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“Rift”

by Kellan Meig'h

Chapter Seven

“Pear Shaped”

Morning had come for the Ambassador so that meant the agreed-upon meeting with the Hasmali was to transpire within three *Heth*. Denise took her time getting herself ready for this, actually just pulling on a simple sleeveless tunic to go consume a first meal. Toast and eggs, easy over with bacon-style *Targ* on the side. She passed on the coffee and just had ice water to wash down her meal. As it were, her stomach was tied in knots this morning; that was not a good sign. Their meeting with the Hasmali representative last eve had been rather terse and one-sided, the male telling them when to show up and who he wanted present at said meeting. She wished Temmet was not having to cover the bridge this morning, since she really could use his support right now. At least he would be with them at the meeting.

She went back to the suite she was sharing with Temmet along with her entourage and took a moment to look for some stomach mints in the medicine cabinet. Glad that there was a small bottle of them in the medicine chest, she put two of them in her mouth and chewed them up, almost gagging on them trying to swallow them down. It really felt like the day was going slowly downhill to her and that was not what she had wanted. Not at all. She reluctantly went over to her powered armor and began the full checklist, just to get her mind off of things.

Denise checked the power levels, made sure her MDR was loaded with live rounds, checked the electrical extension for the sensor mesh and then gave the entire outside of the suit a thorough once-over. Connecting her padd to the access port, she checked all the diagnostics in the on-board computer just to give her something to do that would distract her, even for just a few *Munar*. Looking up at the timepiece on the wall, she decided it was probably time to suit up.

Denise stripped off her tunic, applied her sensor mesh then she removed the protective film over the sensor pads in the suit. Climbing up on the steps her father had made for her, she slipped down into the lower torso portion. That was the part she didn't care for, the intrusions of the environmental systems into her body. Putting her arms down into her armor after connecting the sensor mesh to her suit, she activated the button sequence to start the closure.

She allowed the suit to return to vertical as it closed around her, waiting for that distinctive clicking as the closures locked her inside. Bringing her shield down half-way, she ran through the powered diagnostics carefully. No gripes noted, Denise opened the shield and headed down to the rally point on the *Vaar* side of the ship. She hoped this would go easy this morning with no hiccups because for some reason, she was dreading this. There seemed to be a bad omen floating in the air and that was putting her on edge even further.

Denise reached the designated rallying point near the bottom of the ramp for Bay One Lower

Vaar side and tried to get a grip on her emotions. She knew in such situations, her father would have told her to just take a few deep breaths to clear her head. Taking his advice, she closed her shield and put the environmental into full oxygen mode. Several deep breaths later, she felt a bit better. Once her shield was open again, Sa'Vesi momentarily made her appearance at the bottom of the ramp.

“Boss, the Skipper is headed to the Combat Bridge, Tem is right behind me and Marlett should already be somewhere down here, getting a vehicle ready for us. Jenna and Hank should be ready any moment, they're getting a final tune on their powered armor right now,” the tall femme offered up.

Now that all the members of her small envoy were all assembled, she tried to keep her mind off of this situation while they used several utility vehicles to go to the designated meeting point. Sa'Krista kept going over her talking points, trying to settle her nerves but it wasn't working. By the way she was feeling currently, she hoped she wouldn't lose her breakfast in her helmet before they arrived at the proscribed meeting place.

Once they were on location and everyone was in their position, Denni went forward to meet with the Hasmali, making sure Colonel McLachlan and Commander D'mol were staying abreast of her. For their own safety, all three were wearing powered armor due to the terse message delivered to them by the one called Teval last eve. Tem was warned by the skipper to stay away from the “Line of Scrimmage,” as Denni had called it until things looked safe enough for her and Sa'Vesi and Marlett were going to stay near Temmet, should he decide to move into action.

Just like she had thought the night before, the Hasmali really appeared to be Sarlii to her, right down to that defiant stance they took up while the mixed Elazi and Golden Gate contingency advanced for the requested meeting. What bothered her in particular were the Hasmali soldiers in powered armor. Those individuals carried some kind of a rifle with a huge fist-sized bore. Whatever those weapons were, she hoped in her heart they would not fire them. Now that she was closer to the appointed meeting spot, she could see their armor were in fact Comeri-spec Drexel Twenty-Threes. That made her have to inquire about the situation.

“Jenna, care to explain why the Hasmali are wearing Comeri-style Drexel powered armor?”

The commander replied to the ambassador's question in a very embarrassed tone. “About that; We were moving our supplies from the Killark to the Golden Gate community as fast as we could, trying our best to expedite the job. While we were away from the Killark one evening, they overran our sentries and raided our ship. They took a good one-quarter of our armor and some maintenance supplies along with a small amount of weapons. We never meant for them to have them.”

“How about the two big powered fighting mechs?” Those bothered the ambassador the most, since they seemed to have what might either be rail guns or impulse rifles at ready arms positions.

Jenna answered her question reluctantly. “They copied one of our payload mechs that had broke down, adding that armor to the design. I have no intelligence concerning the weapons, though. They are the wild card. Sorry.”

“Ambassador, I have a lock on the front line,” the voice of the ships weapons systems commander told her on a secure channel. Her suit HUD illuminated everybody standing in that front defensive gathering along with the mechs.

“Gavvet, do not fire unless I command it,” she replied.

“Ambassador, are you sure?” Jenna asked, concerned this could go sideways in a heartbeat. She checked her powered armor status, making sure her Mounted Defense Rifle was ready to fire. The Comeri Commander was very appreciative of the new Mark Eighty armor given to her by Temmet. It seemed to be light-years better than the old Twenty-Three design in both flexibility and comfort.

“Ambassador, we should be okay. I don't think they will be aggressive,” Henry offered up from experience. “Let them know you will be leaving as soon as the wormhole opens again. That should appease them.” The Colonel still made sure his MDR was armed and ready.

“Denni, this is Vesi. Marlett and I are right behind you at holding spot Agra, rifles hot. If it starts going sideways, drop down and we will open up. Jenna, Hank, that goes for both of you, too,” the tall one offered. Her boss waved her off with one hand, trying to look nonchalant about it.

“I'm going to try to be diplomatic about this. First contact is very important for a long-term relationship with another race,” the ruddy femme Elazi put forth. “As long as it doesn't look like they're trying to kill me, stand down.”

“Ambassador, I'm not sure I'm good with that notion,” Gavvet put forth. The ones in powered armor were now highlighted with green outlines as the first to be fired upon. She had to admit, the situation didn't look good at the moment if the Hasmali decided to become aggressive.

“Denni, I'm right beside Vesi. My impulse rifle is hot,” Temmet stated. “They make a wrong move that I do not like, we will fire. Gavvet, do you understand that order?”

“I am with Gavvet,” Na'Risa put forth over the secure channel. “I will keep the peace for as long as I deem it safe. Once I am no longer happy with things or I feel the ambassador is in danger, we will open up. Is that clear, Commander Hone'lan?”

The XO sighed to himself. “Yes, Skipper, very clear. Crystal, in fact.” He was sure the Captain of the Ship could hear the anger in his voice as he re-positioned his rifle in his grip. This was most likely to go sideways, based on the way the Hasmali had come to the meeting, armed to the teeth. They were waiting roughly three hundred *Catre* from the designated meeting point at Holding Point Agra but it felt like a *Hazecan* to Tem. One of the Hasmali front line armored soldiers on the far *Vaar* side kept repositioning his rifle, making the XO nervous.

The Ambassador was finally within comfortable speaking distance from the brown and black male that had delivered the message last eve, so she showed him her armored hands were empty as she spoke up.

“I am Ambassador Sa'Krista Andrews'lan from the Elazi ship *The Dark Claw*. We . . .” she

was interrupted quite rudely by that male.

“You were told to never return!” he practically shouted. “You and your kind now face the consequences!”

Denise was just a heartbeat too slow in responding to the immediate threat, discovering those huge bore rifles were like a military-level riot control device. The one soldier on the *Vaar* side fired on her, a strange round capable of deploying a film that wrapped around her, trapping her arms against her sides. A second round fired from the *Zel* side wrapped around her legs firmly, stopping her retreat. She chinned the center button in her helmet, closing the thick composite face shield for her own safety as she fell over onto her back, no longer able to stand.

Denni could hear the shouting all around her, rail rifles firing in burst mode and the loud popping sounds from those big rifles firing at a fairly fast cadence. Radio traffic made it sound like Jenna and Hank were down, hit by kinetic rounds of some kind. More shouting seemed to indicate the Elazi armored mechs had been incapacitated by a poly metal micro-mesh film that blocked their sensors when it wrapped around them.

“Tem, get me out of here!” the ambassador shouted, trying to move against that film wrapped firmly around her. If she didn’t know better, she could swear that poly was tightening up from her exertions. “Tem? Temmet! Answer me!” There was however, no response from him.

“He’s down, Boss,” Sa’Vesi told her, sounding somewhat out of breath, like she was running fast to cover ground in a hurry. Denise also heard the ripping sound of a rail rifle being fired in burst mode somewhere in the background, probably Vesi’s rifle. “Mar and I are making headway. Hold tight, we’re . . . shit, just hold tight! Ouch! Frack that hurt!” Vesi blurted out after a loud impact on her armor was picked up through her helmet microphones.

“Got that mech on the *Zel* side with a leach round,” Gavvet stated calmly. “Alright, the other mech is leached out of the game. Ambassador, stay down, you’re in the firing lane.”

“Gavvet, can’t move. Not getting up any time soon,” she explained.

“Working on that,” one of their troopers offered up. “We have a fire support team trying to back up Vesi and Mar. Moving up the *Zel* side.”

“Try not to kill them! Diplomacy, please!” she demanded.

“Diplomacy my ass!” Tem stated angrily. “Going to be feeling that kinetic round later when this is over. I’m moving up, Denni so keep your head down. Somebody see what you can do about that frackin’ big rifle behind the mech on the *Zel* side.”

“Mar, you heard the XO; take out that big bore rifle over there,” Vesi put forth. “I’m getting tired of being hit by those kinetic rounds.” A moment later she yelped again. “See? That’s it! That fracker is mine!” Denni heard Vesi’s rifle open up in full auto, making that loud, distinctive ripping sound as it decimated things downrange.

“Vesi! Diplomacy!” her boss put forth. That idea just didn’t set well with the tall ebony

femme that had been mercilessly pelted by those kino rounds. What Denni couldn't see was that unfortunate Hasmali soldier dancing in place, trying to cover his face shield with his hands while Vesi's tubular rail rounds glanced off his armor, opaquing his shield and peeling small pieces of armor away in the process.

"Frack diplomacy, Boss! His ass is mine!" Vesi growled in response to her boss' suggestion while she changed out magazines. Denise heard her open up in full auto again, then she stopped firing. "He's going nowhere with that leg hydro unit pissing fluid like that. Shoulda stole an Eighty to wear instead of that frackin' fragile Comeri spec Twenty-Three. Teach him not to frack around with me!"

Her retinue of Elazi troopers had finally opened up and turned it into a regular fire fight from what she could hear, Marlett directing most of the ground fire. It sounded like they had at least let the mech operator on the *Zel* side escape before they junked that piece of hardware with a turret mounted defensive railgun round from the ship. Moments later, the other mech joined its brethren in the armor afterlife as parts of it rained down around the ambassador.

"Denni, can you move at all?" Tem asked. "We're . . . Damn! Oh frack that hurts!" she heard the XO blurt out after a loud impact on his armor was heard. "Denni, we're trying to get to you but they're laying down some serious suppression fire on us. Not sure if we can continue to be diplomatic about it, if you understand me. We have several down that weren't in powered armor. Those kino rounds aren't piercing our armor but they have enough impact to knock us off our feet."

"Tem, I can't move, I need help!" she replied. "This *fracking* film they hit me with is shrinking tighter every time I struggle. Please try to keep this under control. No one gets hurt, please? Diplomacy?" She actually felt like that insane thought of diplomacy may have went out the window several *Munar* ago.

Krista felt something light strike her armor, then again, realizing two grapples were now pulling her toward the Hasmali line. "Hey! Somebody stop them! Those *frackers* are trying to kidnap me!" Denise demanded.

"We're pinned down, Denni! They've fired a shitload of that film at us and most of us are down or non-mobile. Dammit, *What The . . . Those Fracking Grackers* have got you grappled!" Tem blurted out while she was being unceremoniously pulled toward the Hasmali line. "Everyone hold your fire! They have the ambassador!"

"*The Frack* I'm holding *My* fire!" Vesi snarled, letting loose with her rifle again that now had a fresh five hundred round magazine in it. The Hasmali had pulled Denise close to their line, too close as far as she was concerned. That was causing the spent rounds that didn't damage Hasmali armor to bounce off theirs and hit her armor, some of them impacting pretty hard.

"Vesi! Stop it! Hold your fire! Those rounds are ricocheting off their armor and hitting me!" Denise blurted out.

"Sorry Boss! Aiming higher, then," Vesi replied curtly. At least the rounds weren't hitting her as much. A disjointed thought crossed the Ambassador's mind to have a talk with Vesi about

diplomacy and weapons control in a firefight.

Denise felt them pick her up once they had her behind their front line and run with her at a fair pace to a waiting vehicle. Her captors put her on the back of it and secured her to the deck with what must have been load straps before they started a hasty retreat. “Tem, I’m leaving my locator on. Let’s see if we can be diplomatic concerning my release. Put Sa’Vesi in charge of the release negotiations.”

“Shut up!” that brown and black Hasmali shouted at her, kicking her armor in frustration. He further punctuated that idea by pointing a small bore handgun of some kind at her face. “Be quiet or I will shoot.”

“Go ahead, Teval. This shield will just laugh at that projectile,” she retorted. He repositioned his aim to her legs and let go with a round which predictably ricocheted off her armor and left a stripe on another Hasmali’s cheek. “Teval, stop before somebody gets hurt. Won’t be me but you know, I really want to be diplomatic about this and if somebody gets hurt, it’s no longer diplomatic.”

“What do you know of diplomacy?” he asked with disdain.

“I’m a fourth generation diplomat. I have my experiences and my family’s experiences to fall back on. Teval, it’s not too late to let me go. We can start over, like nothing has happened between our peoples.” That statement seemed to irritate the male greatly.

“You speak like you were never here before. We are not stupid, female. You left your artifacts behind when you left this planet. We told you not to return and what did you do? You returned.”

“Teval, I can vouch for the fact we have never been here on Hasmalan before now,” she offered. Denise was sure of that fact. Had they been here before, it would have been in the space travel history books in school.

“We will see,” he put forth. “You will likely be tried and found guilty. Then we will most likely follow the *Old Customs* and execute you.”

They had traveled a fair distance by land vehicle standards before the Hasmali group stopped for the evening. Denise could hear them moving around, giving her the impression they were setting up camp close by. Eventually, they came over to the vehicle she was in and unloaded her from it, laying her on the ground.

“I know you can hear me,” Teval put forth, “Open your armor and come out.”

“I think I’ll just keep it on for my own safety, thank you,” she replied. The hell if she gave up the only thing protecting her from harm. They still had no idea she had her Mounted Defense Rifle. A Drexel Twenty-Three didn’t have one so they were very unaware of the danger anyone downrange from her would be in.

“Out. Now!” he demanded.

“Um, that’s still a solid “*No Fracking Way In the Eternal Fires*” on my part, Teval. Sorry to disappoint you.”

The Hasmali looked over her shoulder and made another order to someone out of her visual range. “Open her up.”

They rolled her over on her left side so she knew exactly what they were going to try. She observed a cable come into view as they cut away that film from her suit computer diagnostic port. Denni chinned the command button to bring the menu up, then quickly scrolled through the optically tracked menus as fast as she could to put a stop to this.

Across the top of her HUD a warning appeared, suggesting they had accessed her suit with a padd meant for a generic Drexel Twenty series suit so it was probably hard for them to hunt down the menu item they needed. Another warning came up on her HUD concerning suit power right before she chinned the command button again to lock out the diagnostic port. That pissed Teval off.

“You are very sneaky, female!” he blurted out as he kicked her armor again, shaking his head. “We will accomplish our goals whether you agree to it or not,” he added as they went back to working with a now-unresponsive padd. Denni noted they had put her suit into power-saving mode, removing all augmentation and they had somehow placed an override lockout on that setting. The suit would still move with her, but no extra strength was available to her.

She knew where they had cut that film, near her right elbow level. Taking a chance, she raised her right hand toward her shoulder, making the film split like tissue paper and the Hasmali around her scatter in response. Rolling herself onto her back, she sat up and used one of the retractable fighting claws in her left suit hand to cut the film over her legs, finding that piece of poly shrank down to not more than palm-sized once it came loose.

The one that was assisting Teval with the padd was still standing by her, interface in hand. He also seemed to be deathly afraid of her now that she was unfettered. She took the padd from his grasp and tugged on the cable, making it come free of her armor. She carefully wrapped the cord around the padd and handed it back to the frightened male still standing there, probably in shock.

“Teval, you know I could just walk out of here right now,” she stated as she looked up at him. “Well, I guess until you would hit me again with that film stuff. If you say there is a problem, we need to fix it. I’m a diplomat, actually the assigned diplomat, in charge of this problem. We need to sit down and fix this.”

“You take off that armor. Either that, or we secure you. I have been told you’re no longer stronger than a being out of armor.”

“You’re not good with me just sleeping in my armor until morning? Damn, I have got to tell you, I’m tired from all this stress. I need some sleep but I can’t do that if you tie me up.” She was tired, out of energy and as a result, she was starting to get snarky.

“You are making this hard,” he stated, rubbing at the bridge of his muzzle before looking back her way. “I . . . I was directed to bring all of your kind for prosecution. You see how that did not go well. Now what you have been saying makes me question things. There are a number of things spoken about the Zeeanians that were here. Things that make me wonder if what is written in our texts are lies.”

We are called the Elazi,” she offered up as she got up from the ground and sat down on the bed of the truck she had been transported in. After opening her shield to conserve power, she continued. “Teval, I’m being honest, here. Our race are a very proud people when it comes to space travel. Any small child with a few years of learning can tell you all the planets we have visited, the races we’ve met, the ones that tried to wage war against us, those that tried to enslave us. If we had ever been here, there would have been a history of it.”

“How far into the bygone days does your history span?” he questioned. The Hasmlali opened a cooling chest on the back of the truck and brought forth two bulbs of water. He offered one to the ambassador which she took from him.

Denni took a drink, savoring that ice-cold water that had a mountain spring taste to it. “Our history goes back well beyond what we call “The Awakening,” the time where we laid down our weapons and began a cultural renaissance. We have some actual written history from maybe five thousand solar cycles ago.”

Denise had to help Teval to understand the concepts of a base-ten numerology and how many cycles she was talking about. Eventually, he acted as though he grasped the idea. Counting it out on his hands, he gave her this information;

“I may have counted the time wrong but I think the others left here six thousand and a bit more cycles of seasons ago. If they were your before-parents, you would have no record, right?” Before Denise could answer, he continued that thought. “And, if you had no record, you would not know about the order that you should never return.”

With that thought spoken out loud, Teval walked off toward a nearby fire circle, shaking his head.

Denise Andrews’lan tried to find a more comfortable way to lay on the bed of that truck, several times contemplating just laying on the ground instead. At least she could make a depression to lay in, keeping her from rolling around. They had attached a cable to the truck and looped it around her left armor ankle, staking the loop closed with a hydraulic crimping tool. It was a long cable, long enough she could get off the truck and walk twenty or more *Catre* but obviously, she was not leaving anytime soon if she stayed in her armor. The thought had crossed her mind concerning that, too. Ditch the armor, steal some clothes and make a run for it. Unfortunately, spare shoes to steal seemed to be the problem. To her knowledge, the Hasmlali had not taken theirs off as of yet.

“Denni? Do you copy? Denni?” a voice asked in her helmet.

“Tem?” she whispered, closing her shield in steps to keep it from just loudly snapping closed. “Tem, give me an update.”

“I have a drone above you at three hundred *Catre*, looks like you’re laying on a truck of some sort. Is that a cable on your leg?” he asked.

“Affirmative on the cable,” she confirmed. “Status of our people?”

“I have twenty-nine injured troopers that were in light armor. They’re just beat up and badly bruised from those *fracking* kinetic rounds. There were a few broken bones, too. Arms and legs, mostly. I also have a mob of very angry ground troopers in powered armor that want to even up the score and I honestly think Sa’Vesi is going to lead them if I don’t keep a lid on it. You’re not that far away, maybe two or a bit more *Heth* by armored aerial transport, she casually mentioned to me in passing.” Tem took a moment to send her an overhead view with some waypoints on it for her edification.

“Any Hasmali injuries that we know of?” she asked. It was hard to be diplomatic if there are deaths involved.

“One of the mech drivers. He took some MDR rounds to the torso when he was evacuating his mech. He’s not a happy guest in sickbay right now. We found out one of our Bil technicians could somewhat communicate with him. He wants to go home, right now from what we can gather.”

“Get me a name,” she asked. “Listen, just keep a drone up, follow me to their community. If I need help, have a detachment in a *lighter* ready to drop in on them. Keep in mind, those rifles with the film rounds are no joke. The poly will split pretty easily with a fighting claw once it’s tight, though.”

“Kitten, your status? Be honest, please?” he asked with concern in his voice.

“They put my armor in power saving mode before I could lock them out. They still have no idea I have the MDR in my suit. Not that I wanted to, but I had to take off my gloves for a bit earlier while I had some stew they served me. Pretty filling, too. I want the recipe for it, to tell you the truth.”

“So, you’re not in real trouble, then?” Temmet wanted to know.

“They’re going to let me ride in the truck tomorrow, not on it,” she put forth. “We just need to sort this out. I honestly think this is just a misunderstanding.”

“Let me know if you need something,” he offered up.

“I will.”

Denise opened her shield slowly, keeping the noise down on purpose. At least there had been no deaths they were aware of. Her mind was wandering over talking points concerning the situation when she was startled by a voice.

“Ambassador? Are you asleep?” the Hasmali asked. She shook off her musing and looked over to see a male, solid brown in color that looked middle-aged. “Ambassador, I am Farla Terrenan, the Mayor of Northern Vectar. I am also a reserve soldier, a Section Advisor.”

“Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan,” she replied. “Do you want to talk about something?”

“I do,” he agreed. He sat on the edge of the bed of the truck and waited while his prisoner scooted herself upright against the front of the platform. “Ambassador Andrews’lan, I want to apologize for the treatment you’re receiving. It’s probably not in keeping with how someone of your status should be treated.”

“You are right,” she offered. “Farla, as an ambassador, I’m supposed to be afforded diplomatic immunity. So far, that has not happened except for that stew. That was very good.”

“Diplomatic immunity?” he questioned. “I thought I spoke Englannish well, but I do not know that phrase.”

“As a diplomat, one should be free from things like false arrest, detainment, those things.”

“I see,” he mused as he scratched behind his left ear, a nervous tick he despised, one that he could not break. “I told them to let you ride inside the truck tomorrow. I have never worn powered armor and tried to lay down in a truck bed so I have no experience with it. It must not be a good ride, in any case.”

“You’re right, it’s not a good ride.”

“Ambassador, you mentioned the meal we served you to our cook; are you saying you liked it?” This puzzled him completely.

“It was hot, hearty and it was filling. Had a good taste to it, too,” she put forth.

“I am guessing they never told you the ingredients, then. That was just a random gathering of provisions, cooked in a pot. I’m not sure what all was in it. They thought it was a joke on their prisoner.”

“Sorry to ruin their joke.” She was a bit sad, though since it was very good in her mind but now she would never know the ingredients.

“I will tell them you liked it. Serves them correct.”

“You mean, serves them right.”

“Thank you, I sometimes have trouble with the Englannish language. I do not speak it much. No real reason to.” After an awkward moment of silence, he continued. “Teval has talked to me some. I have to say first, I am an old . . . and old hardliner, I think is the word. I am not for change if we do not need that change. Teval is for change, bringing back the things that were forbidden by

our congress, I think that's right word for our law givers."

"Forbidden things?" That sounded odd to her.

"Things like this." He held up his padd for her to see. "Back before I was brought forth into this life, we could send ideas and information to one another through the air with these. We also have communication devices that at one time, could allow us to talk over very long ranges before the disablement. Our congress said they were poisoning our way of life and demanded we disable all but direct wired usage. Even at that, we can only exchange information off of our storage systems. We are unable to send all but important government messages directly to one another."

"That seems harsh," she mused.

"It was troublesome for those that lived in the time before the order was given to give up the techno. As an example, I have maps loaded into this memory core that I can see on the screen. I was told that in the past, I could see exactly where I was on the screen. That would be a good thing to have but again, that was disabled."

"So, you have technical knowledge but you don't use it?"

"Aye, that is a correct assumption on your part. When the Zeeanians arrived, it was said they had incredible techno-capabilities. They told of being up there, in the stars, traveling faster than the sunlight could go. It was said their ship was so big that when it was in orbit, the ship could be seen in the evenings, when the fading sunlight would light it up. The old ones that were not like me, the real hardliners, most of them never liked techno-science so that's why we no longer use it, that's why it was banned by our congress."

"Mayor Farla, that's a sad story," Denise put forth. "I can see some rationale to their thinking but it seems like they have crippled your society in doing so."

"I will agree with you, Ambassador." He scratched his muzzle, then looked at her questioningly. "You were talking to your people before I walked up on you, correct?"

"I was. I won't lie to you about that. I was checking on injuries and such. We have one of your mech pilots that was injured. I guess he wants to leave our sickbay."

"Ah, I had wondered what had become of Jerran Marrelen. We did not find his body when we searched the wreckage in a hurry. Is he your prisoner now?"

"No, he is a patient in our sickbay. This is not a war." Denise chinned a button in her helmet, then double tapped the one next to it. "Temmet, this is Denni. Hey, are you there?" she asked.

"Go ahead, Kitten." Farla heard the XO reply through her suit's external speakers.

"Tem, status on our visitor? Um, you're on speaker for the Community Mayor's benefit."

"Our guest, he settled down after we convinced him he was not a prisoner. He can leave tomorrow morning, if he wants to. We could bring him to your location if that would be okay."

Denise looked up to see Farla nodding. "Yeah, I think that would be great."

"Okay, we will wait until first light to show up. I can watch the drone video to see when the camp stirs."

"Denise out for now."

"Dark Claw monitoring."

The Hasmali looked at her strangely. "Your people are watching us? Right now?" He scanned about, trying to see if he could spot one of her soldiers in the distance.

"Farla, it's a drone, a small flying machine above us. It's just high enough that it's not apparent." She chinned her comm unit again. "Tem, if you're still there, bring the drone down to, I don't know, maybe just above our heads, please? Farla would like to see it, I think."

They were looking up and momentarily, the small four rotor drone came into view. It dropped down to eye level and hovered where they could see it clearly. "Are you Farla?" the speaker on the drone broadcast.

"Yes, I am Farla. Who are you?" he questioned.

"I am Commander Spec Three Gavvet Vellen'van. Normally I'm a weapons officer but I also have duties in the surveillance department, too. Nice to remotely meet you, Farla." After a moment, he continued. "Farla, I seem to be getting a connection request from your padd. It is an old style communication convention but it's strong. I believe I can make a handshake with you."

The Hasmali's tablet buzzed in his hands, making him look at it in surprise. Farla tapped the flashing icon on his screen that he really didn't know what it was for and had never used. A window opened up, then an ebony black furred person coalesced on his screen. "Hello Farla. Can you see and hear me?"

"By the stars!" the Hasmali blurted out. "I . . . I can hear you! I see you too!"

"I can see and hear you quite clearly, Farla. I'm using the drone as a repeater."

"This signal is going through this small flying thing?"

"It is using the drone to amplify your signal. Can you point your padd at the Ambassador?" Gavvet asked.

He did as he was asked, allowing Denise to see the screen. Gavvet stuck his tongue out at her, then allowed Temmet to be on-camera with him, grinning. "Well Stanley, this is a fine mess you've gotten us into," Tem put forth with a smile.

"I didn't mean to, Ollie," she replied with a grin. "At sunup, meet us here with our guest. Bring some proper hot breakfast fare for maybe eighty and some coffee, please?"

“Do you want some clothes or light armor to change into?” he asked.

“My khaki casual uniform, shoes, socks, belt, garrison cap. Toothbrush and toothpaste, too. I might be busy for a few days with this project. Put the items in a small duffel for me, please? Sa’Vesi will know where it is.”

“Very well, I’ll bring a cart to put your armor on so we can bring it back with us.”

“No, I’m staying in powered armor for right now, until I see the situation is fully defused. Then I’ll change out. Oh, I will need underwear, my small padd and a maintenance pack for my armor. You know, maybe you could bring the spare Vaar arm for my armor. This PDR is getting heavy in power-saving mode.”

She showed Farla how to close the connection, then Gavvet took the drone up to a monitoring altitude. The ambassador sat there, wondering about things in general. This was a highly charged situation at the moment that needed to be defused at all costs.

“You have unease about this, correct?” her ersatz captor put forth. “I can understand your reasons. While you were talking to that last person, I put myself in your position. I thought it out and I can see how you would be on side . . . no, on edge right now.”

“I won’t lie, Farla. I am very much on edge. Up until now, I have never been in a war-like situation. I was calling for my people to be diplomatic about things but they just opened up and made a firefight out of it. Scared the stars out of me.”

“I was scared, too.” he offered up. “Your people did substantial damage to our powered armor and some of the others have injuries from those small dart-things your people were firing.”

“Oh Shit!” Denni blurted out. “Farla, don’t take this wrong. I’m calling for medical aid right now.” She chinned her comm button again. “Tem, are you still there?”

“This is Gavvet, Ambassador. Temmet just left the bridge to get something to eat at late meal. Can I be of help?”

“Gavvet, send me a battlefield strength medical triage detachment. We have wounded here that I just found out about. Have them be prepared to tend to PDR and fletcherette rounds, please? Maybe a mobile surgical, too?”

“Copy, Ambassador. I have your location and I’m sending a request right now. Give us thirty *Munar* to get there.”

“You do not have to do that,” the Hasmali male put forth. “We can tend to our wounded when we reach our community.”

“No, that is not good enough,” Denise retorted. “We’re going to fix what we were responsible for. I’m sorry if I’m being pushy but in my thinking, this is the only right thing to do.”

Later that evening, Farla and Denise were walking among the wounded being tended to, what seemed to her as being most of the Hasmali unarmored contingent. She had even called for an armory unit to help extract a soldier that was stuck inside a very unresponsive suit of powered armor. The two of them had made their way to that location to see how things were going.

“Gil, give me an update.” she asked, noticing they had at least gotten his helmet off for him.

“Going to have to cut it open,” he replied. “The Comeri spec Twenty-Threes have the power conduits too close to the locking mechanisms. A rail round shorted the conduit, fusing it to the mechanisms. The damage also disabled the explosive bolt circuits used to blow a suit apart for emergency extraction.”

“No other way to get it open?” the soldier asked. “Will you use a fire-torch to cut with? I will need the suit flooded with water to keep me from catching fire if you do so.”

“No, I’ll be using an Caverium-tipped abrasive wheel for this,” the armorer replied. “We will only use a torch if this fails.”

“You seem to be in good hands,” Farla offered up to his soldier before they went to see about the one mech pilot that had some substantial burns to his legs and torso. “Ambassador, this is all too strange for me. We fought you, we took you from the battle as a prisoner to charge with crimes and now your people are rendering aid. This is hard for me to digest.”

“I can understand,” she agreed. “For now, I will accompany you to your community so we can work this out. For us, I consider this to be *First Contact* with the Hasmalan race. We always like to start out our relationships in the right way. And I want to fix this.”

They had wandered over to the ship that had brought the medical crew so with other things taken care of, Denise took off her powered gloves and disengaged her helmet. She then turned to Farla with a request of her own. “I need your help. I want to swap out the armor on my right arm. The one I’m wearing right now actually has a Mounted Defense Rifle built into it. The damn thing is heavy, now that your associate turned down my armor power. I guess Teval is not going to let us turn it back up so I just want to be more comfortable.” That revelation seemed to shock the Hasmali male.

“Excuse me, you’ve had a weapon all this time and you have not fired it?” he asked carefully. This didn’t make a bit of sense to the mayor but maybe she had her reasons not to use it.

“I didn’t see a need to fire it, Farla. I’m an ambassador and before that I was a linguist, an instructor. I do carry an officer's rank of Flank Commander Spec Seven-Ahn but I am not a warrior by any means. I didn’t see a need to fire my rifle, if I could be diplomatic about it instead.”

“If I may ask, how deadly is it?”

“My rifle fires those small dart-type rounds.” She tripped the mechanism to allow the outer cover to open for quick maintenance, exposing the trio of barrels and the upper breech

mechanism. “The Drexel Sixty-One was the first armor to have this rifle built-in. It holds sixteen hundred caseless rounds in the magazine that goes part-way up into my upper arm armor.”

Farla examined the rifle a bit more before he spoke again. “Ambassador, I think I have gained a new level of respect for you,” he put forth as he spun the barrels by hand. “Sixteen hundred rounds. That would have been enough to fight your way out of our hands, in my opinion.”

“Thank you, Farla. I just wish I could gain that respect from Teval,” she mused. “Okay, press down on these two silver buttons below the shoulder joint section, then turn that whole ring to the left, that way.” She mimicked which way to spin the ring for him. “That will disengage the parts I want to swap out.”

With the Hasmali’s help, it took just moments to swap out her armor pieces. Once she had put the glove back on that arm and tested the circuit connections, Denise thought about it, then made an offer. “Mayor, I want to offer a ride back to your community for all of your troopers. I can call out a ship that we can put your vehicles on for the trip and I have a troop transporter that we can all ride in at the same time.”

“That would save several days travel and reduce the stress on my injured soldiers. I will go talk to my people, see if this would be acceptable.”

Denise watched him walk over to a small group of males, get his composure and start to make his case to them. She really hoped they could come to some kind of an agreement and they could be in productive talks after next daylight would come.

She still wondered if the Elazi really had been here before, in their past.

The ambassador walked back over to the spot where Gillat was still attending to the trapped soldier. They had placed him inside a portable low-walled reservoir which was currently being filled with a non-toxic, non-conductive coolant used in the fighting mechs. One of Gil’s assistants was putting a pump with an attached hose into the tub while another was monitoring the fluid level.

“Going to have to cut it with a torch, Ambassador. No other way around it, the fusion is that bad,” he offered while he put the hose down into the damaged metal carapace. “Sorry, Gerem. This is going to be cold on your back. Ambassador, could you see if either glove will crack open just a bit?”

The pump came to life, startling the Hasmali trooper when the cold liquid began filling his suit. She cracked the seals on both gloves, allowing the suit to fill more or less completely. The coolant was beginning to drip past the seals, then it started to spill out of the neck area.

Gil soaked a fireproof blanket in the coolant and placed it in such a way as to protect Gerem’s head, right before he lit his acetyl-LOX torch. “Gerem, it might get a little warm in there. If it gets too hot for you, let me know.”

The Elazi armorer began his work so Denise went around in front of Gerem and took his hands in hers as she knelt down in front of him. “It’s going to be okay. I’ve had to be cut out

before, Gil won't take long," she reassured him. She could see he was frightened from the procedure so she gained his attention again. "Look, Gil is the best. He will not harm you, Do you understand?"

"I . . . I understand," he replied. "This was my first time in armor. I made a bad showing today."

"No, you lived to see another day. A good warrior gives their all, but always returns to do it again another day. You will do it again another day, Gerem."

Denni could see the fear in his eyes while thick gouts of white and blue sparks were flying about from Gillat's work. She remembered how scared she was when her first skimmer had a catastrophic power loss on the Tunn homeworld. She was wearing light armor at the time but the impact had severely crumpled her skimmer, forcing them to cut her out of the craft, then cut her out of her armor that was distorted beyond any hope of hand disassembly.

"Gerem, I'll stay right here until you're out. You'll be fine."

And she hoped in her heart, everything would be fine after tomorrow's talks were done.