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“Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

Chapter Six

“Settling In”

The alarm clock chiming woke Ronmet from a deep sleep, leaving him feeling a bit disoriented until he remembered why there was another body in the bed with him. That body stirred, then looked up at him.

“Is it morning?” Gina asked in Elazi, waiting for him to answer while she disentangled herself from the earbuds connected to the learning system.

“It’s morning, time to get up,” he replied before he tapped the light control pad over the head of the bunk. “You can understand me clearly?” Ronmet could tell that question made his bed-mate have to think for more than a second or two.

“Yeah, I mean we’re speaking . . . English? Um, no, we’re speaking Elazi, right?”

“You sound just like you were raised in Southern Arrl district.”

“That’s not a bad thing, is it?” she asked. She hoped that wasn’t a bad thing, after all.

“No, not at all. You’ll lose the accent soon enough.” Ron stretched out, trying to get the kinks out of his body. “We have time to shower, if you’re interested.”

“We did work up a sweat last night,” she mused. “Ron, this is kind of personal but do you have another that you’re married to or interested in?”

“Married? You mean joined,” he corrected. “I am not joined, but I think you could change my mind about being joined. You’re the only one I’ve ever been interested in.”

“Thank you,” Gina said softly. “You wouldn’t have known but I’ve been married before. Our marriage didn’t survive my enlistment so we called it quits before I became pregnant.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What rank was your former *One Love*?”

Gina looked away and swallowed hard, embarrassed to admit the truth. “He was civilian, worked at a restaurant in San Diego as the head chef. My being deployed constantly was too much for him to handle.”

“That is a common occurrence with all races.” Ronmet guided Gina into the shower and turned on the water, allowing the overhead rain nozzle to soak them fully.

“I could get spoiled by this shower. For more than twenty years, we have had to conserve water when we lost two of our well pumps to lightning storms. I grew up in Iowa until I was twelve so I’m used to electrical storms. Iowa couldn’t hold a candle to the storms here.”

“Bad storms?” he questioned while he worked on his body fur with a brush.

“We had one lightning bolt that hit our northernmost water pump, actually arced out a hole in the pump body. A few people were shocked by that strike but luckily, nobody was killed.”

“I guess we need to put electrical arrestors on the ship, then.” Ron mused. “So, you ready to go bring *The Golden Gate* down on dirt?”

“Well, not really but I guess I have no choice, since the Commander assigned me to this detail.” If she had to be honest about it, she was not a big fan of space flight, especially after getting stuck on *The Golden Gate* when the Big Boy shuttle decided to go belly up. It was her specialties of material handling and shuttle pilot that put her at the top of a short list of qualified personnel. She knew Leonard Valdez would be with them today, too.

They finished their shower, dressed in their armor set up for vacuum incursions, followed by a quick first meal in the mid-ship galley. Once the pair had polished off breakfast, they went to Bay Five Lower, *Vaar* side. Waiting for them were the pilot and copilot for the Maxi Lifter along with Leonard and Specialist Valenna Namaralla. All of them boarded the Maxi and after a short in-cockpit checklist was completed, they lifted off.

Gina and Leonard were enjoying the view afforded them from the cabin on the Maxi, a view that could not be duplicated from the ground. First, they were marveling at the sheer size of *The Dark Claw*, then they could see the wreckage of *The Killark Feddri* in the distance as they were climbing out of the gravity well at a moderate incline. A ways off to the south, the Hasmaili city closest to the Golden Gate community, Northern Vectar could be seen by the naked eye and finally, The Great Canyon, the one the Hasmaili had told them to stay away from. Apparently it was some sort of a religious sacred site to them, not to be desecrated by any race.

Eventually the curvature of the planet was obvious, then the sky above them became black as they left the atmosphere. Up ahead of them in orbit, was *The Golden Gate* in all of her heavily weathered glory.

“Wow, she looks kinda beat up, huh?” Gina offered up.

“I agree, Gee.” Leonard agreed. “Does look worn out, doesn’t she? Didn’t look that way when we left Luna’s orbit, that’s for sure.” The pock marks on the hull and the pods were a testament to the debris impacts the ship had suffered over the years. Of course, it was never meant to be in orbit this long.

Tammet Tarver’lan expertly piloted the Maxi into a synchronous orbit with the battered Earth ship, then carefully maneuvered up to the point they were almost touching. A few minor adjustments were made to their distance, then the computer took over station keeping duties.

“Everyone listen up,” Tammet spoke up, getting everyone’s attention, “We’re all going to remain tethered to the Maxi so we don’t have to retrieve anyone. We need to attach twelve struts to the Golden Gate on each side per the agreed-upon attachment points. We will work for four *Heth*, take a meal in the cabin, then finish. We need to go back down before dark so we can see our landing site clearly.”

Gina and Ronmet were working on the sixth strut that needed to be attached on the left side, first bolting one end to a bracket secured to the Maxi, then measuring how much to cut off so it would meet up with the correct point on the latticework frames that the material pods were attached to. Ron proved to be very proficient with an electrode cutting torch, neatly severing off the unneeded portion of the strut. While Gina held the modified strut in position, he carefully welded the strut in place with several passes of weld material laid down per side.

“Nice weld,” the Petty Officer commented as she inspected the result. “Um, how close are we to mid-meal?”

“We should head in, I don’t think we have time for another strut before we eat,” he replied. “While we’re inside, I’m going to get some welding rods that are for harder alloy aluminum. Might help the weld penetration.”

Specialist Namaralla and Leonard were ahead of them so they had to wait out their turn to get through the air lock. Once Gina and Ronmet had cycled through and popped their helmets, the smell of hot food hit their noses.

“What is that delicious aroma?” Chief Valdez asked as he took off his gloves. “Hot food for lunch?”

“What else would we eat? I can do wonders in this tiny galley,” their Co-pilot replied. That was an area behind a door that Gina thought was a closet. “It is a very small area but I made sure it was well equipped. Spaghetti is ready.”

“I could really get spoiled by the Elazi ships. Gravity, even on a utility ship,” Leonard mused.

“Is a good thing, to have much gravity,” Valenna offered up. “On Bil or Comeri utility ship, is no gravity. We do better in gravity, is natural. No gravity, make spacers irritated. Not like on planet, not feel natural.”

“I have to agree,” Ronmet offered up. “I prefer working in full gravity, it seems better and you don’t have that problem with losing bone and muscle mass.”

They all consumed their lunch meal which was very filling, then Ronmet and Valenna switched out their welding electrodes for rods meant for a harder alloy material. Once back to the task at hand, Regina asked a question over what was indicated to be a private channel;

“Ron, would you like to have dinner together, once we’re back on the planet?”

“I would,” he replied with a smile. “My ship or your community?”

Gina had to think about that. “Um, how about my place? It’s a dormitory-based cooking and eating area for each dorm area but just about everyone will probably be at the main community dining hall. I can put together something like a pasta and meat meal, if that’s fine with you.”

“I think I would enjoy that,” the Elazi male replied. “It has been too long that I have enjoyed a home-prepared meal.”

Ronmet thought about that; he had been stationed first on Pharrpoint Station, then on *The Dark Claw*. It had been more than six Elazi years since he had sat down to a meal that was made just for him so this meal would be special in his eyes. He also knew in his heart he was falling further in love with Gina, the one that made him feel whole.

“Regina, I have a question.” Ron put forth. “How many years have you served in the military?”

“Officially, twelve years,” she replied as she held the next strut to be welded in place. “Unofficially, I have thirty-one years in service. That’s if Earth recognizes my service here on Hasmalan. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering how long you were in service before you came to this planet,” he replied. “My service runs out in three more Elazi months. According to our skipper, we have to sign a provisional reenlistment form to get pay for serving here. The provisional reenlistment is voided ten days after we return to Elazia. That’s why I asked. You could just stay onboard *The Dark Claw* when we reach Earth, then we would return to Elazia together.”

Gina thought that notion over for a few minutes. “Ron, I think I know what you’re asking. I would be overjoyed to see Elazia and live there with you, if that would please you.”

“Gina, that would please me greatly,” he replied. Before he could continue down that path, their pilot broke in on what was proved to *not* be a private conversation.

“So, are you two going to be joined on Earth or Elazia?” he asked.

“Oh no!” Regina blurted out. “We forgot to check to see if this really was a private channel! Now everyone knows what’s up!”

“Don’t worry,” their pilot offered up. “Nobody on the planet heard you. Only our team up here knows and I hope all of them will keep this under wraps, I think is the proper term for not sharing something private in nature.”

“I’m still embarrassed that I almost bared my soul to my team!” she blurted out.

“Gina, I kinda figured you were sweet on Ronmet,” Leo offered up. “I would like to be at your wedding, since we’ve known each other for so long. You’re practically my kid sister in a way.”

“What if we’re married, um, joined on Elazia?” she questioned.

“I still want to be there,” Leo stated. “I wouldn’t miss it for the universe.”

After the Golden Gate was secured to the Maxi Lifter, Leonard and Gina made their way onto the aging ship and ultimately, the engineering compartment. She located the checklist binder and opened the manual to the proper section before proceeding. Looking down at it, she felt like their actions this day should have been done long ago, in Luna’s orbit at the completion of a mission accomplished.

“Leo, go to panel “Alpha Alpha” and open all breakers except Alpha Alpha twenty-three,” she instructed.

“Got it, all breakers except number twenty-three.” He turned to look at her as she continued to read.

“Okay, panel “Alpha Bravo” open breakers nine, twelve and thirteen.”

“Got it Gina. What’s next?”

“Leo, open panel Bravo, next to the Master Buss controls. Open the Main Buss breaker on top.”

“Main Buss open,” he offered up as the ship slowly became very quiet inside. “Wow, that’s different. I’ve never heard the ‘Gate with no primary power before. I was one of the first of the crew onboard her and since it was already powered, it was always noisy to me.” He looked at some of the indicators and made a comment; “Good thing we’re doing this. The reactor has less than twenty pounds of pellets left so it would have shut down without us in less than a year.”

“I know,” Regina agreed. “Well, she worked long and hard for us. We’re just giving her a well-deserved rest.” She turned to put the manual away, then motioned for Leonard to follow her back to the hatch once the binder was stowed properly. As they walked through the ship, many memories came to mind, some happy, others sad. Two of their propulsion engineers perished when the engineering bay lost atmosphere due to a misbehaving environmental control interface. She also remembered the still that was hidden in an equipment pod that had interior access. It had never been used during flight because the XO had made the Seabees take it apart.

They both entered the airlock and closed the door, waiting while the compartment slowly depressurized. Once they had a “No Atmosphere” indication, the hatch in the floor could open for them. Leo attached a tether to his armor, then carefully dropped through the opening. He powered up his mag boots, attaching his feet to the Maxi, then he squatted and picked up the safety cables where they had left them attached to *The Golden Gate’s* hull.

“Here’s your cable,” Leo offered as he stood back up, putting his shoulders level with the air lock floor while he connected his main cable and detached the short one. Gina took her safety

cable from him and connected her suit to the tether for safe egress. She waited until Leo had cleared the area under the hatch before she made her exit from the Golden Gate. It only took a few moments more to close the hatch and dog it down for reentry so once that was done, they made their way back to the Maxi's cabin.

Commander Tarver'lan and his co-pilot went through their landing checklist, inserting the approximate gross weight of the Golden Gate into the nav computer so they could maintain a balanced loading. After checking his screens once more, he spoke up in English for the Earthers onboard.

"We will be attempting a landing on the next rotation around. Our landing spot will be very close to *The Dark Claw*, since that dry lake bed seems to be the ideal spot to try for. I'll turn down the cabin gravity to about one-half Earth equivalent now that we're connected to our seat attachments. Kevven'lan, prepare for atmospheric insertion."

The Maxi shuddered a bit when it began to hit the thicker atmosphere, then a bit more as they started to bleed off excess Delta-V for their landing. On some overhead monitors, Gina watched the nacelles adjusting angle to keep them on a steady descent, amazed that the two ships tied together were just making this seem ever-so-easy to accomplish. At least they had slowed down considerably before entering the atmosphere and there was no fire surrounding them from atmospheric compression heating. The side-benefit was the ability to do some high altitude sight seeing.

"I have the beacon," Co-pilot Kevven'lan stated one *Heth* later as he continued to make minor corrections to the computer's course setting. "Retro-thrust on full, no overload indications from the strut mounts."

"All flight systems normal," Ronmet offered up, acting as the auxiliary pilot for them. "We are fifty *Hazecan* out, velocity at two hundred *Hazican* per *Heth* and dropping. Optimum speed reduction profile in effect, we are within one *Hazecan* to landing. I have the landing site marked on the scanner."

"Go ahead and set us down," Commander Tarver'lan ordered, checking all the indicators for trouble. The ship finally stopped and shuddered slightly as it transitioned to station keeping, then it finished the maneuver by settling down on its landing legs. "We are back on dirt," he added while they went through the shutdown procedures.

"Good to see you back on dirt," Commander Na'Risa Tavvit'lan put forth over the radio in English. "Crew, you will please debrief as soon as possible, Pilot's Room Three."

Gina and Ronmet had went through the debrief with the rest of the orbital crew so they were now changing into regular clothing to get a dinner meal. That spaghetti they consumed in orbit was good but it had not held them over well enough. It was also too late in the evening to begin cooking a meal so the chow line would be more than adequate tonight. Gina was finishing up

dressing in her standard Naval utility uniform while her lover, who had already dressed himself in a jumpsuit, was slipping on his shoes.

“Ron, is there something that the Elazi do to denote a potential joining between two people? On Earth, the man would give an engagement ring to his future wife.”

Ronmet looked at Gina and smiled. “Yes, there is something we would do. Give me a *Mumar* and I will present it to you.” He rummaged around in a dresser drawer and removed a small box from it. He removed a delicate silver band that was engraved with runes and opened the fastener. “Gina, I am asking if you would be my future *One Love*. If you accept, I ask that you wear this bracelet to show all that you have been asked to be joined.”

“I would like that, Ron. I will wear your band that you’re offering to me,” she agreed. He carefully snapped it closed around her left wrist and turned it to show off the main runes engraved in the top surface. “Those are some very intricate carvings.” she commented.

“It says, “I have made my choice to become joined with the one that offered this band,” in *Old Elazi*. This custom dates back thousands of rotations. When we are joined, I will remove this band and place a different one on your right wrist. That band will be the equivalent of a wedding ring.”

“It is a custom I will gladly accept and continue,” Regina put forth. “And, my stomach is growling at me. Let’s go find something to eat.”

“Agreed,” Ronmet stated. “Let’s go to the upper All Ranks hall. They have good A’Pari offerings at last meal.”

Denise was poking at her Tem-an-tra, sort of an A’Pari pizza of sorts. She had ate most of a small one, a meal that would normally feed two if a salad were added on the side. Taking another sip of her Royal Crown Cola[®], she pondered whether she had ate too much or she honestly just had an upset stomach. Well, after finding out how far away from home they were by FTL drive, maybe it was nerves after all.

Temmet, Sa’Vesi and Marlett sat down with her, discussing what sounded like a change in suites for them. Tem looked over at her plate, then at his.

“Well, I guess I should have checked on what you had ordered first, Denni,” he commented. His plate was covered by a small A’Pari pseudo-pizza, the same kind as hers.

“No, that’s okay. My Tem-an-tra has grown kind of cold,” she replied. “It’s giving me an upset stomach, to tell you the truth. I need to take something for this because my gut is burning.”

“It’s not nerves, is it?” Vesi asked. Her boss nodded in the affirmative in return.

“Might be. I’ll be honest, knowing just how far we are from home bothers me.” She detached her belt pouch from its holder and began rummaging through it. “I know I have some stomach mints in here somewhere. Needed them on Tunnis during that last diplomatic mission there.”

“Maybe you should see the Medics for . . .” Denni waved Sa’Vesi off.

“No, it’s not that bad. I feel like I’m needing to burp, but I can’t. That heavy, gassy feeling in my stomach.”

“You sure?” Marlett asked.

“I’m pretty sure,” she replied. She started to add more to those thoughts when they were all interrupted by an All-Call to their communicators from the bridge.

“Ambassador, Skipper, XO. Please report to the *Vaar* side Bay Three. We have official visitors.”

Denise had put on a black blouse, her long green diplomatic skirt trimmed in House Andrews’lan tartan and her knee-high black leather boots. Tem had helped her put on her ceremonial upper torso and arm armor, then he clipped her ceremonial green cape to the studs on her shoulders. He followed up by quickly putting on his semi-formal uniform while Sa’Vesi and Marlett had donned their powered armor.

They gathered in the hallway leading into the *Vaar* Bay Three and once the skipper arrived wearing her semi-formal uniform, they all entered the bay and headed for the ramp.

“We have some important visitors from the Hasmali,” Na’Risa put forth. “Well, they were expected at some point in time.” What she had just said in clear, almost unaccented English kind of shocked the Ambassador.

“Skipper, your English has really improved,” she commented.

“I used the program while I was on Bridge Duty, the first four disks. For some reason, it seemed to work out better for me that way. I . . . I absorbed the subject matter markedly better this time around.”

“I’ll say,” Tem offered up. “Your English was so rough just one day ago. Now, you seem to have a solid grasp on it.” That made the skipper smile.

“I wish I could speak Hasmali, so this meeting would be proper. It’s always good to speak the language of the new neighbors,” Risa offered up.

“I’ll agree, Skipper,” Denni put out. “Maybe I can pick up their language fairly easily. You know, Father always said I was good with languages. It only took me a year to learn proper French and Quebecois.”

The small retinue walked down the ramp to a small vehicle that was waiting for them. Once they had gotten squared away, the driver took them about a quarter of a *Hazecan* from the ship to what looked like a campsite being set up. Waiting for them was a small group of heavily armed Hasmali with a black and brown toned male standing in front of them.

An area had been set up with lighting so all could be seen, so the vehicle carrying the ambassador and her group stopped just outside the circle of light. They all exited the vehicle and formed up on Denise, who was not feeling good with the way this was panning out. She then hesitantly motioned for them to advance to the center of the light. Once there, the two-toned Hasmali male came forward to meet with them.

“I am Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan, from the Elazi ship *The Dark Claw*. We have come as you instructed,” She put forth.

The Hasmali male looked at the retinue with her and spoke up in return. “I am Teval Kovvelan. Where is Colonel MacLachlan and Commander D’Mol? They should be here.”

“I apologize, I did not know they needed to be present,” Denni replied.

“Tomorrow, at the time you would call “Nine A.M.,” we will meet here again. You will have the Coomeriani and Englannish commanders with you,” he put forth tersely. Teval then turned and walked back toward his camp, the group with him following closely behind.

“Well, that didn’t go as expected,” the ambassador put forth as her retinue returned to their vehicle. Her expectations had been thoroughly dashed by this failure in her eyes. The Skipper speaking to her brought her out of her introspection.

“I will agree, Ambassador. We need to send word to the Golden Gate community tonight. I will task someone to do that duty,” Na’Risa offered up.

“Somewhat off-subject, but I think they are at least related to the Sarlii,” Denni offered up. “Even their accent when speaking English sounds very familiar to my ears.”

“I think you’re right,” Sa’Vesi chimed in. “They do look like they are related in some way to the Sarlii.”

Opening her door to get into their utility vehicle, Sa’Krista made a comment before she got in; “Tomorrow, I’m wearing my powered armor. For some reason, I’m not getting a good vibe from this meeting. Something is very wrong here.”

“I would agree with your assessment,” Na’Risa put forth. She had that same gut feeling that tomorrow’s meeting might not go well, either. “We will all be in powered armor, just in case there is trouble. Temmet, make sure Colonel MacLachlan and Commander D’Mol are issued powered armor if they need it. Anyone not in powered armor will wear hard armor with bubble helmets. No unarmored personnel at the meeting.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Tem replied. This was one case where he found no reason to argue with the Captain Of The Ship over semantics. Wear armor or just don’t be on-site for the meeting. There

was no reason for anyone to risk harm, even if it was 'First Contact' with the Hasmali. He did have to admit, He agreed with his *One Love* in this matter, they did sound like Sarlii when they spoke English. There had to be a connection here that was just being overlooked.

Sa'Krista and her small retinue had made their way back to *The Dark Claw* and the rooms that had been converted for them into what would be the Executive Officer, Ambassador and support suites for them. Their possessions had been moved for them but now it was up to Denise, Temmet, Sa'Vesi and Marlett to put their items away. This didn't take long for Sa'Krista, since she had most of her clothing packed and stored in the designated locker area for officers and ambassadors several frames down the corridor.

Tem had managed to clear one of his tubs and he was working on the second one, what amounted to his underwear, socks, miscellaneous clothing and odd items. Sa'Krista walked by the tub in question to put her toiletries away but on the way back into the bedroom area, something glinted inside the container. She stopped to look at it, somewhat taken aback by what it appeared to be.

"Temmet, would you confirm what this is in the tub? I think I know what it is but I want confirmation from you," she asked.

"Um, it's a Bil Restraint Harness," he put forth, "I won it in a card game a few solar rotations back. The stakes were high and our Engineering Officer at the time wanted to stay in the game. He bet this harness and somebody saw his bet and raised him an Earth crafted Rolex Oyster wrist watch. I finally went all in, covered their bets and put down nine high rank Diamonds to the engineer's six low rank Ovals and three high rank Stars. It's new, never been worn according to the Engineer."

"It's not like the one my mother has," she mused as she carefully took it out of the bin and held it up. "Must be a newer model. Do you have the keys and fobs for it?"

"In this box," he replied, opening a small wooden case to show off the contents. "Why do you ask? Interested in trying it on?"

"Well, maybe," the ambassador mused, "I wore one that belonged to my mother but it was way different than this one." She removed the key from the case and unlocked the harness, then locked it closed and unlocked it again. Satisfied the mechanisms all worked as advertised, she began to strip off her clothing.

"Need some help with that?" Tem asked casually. He was trying to keep from showing his excitement at this unusual and rare prospect. He also knew he would have to play fair with her, too. Tem didn't want to drive her away with some bad decisions concerning her pending immobilization and that was only if she allowed it to happen at all.

"Yeah, you'll need to help me with this, I think," she put forth as she straightened it out and laid it out properly in front of her while she sat on the edge of the bed.

Temmet helped to work the harness over her body, since this one was far more elaborate than the one her mother had allowed her to try on. It was obviously made from some extremely light alloy and her coat slid effortlessly past the hundreds of segmented sections, none of them even thinking of grabbing at her pelt. Once it was on her legs fully, she stood up to continue the process of application.

She worked her hands down into the segments for her arms, then Tem helped to get her hands into the pseudo-gloves at the ends of the skeleton sleeves. Her fingers and thumbs were free but a band went around each palm just behind her knuckles and another band encircled each wrist. When she shrugged the harness up onto her shoulders, she realized just how high the collar was on this particular model. She really hoped it was self-sizing once activated so she wouldn't have to hold her head up so high. Temmet finished her enclosure by inserting the lock tabs into their matching receptacles to close the back of the harness.

"Um, it's not activated," she commented when the suit of alloy didn't do anything right away.

"Well, give me a *Munar* and let me read the instructions," her future *One Love* replied. "I'm supposed to use the bigger fob, I think. Uh, here it is on page five. Stand relaxed, arms at your sides." Temmet activated the garment of polished metal, making it begin to self-size on Sa'Krista's body. She stood there patiently, feeling the suit constrict on her body, then relax just a tiny amount. After a moment, it snugged down further on her, made some adjustments here and there, then the whole suit loosened to a wearable snugness.

"Well, that seemed to go smoothly," she commented, walking over to the closet that had a mirror on the door. Looking at herself in the reflections, she was pleased with the appearance.

"I need to do some initial setup," he offered as he read the instructions further. "I need to press some buttons to keep it from locking up the articulations or shocking you."

"What? Shock me?" she blurted out, taking the manual from him and reading it for herself. "Well, you had better follow the directions, then. It says I have to wait at least one *Bil Sisk* before you can let me out of this, now that we have powered it up."

"So, what do you want to do while we wait?" Temmet asked while he worked through the initial setup of the suit parameters, enjoying the sight in front of him. The Restraint Harness definitely accented her curves to a high degree, each strap and band sitting in just the right place.

"Well, for some strange reason, I'm hungry again," she replied. "How about the forward Officer's Galley? Maybe a dessert?" she suggested as she read up on how to make the myriad of little red lights scattered around the suit stop flashing.

"Dressed like that?" he questioned. While it was not *that* unusual, somebody might know what her minimalist alloy garment actually was and jump to conclusions. He did have to admit, it looked very provocative on her.

"Why not?" she quipped while she put her identification, meal card and both fobs in a pouch. She clipped it to her harness, then motioned for them to leave their suite.

“Very well, if you say so,” he replied, shaking his head as he followed behind her through the portal. He wondered if her mother would have done the same thing if she were in this exact same situation.

Ronmet was adjusting the laces on his roller skates, getting them snug but not too snug. He had already put on his knee and elbow pads so once his skates were snugged, he could get on the rink. It was a bit crowded this evening, since the Golden Gate community had been told they could use the facilities by the Skipper. Gina came flying off the rink and made a very snappy sliding stop in front of her *One Love*, getting his attention.

“Ron, that maple flooring is fantastic!” she almost blurted out. “It has been too many years since I’ve been rolling on wood! The last wood rink shut down right before I was assigned to the Golden Gate project, the last of the Southern California Woodies in Pomona.”

Ronmet smiled. “You might be skating on part of that rink, then,” he offered up as he stood up on his skates. “We purchased enough wood to build two of these rinks on our last rotation to Earth. The wood came from several decommissioned, um, closed down rinks.” That made her look at the rink again, giving thought to that.

“That would probably surprise my family. Well, that’s if Mom and Dad are still alive. I’m the youngest and my oldest brother would be almost seventy now so that means Dad would be ninety-two and Mom would be ninety-five. Our whole family skated for either recreation or skated professionally. The family had high hopes that I would become a professional.” She checked her laces, then took Ronmet’s hand in hers and headed toward the wood. “I’m still a bit rusty, haven’t been on skates in over thirty years.”

They started skating around the floor, Ronmet taking up an easy gait while Gina reacquainted her muscles to skating. Eventually she was at least skating as well if not better than the other Golden Gate members were. Gina then motioned for them to leave the floor.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, concerned since she hadn’t been on the floor that long.

“The boots are loosening up. I need to snug the laces a bit more. Actually, I need to re-lace the tops of the boots so they won’t loosen up.” Once she started working on her laces, she looked up at Ron with a smile. “Um, could you see if they have some lace wax behind the counter? Please?”

“I can do that,” he replied with a smile. By the time she had both boots unlaced half-way down, he was back with a tube of wax, similar to a tube of lip balm.

“Thank you. Sit down and have a lesson on lacing,” she offered as she took the wax from him. He watched as she coated her laces lightly, then re-laced them by bringing the laces in from the outside of the boot before crossing to the other side. “Now, when I tighten my laces, the boot holds the laces tight as I move up the boot, just by pressure.” She pulled a loop tight and let go, showing him it was still tight by tugging on the crossed part of the lace.

“I never thought there was such a thing as different styles of lacing,” Ron mused.

“You need your laces tight if you’re doing spins and jumps,” she replied, “Loose laces can cause bad jumps or spins.” After a few moments, she asked an odd question; “These boots; were they made on Elazia?”

“They were made here on the ship,” he replied, “We bought up something like five hundred pairs of plates in a wide range of sizes, then the parts to make plates if we needed an odd size. Some of the boots are Earth made renting, no, rental boots and we have electro-printed the rest, like the boots you’re wearing. We have, um, you know, I not sure how many wheels and bearing sets we have and the stopping pieces for the toe of the skate.”

“You bought the whole load-out at once?” she asked. This seemed real odd to Gina.

“No, we buy some supplies each trip to Earth. Four of the manufacturers are glad to see us arrive, since we do what you call cash and carry.”

“You know, this boot had me fooled. I thought it was a leather composite, not printed,” she offered up as she finished lacing her boots properly. “Okay, I’m ready.”

They started skating again, enjoying some music that had its roots on the Bil-Cmela home world. Sort of Southern Rock meets Celtic. As she loosened up, the dainty Petty Officer began to add some speed and style to her skating that made everyone move to the outside of the rink and give her some room. Her impromptu routine wasn’t a long performance but the ending, a very proper Scratch Spin, brought a round of applause.

“Wow!” Ronmet blurted out, skating up beside her while she skated slowly to cool down. “That was impressive!”

“Naw, just showing off,” she countered. That’s when the trooper that was running the rink motioned for her to come over to the counter. “Well, I must be in trouble for fancy skating,” she mused as she headed that way.

“I saw your performance,” the gray Elazi male offered up once she was at the desk, “Would you be interested in teaching on a part time basis? None of our personnel onboard ship really know how to teach the things you were doing.”

“Well . . .” She didn’t know how to answer this. As a teen she had worked as an instructor, then as her military duty shifts had allowed but that was over thirty Earth years ago. “Let me talk to my commander, make sure that it’s okay with him.”

“That would be good. Please let me know what your commander says,” the attendant put forth. “I’m Jasset Kelmon’van, Ship’s Morale Department.”

“Petty Officer Regina Anderson,” she countered.

“Regina, please have a good rest of your evening.”

They went back to skating with Regina teaching Ronmet a few easy moves as they went. After a while, she noticed the Elazi, for the most part, were doing good approximations of the moves she had taught to her *One Love*. Even a few of *The Golden Gate* personnel were trying out some moves. Gina carefully guided Ron into the middle of the rink that was marked off with several Earth measurement ten foot diameter circles.

“This is called Rexing.” she offered up, “It’s a figure eight dance, backwards, inside the circle. It was really popular when I was in high school.” She started her routine, doing a set of steps and moves, all while skating backwards. “It’s not that hard, you only need to know five or so steps.” That made Ronmet look at her funny.

“I . . . I don’t know how to skate backwards,” he commented, “I really hadn’t thought about skating backwards until *The Golden Gate* skaters were doing it when we came into the rink area earlier.”

“It’s not that hard,” she offered up as she prepared to teach this maneuver. “Instead of pushing off with your front wheels, you push outward with your back wheels. Give it a try.” She held his hands as he made a few attempts, finally getting the hang of it. “You look good,” she commented.

“This is not hard,” he agreed, looking over his shoulder to see where he was going. “Um, seeing where I am heading is hard, though.”

“If you’re skating with another person, well, like me, I’ll guide you. You can also look to see where you are by the inner lane stripe and the circles. They act as landmarks. We should also move to the inside to allow the faster skaters a free lane around the outside.”

“Is that customary?” That idea sounded odd to him, that the faster skaters would want the outside of the rink.

“It was when I skated in SoCal.” When she noticed the confusion on his face, she amended that statement. “Southern California, the Los Angeles basin.”

“Ah, so that’s what SoCal means,” he put forth. When he was on Earth, even though he spoke and comprehended English to a high degree, sometimes slang would trip him up. “That would be like me saying I was going to go to Z-Kas, meaning I was going to the entertainment zone on the southern side, the Zenter side of Kas’Madelle. Um, East side.”

The information ronmet had conveyed made her smile. “I think I’ll enjoy living and exploring the entertainment on Elazia. It sounds like a fun place.”

The gray male and his partner for this journey, a buff tan male, made their way back toward their settlement, tired from the long multi-day reconnaissance trek to gather information. When they arrived back in their very small town, the council members were still awake, waiting for them. The lead counselor met them near the town center, giving each one of them a fist bump and a firm hug.

“How did it go, Servas?” the medium gray male asked.

“I’m sorry Tam, we could not get as close as we would have wanted to, but Varran was able to get some good images for the council despite that problem,” he offered up, “That dry lake bed was a hindrance. We skirted the Western edge but we could not get as close as I would have wished to.”

“Come inside, we are waiting to see what you have observed,” Tam stated, holding the door to the chambers for the two that were charged with this task. They went inside and acknowledged the council members before Varran put his memory cartridge in an image converter, allowing his stored images to show on a screen behind him.

“As you can see, this is an image of their ship, taken from the southern edge of the dry lake bed. We are assuming they are not currently operating scanners or they would have picked us up,” Servas opined while his partner brought up the next image, “This was taken from the south-west corner of the lake bed. The ship appears to be Bil-designed, maybe a Deltrey class cruiser of some sort. It is clearly larger than a Deltrey Light Cruiser or a Standard Cruiser, possibly a Heavy Cruiser archetype.”

“I agree, a Bil design,” the pale gray femme on the left end of the Council Bench put forth.

“I agree with you, Kimsa,” the tan male next to her spoke, nodding his head.

“We just couldn’t get a good image, but the ship seems to have taken some damage right in front of the Combat Bridge, if that’s what it is,” Servas said as he used a pointer to show the area in question. “Varran, next image, please. Here you can see they were working on the hull which indicated there must have been some damage. That might be why they landed the ship.”

“Did you get any images of the beings?” Kimsa asked.

“We did,” the tan one replied, “Varran, go to those images for Councilor Kimsa. We obtained these images from the closest point that we were able to reach near their ship.”

Varran scrolled through fourteen images that were the best ones, giving time for the council to digest them. After the last one was put on the viewer, Servas spoke up.

“I think it’s clear to all, their presence is either a blessing or a problem. In my opinion, I honestly think this either complicates things for our small community or it could be a very good opportunity. Would the Council agree?”

“We agree,” Tam put forth, “The question now is, do we approach them or do we let them find us? I’m sure, based on the size of their ship, they will have some kind of ground or air transportation available to them. It is also a positive they will most likely explore the area. They *do* have some time to use up before the Greater Worm Hole opens for them.”

“We will have to study all possibilities,” Tienan, the short gray Tally Master Of Votes put forth, “We still have not been detected down in our little valley by the Hasmaili, even when they

were flying the sub-orbital aircraft the others left behind. I will say this; these Elazi may well be our way off of this planet. I know in my heart, restoring *The Zaid'Vairer* to flight status is never going to come to fruition. When it can no longer generate power for us, we are done as a community and a race on this planet. We must all keep these facts in mind.”