at landing will be just after sunrise on that dry lake bed. I had a chance to see the VEDAR scans and it seems pretty level over a twelve *Hazecan* zone. I sent the scans to your padd to look at. By the way, we’re still acting Skipper and XO tomorrow morning. The Captain says she will ride this one out in sickbay or an observer’s seat on the bridge. The Science Officer can back us up.”

“She should stay in bed, at least until her concussion is better.” Denni commented. Bringing up the scans on her padd, she looked them over carefully. “We will have the star at our stern for this maneuver. That’s not a problem?”

“We can turn on the landing lights, so that should illuminate any issues. Start down into the atmo on the beginning of the last orbit, stay at or above ten *Hazecan* to bleed off Delta-V. At one

hundred out, retro burn at half-power, bring in the repulsors at half-power. Fifty out, retro burn at full power and hold. Repulsors on full and as the speed bleeds off we adjust repulsors to give a nice sink rate. At five out, we will adjust retro fire and repulsors to get that full stop, then sink carefully from about five hundred *Catre* up. That is by the operations manual.”

“You remembered all of that?” she questioned. “Crap, I can’t remember the maintenance schedule for my skimmer, let alone the procedures for landing a Deltrey Class Heavy Cruiser!”

“I read it off the display on the wall.” he confessed. Denise looked over at the wall display to find the operations manual open to that particular page. “I’m going to print that out on a flimsy so I have something in hand in the morning.”

“What’s my role in the morning as XO?”

“I want you to have a diagnostics and operations screen open for repulsors and the ventral thrust generators. If we have to go around, we will need full repulsors and full ventral thrust, like right away to keep from crashing. That is the only thing that worries me, crashing the ship. I don’t want to mess up our chances of getting home. This is going to be the first time on dirt for *The Dark Claw* and my first time putting a capital ship on dirt.” Tem offered up.

Denni put her bowl of fruit on the low table next to the settee and rolled over so she could see her *One Love* better. “I didn’t say to stop brushing, Saar.” she put forth with a smile. “There are many first times for things. We will do good with this first time. Keep brushing, please?”

“Is this where I say, By Your Command?”

“Get back to brushing, Tem. You’ve got a lot of fur left to groom here.”

“We’re just going to mess it up later.” he argued while he started working on her shoulders.

“In that case, you can just brush me again,” she replied, reaching for her bowl of treats. “Besides, I think you like to mess up my fur.”

“You caught me.” he agreed. “then I get to brush you again when we’re done.”

“Thanks for coming by, Sub-Commander. Just finishing up here.” the armorer offered when Sa’Vesi walked into Armory Two. Technician Gillat Deen’lan had asked her to come and try on her new armor, now that he had it set up properly for her. He was polishing off the fingerprints, making it look as good as possible when she had arrived.

This looks great!” she blurted out, running her hand across the new frontal impact plate that had been installed at her request.

“I’m glad I have a Two Va-Deci-Zet capacity press in the shop to shape that plate with. My staff lost their minds bending that gentle ‘V’ down the middle of it and at one point, we thought we had broke the press.”

Vesi walked around the alloy suite of protection, taking in the shape of her new powered armor. It was very sleek, quite form-fitting and it had the proper look, now that Gillat had done some mix and match to fit her better. “So, tell me true, Gil. Males don’t like the Eighty because it looks feminine?”

“You are probably right on that but I wouldn’t bet much Crown on it.” the gray armorer agreed with a wide smile. “In an all-out firefight, though I would put my Crown on the Drexel Eighty. A Lestim Mark Nine is sturdy, but not that sturdy. That new impact plate we made for your armor is manufactured from a piece of standard ships Class Seventeen ablative plating. It will stop just about anything short of a nuke-tipped projectile.”

“Um, how much work was this?” she wanted to know. Other parts for Drexel Eighties were sitting on benches or in shipping crates, obviously the donor suits for hers.

“Sa’Vesi, I mixed a size twenty-four extra-long lower for your hips and thighs with a size nineteen long upper and a size twenty helmet. Good thing I had the adapter pieces to do that, we had almost left Pharrpoint without the setup and maintenance loadout for these suits. Just so you know, I have the lower environmental interface out for now, just so you can try it on without those intrusions.”

Gillat handed her a disposable absorbent pantie after she had stripped down, so she slipped it on before setting her fingerprints as the activating signal. The suit opened up, the torso leaned forward and the back of the helmet opened up for her so she started to squirm her way inside. The hip and thigh areas were snug but good and putting her hands down into the sleeves for a test fit proved a good choice in size, too. She looked over at Gillat to see he was pressing the sensor mesh against a bench top, sticky side down.

“Doing this twice is good enough to kill a bit of stickiness in a new mesh. In a pinch, stick it against your armor twice,” he commented, showing her where to plug in the mesh on an extension. “Tell your boss I have an another extension cable that I made for her. That’s so she can get out of her Eighty without peeling the mesh off first. I made one for the Skipper, too”

Vesi finally had her mesh adhered into place on her chest and neck so she closed up the armor and went into diagnostic mode. Saar Deen’lan plugged in his diagnostic interface and between the two of them, they had her armor tuned to her neural inputs in no time.

“Sa’Vesi, how do you think it’s tuned? Good to go?” he asked.

She turned to him and he could see the tears running down her cheeks. “Gil, this is just fantastic!” She blurted out between sobs. “I can’t believe just how responsive this suit is. It feels like I’m not wearing anything, to the point it makes my old Mark Twenty-Three seem like a utility mech with a dead battery.”

“I have heard that before and that’s probably why your boss and the Skipper likes theirs so much.” he offered up. “Let’s load up a few polymer test rounds and tune your Mounted Defense Rifle.”

Vesi went to a loading stand and put her right elbow against a stop, then leaned her arm down against the hardware under it. Once she was properly engaged, the system loaded up one hundred test rounds, allowing her to fire her defense rifle onboard the ship. She walked over to the firing range, aligned her HUD sight to the target and let loose with a few of the two millimeter Earth measurement caseless rounds.

“A little low and off to the Zel side,” Gillat commented.

“Okay, recalibrating.” she replied. A few adjustments later, she blasted the center out of the next target presented. “Now that is how it’s done.” she commented. “So, I’m ready to go?” she questioned.

“You’ll need to put in the lower environmental interface if you’re going to wear your armor for more than a few hours and I need to give you a maintenance kit so you can sterilize things between uses. Other than that, you’re good.”

Marlett looked up from his last meal to see a Drexel Model Eighty suit of powered armor enter the common area of the Ambassador’s suite. A quick glance to his left showed Denni’s armor sitting on its charging pad and the armor coming into the room was tall. Very tall. He smiled when the polarized shield retracted into the helmet, revealing the occupant of the alloy carapace.

“You finally went and got yourself a new suit.” he commented, walking over to Vesi and taking a close look at her new gear. “How does it fit?” he questioned, tapping at the impact plate to hear that dull, flat thud of heavy ablative armor.

“This is what I should have had all along,” she replied, taking his hand in hers and starting to dance around him in a circle. “This powered armor suit moves effortlessly, Marlett. You should see if they have a Ninety for you, since the Eighty is probably a bit too feminine for your tastes.”

“I might try a Drexel Eighty.” he commented as he watched how she was moving. “Now I know why the ambassador always looks so sexy in her powered armor. It’s the way it moves with you, not against you.” That made Vesi comment on the situation.

“My *One Love*, I can’t really explain to you just how it feels. It’s like wearing light ceremonial armor, the movements are so smooth and easy. You need something like this or a new Ninety. I think I spotted a few of them in shipping crates down in Armory Two.”

Marlett stepped back to take another look, then nodded. “Very well, let’s go down to the armory and see if I can procure a new suit of armor from Gil.”