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“Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

Chapter Two

“Inbound”

Denise tried to find a more comfortable way to sit in the command chair while wearing full light armor, keeping watch over operations while Temmet found a few moments of much-needed sleep. Actually, she had sent him to his quarters because he was literally falling asleep while standing up. Earlier during that same shift, they had responded several times to the emergency hail from the fourth planet out from the sun but now the possibility existed they were just listening to an automated beacon, not a settlement of survivors.

Every once in a while, the bridge would light up brightly from the arc torches of the repair crew, adding a buttress from frame forty to frame forty-one for strength. Now she knew why Tem vacated the bridge for his quarters when he was asked. The arc flash was rather distracting, jarring her back from her musing when her mind drifted. That had been SOP for the last two cycles of slow drift toward the solar system ahead and it was beginning to wear on her nerves, too.

The welding and fab team had been on the outside of the hull several *Heth* ago, using hydro-actuator jacking bolts welded to the hull to pull the split closed. That was unnerving, listening to the hull scream under tension as they forcibly closed up the damage, all while she was trying to get something to eat in the forward galley. They still had no atmosphere on the bridge by design at the moment, since it was safer to weld with no possibility of starting a serious fire. A fire suppression crew had stood by, just in case. She kind of wished she had been on the bridge when the crew were closing the split, since she wouldn't have heard all of that infernal screeching.

After the buttress was in place, it was most likely going to be a permanent part of the ship. The fab shop had done a nice job of at least making it look like it belonged, rather than a scabbed-on repair. Once they were done welding, the entire inner hull zone under the repair would be coated with Gel-Seal for added protection. After all of the trim panels were back in place and secured, most of the damage wouldn't be that noticeable. Later, a crew could go between the pressure hull and the outer armor-plated hull and seal it as well once the plating was repaired.

The thought crossed her mind, concerning what her father had charged Temmer with; she was a grown femme now, a mid-level ambassador to Earth but sometimes she thought she had that distinction only because she spoke and understood the nuances of the English language perfectly. Eventually, she would gain the rating of Esteemed Ambassador and maybe, just maybe, she could be promoted to a better posting and stay on what she considered her primary homeworld, Elazia. Most likely not, since she was perfectly fluent in English, Spanish, Quebecois, Russian and Afrikaans. She could speak fair French and not embarrass herself if she paid attention to her syntax and not use English and Native American loan words.

Tem kept coming to mind; had they really tried their best to be a family or did their jobs get in the way? She remembered the long days at *Post Fontaneauz*, teaching English and Quebecois to the new troopers that were in rotation to Earth. Temmet was working on the other side of the base as a flight instructor, teaching brand-new rooks on the new Ford Aerospace *Mustang Fast Lighter*, the craft that really sucker-punched Lestim Industries. Faster, lighter, a significantly greater range and certainly stronger in the armor department.

Really, it was clear they honestly didn't have time for one another back then. She was sure of that now.

Turning back to her duties as acting captain, it was her job to look over the reports generated twice per shift and make notes on things that were either out of place or needed to be followed up on. The only thing that stood out in the reports was the condition of Wing Commander Na'Risa Tavvit'lan, the actual Skipper, or Commander of the Ship.

When they had impacted the edge of the Event Horizon, the captain had been thrown across the bridge, from her command chair to the walkway between navigation and the front screens. She had bounced off her Flight Status console, the Astro-Guidance console and Navigator Blane'lan before breaking the center display screen with her forehead and another screen with her arm. Looking over to her right, they were still trying to clean up the blood in that escape pod the pair had took up refuge in.

The captain had suffered a bad concussion so she was currently under forced medications until they could determine just how bad her concussion really was. Her jaws were wired shut, one eye was badly swollen and some bones were either broken or fractured. It was fair to say, she would not be up and around for a few days. Considering the lack of speed as they were coasting toward the 'Goldilocks' planet, the Skipper might get her chance to see it from orbit before they landed.

One thing had crossed her mind; a wormhole doesn't stay open indefinitely. They have a period of open and closed, sometimes once a day, other times once in decades. The Golden Gate probably went through the same wormhole they did so she hoped the period was not somewhere around thirty Earth years. That would not do. Not at all. She was going to put some notations on her report when the communications technician gathered her attention.

"Ambassador, I have a new transmission coming in from the planet, Northern Hemisphere. Piping it over to you now."

She tapped her integrated control suite on her left armor sleeve, taking that transmission once she found the correct channel from communications. "__locate us. Dark Claw, this is the Golden Gate Community on planet Hasmalan. Fourth planet from the star. We are about twenty-five degrees North from the equator on the largest continent. We will start broadcasting a beacon for you on twenty-eight point two megahertz, amplitude modulated so you can locate us. Dark Claw, this is the Golden Gate Community__."

She sat there, momentarily not knowing what to do now. After a bit of thought, she punched in Temmet's communicator. The icon flashed orange for a *Munar*, then switched to blue when he accepted the communication. "Tem here. What is it, Denni?"

“Tem, we received a response from our transmission. They’re setting up a beacon on what must be an old Earth Amateur Radio frequency. It was a looping message, but it is a response. What are your orders, Cap?”

“Listen for a break, then send back a reply. Let them know it will be a few days, I estimate two or maybe three before we can set this bucket down. Might ask for a good landing location near them.”

“I understand. Very well, that’s our project here on the bridge, then. Get some rest if you can, Tem. Sorry if I woke you up.”

Sa’Vesi was waiting for her boss to make her way back through the bridge Vaar side or in English, the right side access air lock, her shift in command over with for the rotation. With thirty-one Earth hours per Elazi day, this shift had been a long one at ten and a half hours. The first action Denise performed once in atmosphere was to pop her helmet and take a breath of air that had not been endlessly recycled by her personal environmental system.

“How are you holding up?” the tall one asked. She could see the fatigue in Denni’s eyes, dark and hollow looking.

“Probably as well as you are. I feel sorry for our science officer who is now on shift. You know, that thought is kind of interesting in a way; he technically can’t stand watch because he has no training on ship operations.” the Ambassador replied. Looking up at Vesi, the tall one had that look of total exhaustion that must have been mirrored in her own face. “Tell me, how could you be tired wearing that powered armor?”

“Try standing in one place for a long period of time. The movement sensors in this suit aren’t tuned the best. I really have to try to move before it will move, like a maintenance mech that’s got a really low battery.”

“Yeah, I guess that would make you tired.” The ambassador thought about her first indoctrination to powered armor, just in case that was her only protection available to her. The unit she had to train in was very sluggish in response and it didn’t help they were training in a ship out in a high orbit. At least she hadn’t went ballistic a few times from her mag-lock boots being turned down too low.

Her regular issue powered armor was actually light-years better than the trainer version and it was trimmed out in diplomatic green for her. Giving some thought to that, she asked a question; “Vesi, your mag locks aren’t on, are they?”

The ebony Sub-Commander chinned a button, then used the optical tracking system to find the menu she was looking for. “Thank you, Denni. They *were* on. No wonder I’m tired, I guess I overlooked that when we went to orange alert.”

“Vesi, let’s go get some food in us. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving and I need some sleep.”

On the way to the Officer’s Galley, she thought about the situation. Her message back to the surface had been received by someone and they had been given a suggested landing site about two Earth kilometers south of the community on a dry lake bed. They had also been warned about the ring circling the planet at the equator. It was made up of mostly alloy material and it was probably not a safe thing to cross through, even for the Dark Claw. That was all the information they had been given concerning that issue.

It was rather odd, that the person relaying that information spoke with what seemed like a decided Comeri accent. Well, maybe they were of Russian or German descent. There were a large contingent of Chinese and Russians on the Golden Gate when it left Earth if she remembered correctly.

Once in the galley they made their way through the serving line, Denise just selecting menu items that would be called comfort food on Earth. A hamburger, some fries, a large milkshake that was good, even if it was partially made with powdered milk and a wedge of hot Kebra fruit pie.

There was a corner of the galley meant for officers to eat in powered armor so Sa’Vesi sat her tray on the table that had chairs for her superior on one side to sit in while wearing light armor. She was getting ready to shuffle into place so she could squat down at the table and eat when a technician interrupted her train of thought.

“Sub-Commander Kevvit’lan?” he asked, waiting for her to answer.

“That’s me. What do you need . . .” Before she could finish her question, he had plugged into her suit with a diagnostic padd. “Hey! That locked my suit!” she blurted out. Testing it, she was not able to move any appendage at all, since he had gained total control of her armor at the moment. The mini-HUD to the left of her line of vision showed him checking her suit systems.

“Sub-Commander, when was the last time you had a full diagnostics ran on this suit?” he asked tersely. It was very clear he was not happy with her at the moment.

“Um, that last diagnostic would have been at least three months . . . sorry, *Saens* ago. Before we went to Earth, I know that much.”

“The Ambassador, here says you need some adjustments and I have to say, I agree. I need five *Munar* of your time. Lift your left arm, then lower it.”

Vesi did as she was asked, since she was not going to deny his diagnostic check while not being able to control the suit beyond what he was allowing. “Well?”

“Sub-Commander, Sa’Vesi if I may? Try these settings.” The ebony hued femme did as she was asked, finding the suit arm moved freer than it had been.

They worked on her suit, trying and adjusting her motion pickups, arm and leg neural pad settings and finally her grip feedback. It had taken all of five *Munar* or so to get this done, since the tech seemed to have a handle on what to do.

The tech made some notes on his padd before he asked her a question concerning his work; “Well, what do you think? Is your suit moving like it should? What I mean is, your suit feels like you’re not forcing the suit to move, it’s just moving with you?”

“I would say that is the case.” she agreed. She carefully picked up her tray of food, then sat it back down again. The Sub-Commander then took the padd from the technician and carefully used the stylus to sign for his work. “Wow! This is how it should have been set up in the beginning. Thank you.”

“I have had some exposure to that model line during the Ran’Wila Incursion. That was the popular model at the time. You know, you really should get the latest model, if we do get back home to Elazia. Or come down to Armory Two. We have some newer ones there, never issued that might fit you nicely.”

“I like this one. It’s like an old friend.” Vesi put forth, looking at her boss and winking at her. “I may bring it to you once we’re on dirt so you can give it a full overhaul. I observed I’m two hundred *Heth* or more overdue for a major maintenance interval.”

“I’ll make a note of it.” the tech commented before he left for his shop.

“Denni, was that necessary?” she questioned as she turned to her meal, looking at the obvious smile on the ruddy one’s face. “You could have just asked me . . .”

“No, I could not have.” the ambassador retorted. “I asked you to have your armor checked that first day out of dock and what did you tell me?”

“I, um, I said I would have it looked at and tuned up.” She took a bite of her spaghetti, savoring it’s intense flavors. “I’m sorry if I disappointed you. We were busy with that Sarlii addendum package and I forgot that little detail, that’s all.”

“Well, you can have you armor looked at once we’re dirtside. I really think I need to go check mine for service required since I haven’t used it in, well, two solar cycles?”

“It’s been at least that long. We wore them for that whole Tunn Dignitary meeting so that was almost two and a half cycles ago. Did you at least have it cleaned before loading it?”

“It’s fully serviced in a ready state, in the shipping crate my father built for it. I sent a message just now to have maintenance send it to our suite. I’ll try it out to get a feel for what needs to be adjusted before I give it to the techs.” Denise rarely liked her powered armor to be out of her sight while off-planet, even though she actually had only worn it a handful of times. It still looked brand-new with no major scrapes or dings. She thought, once they were dirtside, she would take it out and rough it up a bit, just to give it some character.

“What’s so funny?” Vesi asked when her boss chuckled to herself.

“I was thinking about roughing my powered armor up. Give it some character.”

“Don’t do that.” The sub-commander pointed at her with her spork for emphasis. “Your armor is that smaller Mark Eighty design that just about all males seem to pass on because they think it’s feminine looking. Your armor has that lean, mean look that my armor doesn’t. Besides, I don’t think they make that size anymore.” Sa’Vesi was interrupted by another voice, startling her just a bit.

“No, size is no longer made new. Shame, too, is good armor, that why I have same armor for self,” another femme offered up; it was Wing Commander Na’Risa Tavvit’lan, the Commander of the Ship. “You keep look new, eh?” she added as she slipped into the seat next to Denise. “Ambassador, good I find you. Tell me, what is this Gold Gate I hear of? Imbecile doctors not tell me much. I have to dig to find out. No one is let me dig their brain.”

“Skipper, are you supposed to be out of bed?” Denni asked, looking at a pretty scary sight sitting next to her. The pale gray female looked like a walking corpse; covered in bandages, a bad black eye developing, one arm in a cast *and* carrying a bag of universal plasma. “Um, Vesi, set that plasma bag on your shoulder. It needs to be higher than her heart.”

“Thank you, Sub-Commander.” she offered as the tall one put the bag up on the shoulder of her armor. “Vesi, how are studies coming? How many blocks you have now?”

“Commander, we can speak Elazi for you.” she replied, noticing her Skipper was struggling with her words.

“No, speak Earther, um, English, please. I need learn for better posting. Learning program not working for me.” She then turned to face Denise. “Denni, you speak perfect. You teach, please? I hear we may be on dirt for while.” Turning her attention back to the tall one, she continued. “Vesi? How many blocks you have?”

“I have four blocks now and maybe another eight ten-days for that fifth block.”

“Good. Get five blocks, I promote to rank of Commander, then make you Junior Ambassador under Denni.”

“I’m working on it, Skipper.”

Someone had brought the Captain a cup of coffee with a straw in it. Putting the tube in the corner of her mouth, she took a tentative sip of the liquid. “Tell me, what is Gold Gate I hear?”

Denni turned to her commander before explaining what she knew. “The Ship is called the Golden Gate. That ship was the spearhead for Earth’s Martian Colony program. The ship was lost with all aboard about six Earth months after launch, probably through the same wormhole we fell through. That was about two solar cycles before our first contact with Earth. Now we know what happened to them.”

“So, is same ship you think? This Golden Gate?” Na’Risa had heard of wormholes but this, this was her first and hopefully last encounter with one.

“I would guess so.” Denni took another bite of her hamburger, then continued. “They also warned us of the ring circling the planet. We’re close enough now to make it out on maximum resolution but they implied we should not go through it. No reason was given for that.”

“Is bet this ring is destroyed ship.” the gray one offered up. “Gavvi system. Gavvi Three has ring from destroyed Trexxanis Heavy Cruiser and Comeril Rail Ship. Blow each other up. Is mostly alloy, like fly through flack for us. Shred an Elazi Corvette. See with my own eyes.” The line chef had brought the captain a cup of soup made from a carrot-like stock and a straw to drink it with. She thanked him, stirred the liquid and sampled it. “I not see bridge. How bad is damage?”

“I wouldn’t want to light up the drives right now.” the ambassador stated. “We must have hit the combat bridge superstructure above the bridge, creating a tear across the hull in front of frame forty-one. We should have atmosphere in that zone soon and that is the reason we need to land and repair the ship. What we have is just temporary, to protect the hull integrity.”

“You bring me report?” Risa asked between sips of soup. “Tem, he just say I sick, recover first.”

“He’s not far off of what I would say right now.” Denni offered up. “Would you like us to help you back to sickbay?”

“I finish soup and coffee first. Then help back to sickbay, yes?”

They sat there, consuming their meals in silence and eventually, the Captain was finished with her soup. She picked up an unopened spork packet, opened the plastic covering and put the handle end of the polymer utensil in between her teeth and left cheek. After a moment of fishing it around, she turned to Denise. “Is sharp wire poking me. Can you see?” she asked as she pulled her mouth open at the corner nearest the ambassador. “Right here.” she added in a slurred voice.

The captain had a electro-printed polymer spacer in between her teeth, holding them apart just wide enough to be able to put her tongue through the gap in her front meat-tearing teeth. That piece of polymer also matched her dental profile exactly, preventing any possible movement. The wires were attached to temporary blocks glued to her molars and threaded through guides made into the spacer. Denise had this procedure done to her after a skimmer accident so she knew just how uncomfortable this was.

“Found it.” she said as she took a stylus and attempted to bend the wire down. “Um, the doctor will have to fix this. I can’t get the wire to bend.”

“Thank you for trying. You take me back to sickbay? I ready now.” she asked.

“No problem.” Sa’Vesi replied as she stood up and moved around to get on one side of her Skipper. They helped her to stand, then with one on each side to support the injured Elazi femme, they carefully maneuvered her back to sickbay and a very pissed-off doctor.

“Commander! I said, you need to be in bed!” he told her angrily as he put her back in her medical observation cot. “If you need a reader screen, I can do that but I want you to heed my orders and stay in bed! Is that understood, Mere?”

“I will need a reader screen, doctor. Once you find one for me, I need to start looking at reports and for me to do that, I need you to back off the medications you’re feeding me. And, I need you to find the sharp wire that’s cutting into my cheek, please.”

“I have her now.” the med tech told Denise. “And really, teach her some better English if you can. The Skipper sounds like a Russian trying to speak English when she does try to speak it.”

“I’ll have that report sent to your reader.” Sa’Krista offered up as she prepared to go back to her suite. “Doctor, find that sharp wire and please back off the meds so she will settle down.”

“Yes, Ambassador. I’ll take your requests under advisement.”

As they left sickbay, they could hear the Skipper and the Doctor arguing which made the Ambassador smile. “I think she will be getting better soon, just so they can get her out of sickbay.”

Once back at her group of rooms that comprised her ersatz Ambassador Suite, they found a custom-manufactured shipping container waiting for them in the middle of the room. Marlett was standing by in a jumpsuit, just in case he was needed for anything.

“Mere, this was delivered by the cargo crew about ten *Munar* ago.” he offered up. “Would you like me to help open it up for you?”

“Yeah, I might need a hand with opening up the cargo box.” Denni went to one side of the container and keyed in her code, making the latching bolts retract. The door, once it was disconnected, fell away from the box. She caught it and slipped it over to the side with just a little bit of trouble. Between the three of them, they slipped the three remaining sides and the top away from the bottom of the crate in one piece, leaving the suit standing in all its glory, waiting for her.

The suit of powered armor stood about four Earth inches taller than the ambassador and it only weighed about five hundred and ninety pounds with her and a full ammunition loadout aboard. Rather than the boxy, machine-like appearance of the ones her detail wore, hers was rounded and sleek or as Tem would say, it was flat sexy. She just couldn’t get over how he always wanted to see her wearing this almost quarter-ton of alloy, especially since sex while wearing it was quite out of the question. The suit, although lightweight, would still stop a frontal assault from a twenty-five millimeter large bore rail gun round without any trouble.

Reaching in through the open helmet visor, she used her right thumb to activate the suit. There was a biometric pad on each side, just above the top of the shoulders to control on and off functions. That way, nobody could take your armor without asking. A button in the group of chin controls unlocked and opened the back for her.

The back of the helmet opened up and the whole unit lifted and tilted forward a bit for easier ingress. The back panel of her armor opened up from the right side, followed by the sides along with the arms pivoting forward some. While this was going on, Denise was stripping down to the buff so she could climb inside. From her knowledge of this suit, she knew to remove the mylar coverings over the calf, thigh and arm sensor pads before continuing. The rust-toned femme stepped up onto an access step her father had made as part of the crate then on up to the waist, gaining her balance as she did so. Putting her hands on the shoulders, she stepped into the armor and began to lower herself down.

Gritting her teeth when the two environmental “intrusions” insinuated themselves inside her, she was finally at a point where she could get her sensor net on her body. One big mesh of sensors stuck onto her chest and another smaller set, tethered to the larger one, went onto the back of her neck. She grimaced, thinking about how hard these sensors would be to get off in just a few *Munar*. Normally, a soldier that wore powered armor full time would closely shave the areas the sensors were adhered to. She thought maybe she should have probably taken care of her pelt length before trying out her armor.

Turning back to putting on the suit of alloy protection, she worked her arms down into the sleeves of the suit, making sure to get contact with the sensor pads inside. Leaning forward into the torso, she guided her head up into the helmet as the suit closed back up, trapping her inside. Using her chin to operate a few buttons, the system locked the suit and brought up the diagnostics on the HUD. She lowered the shield just enough to see the displays painted on it without going onto suit environmental air and life support.

“How are your systems looking?” Sa’Vesi asked, smiling when Denni slaved her screen to the tall one’s suit. So far no major gripes had reared their ugly head.

“Not bad, considering my armor hasn’t been run for two and a half solar cycles.” she commented. Running through the diagnostics, she flagged a few items to have checked or adjusted. “Well, it seems okay to move around and you know what, I really need to spin up this Mounted Defense Rifle. Onboard ECM says I haven’t used it in over three solar cycles.”

“You should at least walk around the ship a bit, just to see how out of adjustment it is.” the sub-commander suggested.

“Very well, Vesi. Let’s take a stroll to Tem’s cabin.” She looked over at her compliment, finding them both smiling back at her. Clearing his throat, Marlett Vennet’lan spoke up.

“You just want to mess with him, right?” the tall black-furred male asked.

“Marlett, you know how he gets turned on by seeing me in this mobile bucket of bent bolts and burnt out bearings.” Denni went to her locker and pulled out her projectile sidearm, slipping it into the holster mounted on her left leg. “Let’s get going before I change my mind.”

Denise went to her door and sent her access code to the controls through the suit interface so they could exit the suite. The door acknowledged her command, allowing the portal to slide open for them. Marlett took up a rail rifle and the two tall ones followed their boss through the portal and down the corridors. Actually, it was entertaining for Denise to see the expressions on the

ships' compliment when they realized just who it was wearing the Drexel Model Eighty powered armor.

Ambassador Andrews'lan was strolling along, taking her time in making her way through the ship so she could monitor the signals coming from the suit diagnostics. Whereas the armor worn by Sa'Vesi and Marlett moved with a rough, mechanical stride, hers actually moved in a very sensuous way. Her steps, light and playful, telegraphed right through to the mobile suite of alloy protection surrounding her.

"Your gait looks good." Sa'Vesi offered up on talk-around channel three as they made their way through the corridors. "Sure wish I could move like that. Might get Marlett to pay some attention to me."

"He does pay attention to you. I think it's because you're an officer and he's just enlisted."

"He has a cute butt, you know that?." Vesi put forth. "I really like to watch him putting his armor on. Now that is sexy to me." She was going to say something more when she heard him clear his throat.

"Meres, I am wearing a radio headset on Talk-Around channel three." he put on the table. "However, thank you for thinking I have a cute butt, Sub-Commander."

"Shit!" Mere Kevvit'lan blurted out. "Marlett, I really . . ." He held up a hand to stop her.

"Vesi, I'll be honest. I'm really interested in you, too. I need to punch my next exams perfect and I finally have five blocks of high education. Once I'm an officer, we can be an official item."

"Oh Gods!" she muttered under her breath. "Mar, I feel so embarrassed right now. Had I known you were listening . . ."

"Vesi, you didn't embarrass me. I like to watch you put on your armor, too. I'm going to do some investigation, see if I can find you a Drexel Mark Eighty like our ambassador wears so . . . um, you know, I think I'll keep that thought to myself."

"What thought is that?" Denni asked playfully as she really began to really strut her stuff in response to what was said about her and her armor.

"Um, Your Ambassadorship, I was going to say, your armor compliments you nicely."

"Nice save, Marlett." the rust-toned femme offered up. "You will make a very good officer, I can tell. Have you ever thought of becoming part of the Diplomatic Corps as a diplomat?"

"I have given it thought." Marlett looked up at his superior, Sub Commander Tavvit'lan. He was probably not forthcoming in what he had just said out loud; he was in love with her. If they were ambassadors, they could get a joined posting somewhere. It may be on some backwater planet off in the corner of the system but they would be together.

The trio made their way through the ship to Tem's quarters only to find he was not there at the moment. Denise thought to herself, he might want to change that door code sometime soon, since she had accessed his suite with her old code. A quick check of the computer system indicated he was on the bridge so they proceeded in that direction. Once there, the *Vaar* side air lock was open to the passageway, a sign the atmosphere was back on the Command Deck. Walking onto the bridge, she tapped Tem on the shoulder lightly, startling him just a bit.

"Oh! Hey, Denni! Well, you're looking very sexy . . ." He didn't finish that sentence when he observed the others with Denise. "I was just about to call you. I was doing some scans of the system, just to get a lay of the land, as your father would say. I came across this very low-gain signal about one *Heth* ago, and we're now in range to hear the broadcast clear enough."

The Ambassador switched to the channel her former lover sent to her, waiting for her comm unit to sync up. She finally received a blue light, then the audio in question. "___the Heavy Cruiser Killark Feddri, a Comeri registered war vessel. We are under attack by two rogue Sarlii Wraith Destroyers who will not answer hails. Request assistance if you can copy this message. We have lost main power throughout the ship, running on battery. The Sarlii are firing rail gun rounds at us and we can't withstand the damage much longer. This is the Heavy Cruiser Killark Feddri, a Comeri registered war vessel. We are under attack by two rogue Sarlii___"

"Denni, we're reading some debris from a Comeri ship and what must be a completely destroyed Sarlii ship. That is what the ring of that planet is made up of. The Comeri must have launched the beacon before they were destroyed. I'm also picking up a Sarlii beacon that's sending out a dead carrier and we're sure we hear a second beacon that's not on a standard frequency and broadcasting a garbled message we can't decode. Maybe that beacon was from the second Sarlii ship?"

"I think we need to go to alert status." the ambassador suggested. "We don't know what's down there or floating around in this system, for that matter."

"Denni, you're right. There might be torpedoes out there with spent propellant, caught in a gravity well and orbiting a moon or an asteroid. I think we had better go to alert status. I'll let the Skipper know."

"What can I do?" she asked.

"Well, since you're already dressed for battle, stand the bridge while I put on some armor? Not as sexy as yours, though."

"I hope not." she quipped back.

Temmet turned to the Sub-Commander and made a suggestion to her. "Sa'Vesi, If you go to Armory Two, they have some of these Drexel Eighties, several sizes of them that are brand new. I'm sure you'll find one that will fit you. They're all fresh, still in the shipping crates. You might see if wearing one gets the attention of your counterpart, here."

“Brand new?” she questioned, looking over at a very embarrassed Marlett. Several times Sa’Vesi had thought about getting a Drexel Eighty, if a good one were available. This was proving to be a very good opportunity for her to realize that inner desire.

“They are brand new, never worn.” Tem confirmed. “I had those suits loaded into the armory when we were at Pharrpoint our last trip to Earth. They actually had no place for me to deliver them to so they became ours by default. Seems their station security doesn’t like them for some reason and my security detail likes the Mark Nine *Lestim* light powered stuff for ship-board use. Go, the armory is on deck seven, frame ninety-four. Marlett, you won’t look that good in the Drexel stuff. Borrow a Mark Nine while you’re on-board.”

As the two ranking officers watched Marlett and Sa’Vesi exit the bridge, Tem made a comment. “I’ll bet Sa’Vesi looks real sexy in a Drexel Eighty.” he put forth.

“So, I’m chopped liver, now?” Denise was smiling because he knew what he meant.

“No, you will never be chopped liver to me.” he corrected. “You know, I really hope we’re wrong about this. I don’t want to set down in the middle of a war and I certainly don’t want to announce that I suspect a war is going on by asking.”

“You have it under control, Tem.” After a moment, she asked an important question, important to her. “Tem, we didn’t really get a chance to get our family going, did we?”

“No, we didn’t.” he agreed. “We were working too many *Heth* and we had almost no time to ourselves.” He turned to face her, smiling at her in that way he always did.

“You’re smiling that cute little smile of yours. Is it this armor?” she had to know.

“I would be lying if I said no,” he agreed, running his hand across the shoulder of her alloy protective suite. “I don’t know what it is, maybe the thought that you’re all bare fur in there, I don’t know. Maybe it’s the way you walk in it. You know, the Eighty is a favorite amongst the femmes onboard ships although I don’t think they make your size any more. You would have to go to a Drexel Ninety if you needed new armor.”

Denise smiled back at Temmet. “You can see me putting this armor on in your mind’s eye, right? Sliding down and wiggling my way into place? Grimacing at the very unwanted intrusions by the environmental hardware?”

“Again, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t.” After a moment, he continued thoughts that he might not have shared otherwise. “Denni, I still care for you. Well, I’ll correct that; I still love you. I won’t lie about it.”

“I thought so.” she mused. “Tem, what are we going to do? You and me, the two of us? We might be on dirt for some time, depending on the period of that wormhole.”

“I don’t know, Denni. You know I still love you.” he offered up. “And, I really love how you move in that powered armor. There’s a video floating around the InfoWeb with what must be femme troopers dancing in powered armor, particularly the Drexel Sixty-One and Eighty models.

It's enough to get a young trooper hot under the shirt collar. Reminded me of the way you move in your armor."

"What, dancing, like what, this?" she suggested. Denise began to do a popular dance, something traditional with a splash of Earth country line dancing mixed in.

"Yeah, like that. It was starting to overload the ship-wide InfoNet so we had to throttle that feed."

Denise stopped her dancing and thought about something. "The Drexel Sixty-One. My mother has one, looks like brand new but it has about a jillion *Heth* on it. Father maintains it for her like it was another child of theirs." Then another thought crossed her mind. "Tem, you need to get your armor on, then I can get unsuited and try to get this sensor mesh off of me. Since it's a brand new mesh, replaced just recently, it's probably stuck on my fur really good."

Temmet had a look of horror cross his face. "Oh Gods, Denni, tell me you didn't do that! I'm guessing you didn't shave down your coat, either." He knew just how uncomfortable that sensor mesh would be to remove. Considering where it was stuck on her and the length of her pelt, it could be painful to peel it off of her without some help.

"Tem, I forgot. I got in a hurry and I honestly just blew it off. Big mistake on my part."

"Well, the leg and arm sensor pads aren't going to be an issue. If you would like, I can help tease the mesh off of you. Sa'Vesi could bring us a spray can of mesh release from the armory, that flowery stuff you like. I know you can't get the angle needed to unplug the mesh from the suit while you're wearing it but I think I can. I'm offering, as a close friend. Not looking for any perks, I just want to help."

The Ambassador lifted one eyebrow as she crossed her arms. "No perks? For sure, no perks?"

"No perks unless you're offering them. Your decision always." When he observed his former *One Love* smile at him, he turned to the trooper at the nav console. "Navigator, I will be monitoring ship channel two. You have the bridge."

Denise slowly stepped up onto the base of the crate which was now acting as a place to store her armor so she could extract herself from its intimate embrace. She carefully found the indent the left boot had to go into, then the right. Chinning a button to actuate them, the clamps in the soles took a purchase of the base, holding her in place. The suit popped open by her command and began to lean over at the waist, allowing her to stand back up and wait for Temmet to release the umbilical cable for the mesh adhered firmly to her chest.

"Okay, I'm going in." he said as a joke, sliding his arm down in front of her into the armor. "Lean back a bit, if you can?" he asked, finally getting the end of the cord in his hand. "Denni, does it turn or do I just pull down?"

She had to think about that for a moment. “Um, it turns left-handed, um, Zel-handed to release, I think. Pantomiming turning the connector, she nodded. Yeah, Vaar-hand to connect, Zel-hand to release. Should be one-quarter turn.”

“Got it!” he blurted out, pulling his hand out that still held the cable in it. That’s when Denni kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you!” she offered up, showing him she wouldn’t have been able to do that herself. “I don’t think Sa’Vesi could have gotten her arm down in there, either. There isn’t much room, is there?”

“No, there’s not. A design flaw, I guess.” Tem waited while she climbed out, those first few inches moving very slowly, being careful to not hurt herself as she came free from those protrusions. She stepped out and stood on her own for a moment, getting her sense of balance back.

“Sa’Vesi said to give you this first.” He offered her a milk shake which she didn’t object to.

“Mmm! Ginger, cinnamon, allspice and vanilla.”

“Your favorite. Now, turn around.” She turned her back to him and knowing what he was going to do, she lifted her hair for him. Denise felt that familiar cold spray on her neck, then he started to tease the mesh off.

“Did they change the formula for that stuff? Seems a bit fruity to me.” she commented. “Not complaining about it, just asking.”

“New formula. The males have one that has a mountain *Sedrim* forest smell. I think it’s not as good as the old stuff, though. Okay, that’s free. Turn around, please? Keep in mind, it’s not the first time I’ve ever seen you in the raw with a sensor mesh stuck to you in an unwanted way.”

“You are not going to give me any slack on that, are you?” She mock pouted at him, making him smile again.

“Denni, it was priceless when that armorer told you to peel the mesh off and it wouldn’t budge. He knew exactly what he was doing, since you played right into his practical joke. Your father would say, It was just like shooting fish in a barrel.”

“I forgot to trim down that time, too.” she admitted. “We had just went into orbit on that barf bucket flight the day before and everybody was flying around, hitting into each other and doing too many forward and reverse rolls, me included. I was still not back on my game when we went to get my regular issue powered armor, this armor. You could have said something, you know.”

“I could have, but what would have been the fun in that?”

“My language class students gave me grief for still having the mesh stuck on my coat the next day, too. My father finally told me about the release spray. Seems my mother did the same thing,

forgetting to trim down beforehand.” She smiled at him as she tugged at the connector cable. “Get busy with that spray, Saar,” Denise put forth, motioning to the mesh still adhered to her pelt.

Temmet started by giving a small area a shot, then working it a bit to get the mesh to begin to come loose from her fur. Working at the material, then soaking the sensor array again was doing the job, it was just not that fast of a project. It took about ten *Munar* but the mesh was finally free of her. He sat the sensor array on the low table in front of the settee, then he put the mylar film back on it to keep the adhesive ready for re-use. That’s when Denise tentatively spoke her mind after looking at her padd.

“We might be in powered armor on the surface for a while, you know that? Tem, I hate to ask you, but would you trim down my coat?” Denise looked down at the floor then back at him, obviously embarrassed to ask such a thing. “I sent a message to Vesi, asking if she could do that for me. The message I just received back says they are doing something unintelligible, it was all in capitals and it’s badly misspelled. You know what that means.”

“Yeah, I know what that means when Vesi does that. Very well, I can trim your fur for you.” he agreed with a smile. “In the shower, so we can clean up easier afterward?”

“In the shower.” Denise went ahead of Tem, going to a locker to find the usual fur trimmer found in a cabin aboard ship. She snapped the thinnest guide onto it, then handed it to her former *One Love*.

“Denni, you want to do a four guide, no shorter. This number one is too short, you’ll have trouble with your clothing grabbing at you and the sleeping mesh doing the same thing. When we were together, I always trimmed your fur with a number four guide.”

“If you say so, Saar Stylist.” She changed the guide before she stepped into the shower and turned around to face him. “I’m ready. Let’s do this before I change my mind.”

Denise rolled over in her bed to look at Tem, who was sipping on a cup of cold water. She could tell he was still smiling, too. “Well, did that blow off some steam for you?” she asked.

“It made me remember what I have been missing all these solar cycles, Kitten.”

“My father calls my mother ‘Kitten’ when they’re in a mood.” She put her nose to his shoulder and took in his natural musk while she ran her hand across his chest fur, freshly trimmed to a number three length by her. This, she had missed for a long time, the closeness and comfort she felt being near Temmet.

“Denni, where do we go from here? I mean, this was not just a romp, was it? You seemed pretty insistent we have a bit of fun in bed, blow off some steam, as you say.”

“Tem, be honest with me. You have not found another femme to be with?”

“No, I have not. Denni, you will please be honest with me, now. No other lovers?”

“Well, you probably heard about Arent Sanden’lan. We weren’t lovers, just friends, nothing more. I never felt a true love for him like I do for you. As far as that goes, we were never intimate. You and I both know time was our enemy before, so we need to fix that if we’re going to go down that path again.”

“Down on the planet, once we settle into a routine, we will fix that. We can . . .”

Denise shut him up with a sensual kiss, one that curled his toes. “Shh. Let’s enjoy these few moments before you have to go back on duty, okay?”

“Oh, that’s right. The bridge. Yes.”

“Come here, Saar. I need to get to know you again. Hold me now for a few moments, then you can hold me later when we’re off rotation again.”

“As you wish, Kitten.”

Denise allowed Temmet to hold her tightly, making her feel warm and contented in his arms. It seemed like it had been forever since she had been held like this, a number of solar cycles. Thinking about her mother and father, she wanted that same loving household for herself, children and all. She honestly hoped this turned out right for them.