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“Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

Chapter Eight

“An Appointment”

Denise had slept the night on the truck bed after her captors had re-secured the cable, not exactly enjoying her rest. Someone near her had been snoring loudly, keeping her awake for most of the night with their incessant dissonance. Denni suspected it was Teval, since he had made it his personal assignment to keep track of her. She thought about closing her shield, just to dampen the sound but she didn't want to use up her environmental breathing supplies. At least she had gotten a small amount of sleep at one point in time, right before sunup.

As the sun peeked over the top of the hills, the ambassador sat up and scooted to the edge of the flatbed, getting herself into a sitting position with her legs dangling over the edge of the bed. Searching through her small bag after she took off her helmet and gloves, she found her hair brush. Brushing out her tresses as best as possible, she put a hair scrunchie in her coif to keep things under control while wearing the helmet. Looking at the three pieces of armor sitting on the truck, she actually contemplated not wearing them today. This armor, despite how form-fitting it was, did not make for easy long-term wear.

She slipped her helmet back into place and made sure it was engaged correctly before she put her gloves back on. Chinning the comm switch, she called out to *The Dark Claw*.

“Dark Claw, do you copy? This is Ambassador Andrews'lan. Do you copy?”

“Loud and clear,” a tired sounding Temmet replied. “We're on our way with the agreed-upon transportation and a first meal for everyone. Where's a good landing spot?”

“Land just to the South of us, on the unpaved roadway you'll see when you're close enough.” She looked back toward the direction they would be coming from, spotting the incoming ships in the distance, augmented by her HUD. It looked like a *Mustang Fast Lighter*, a *Lestim* large personnel carrier and a *Lestim* equipment transport on the way to her location. There was what looked to be an armored and armed Simmon-built skimmer with them so she would bet that was Tem and the Skipper.

Denni looked around to see a few of the Hasmali were now holding their firearms at the ready position, probably by Veran Terranan's orders. She had met with him last eve, the one that seemed to be in charge of the military detachment and not surprisingly, he was not a fan of the Elazi either. He had backed up Teval's denial of her being left unfettered last night, despite the objections put forth by Farla. Veran was also quite upset when he found out she had been armed in their presence, even if the ambassador had not fired her Mounted Defense Rifle in anger.

Veran seemed to be an enigma to her; he liked to use his padd to keep notes on but it was

clear he was not wanting to connect to a network when the drone gave a general handshake request in his presence. She smiled, thinking about how he had almost dropped his padd when it buzzed in his hands.

The ambassador spotted the one that had fettered her to the vehicle last evening and gained his attention. “Excuse me, could you release me? I would like to get something to eat.” she explained.

“You must speak to Veran concerning that issue,” was the blunt reply. He continued on toward the Elazi transportation, rifle held at what her father would call port arms position, seeming to be uncaring about the situation. That Hasmali had to avoid the group walking toward her, made up of Temmet, the Skipper and Sa’Vesi. Well, it might be Sa’Vesi except the helmet polarizing screen was hot, making their shield blend into the helmet. Whoever it was in that armor made it to her first.

“Boss, are you okay?” the femme in the armor asked in Russian as her shield opened, just to have a private conversation. It was Sa’Vesi after all.

“I’m doing fine, except for being fettered by this cable.” she replied, lifting the end that was attached to the vehicle for emphasis. “The Hasmali think I’m a flight risk. They also put my *Vaar* arm armor that has the MDR in it out of my reach. A few of them weren’t happy I was armed around them.”

“Should have just cut loose with it,” the tall one suggested. “Sixteen hundred rounds would have gotten you out of here, I would put good odds on that. Besides, they hit me with at least twenty of those kinetic rounds. My suit took the beating with no physical damage but I was just a chunk of meat rattling around inside it on each hit. I honestly feel like some payback is in order.”

“Vesi, you did just fine. Could have been worse if you hadn’t worn your powered armor. I heard several of ours have broken bones from those rounds.”

“That’s what I’m saying, it wasn’t right at all. You went forth with good intentions and this is how they pay you back.” Denise was about to say something in rebuttal along those lines when Temmet and the Skipper walked up to them.

“Kitten, are you okay?” he asked as he hugged her once she had gotten off of the vehicle.

“All except for the cable, yeah.” Tem wasted no time as he took out an Amp-Light knife he kept in a pouch attached to his hard armor, using it to neatly sever the cable at the truck like a hot knife through warm butter. “Stand still, I’ll get the other end.”

“You might let them cut the loop around my leg,” she replied, pointing to the stunned Hasmali male that was bringing tools to release her fetter. “I trust you, Tem but my armor would pose no resistance to that knife and I really need two feet to walk with.” The XO begrudgingly gave the male some room to work, allowing the dark buff-colored male to sever the cable with some compound ratcheting shears.

“We have spoken with the one named Veran,” the Skipper stated. “He says you still need to

stand up in front of their lawmakers and plead our case. He made an outrageous claim we have been here before.”

“I have been told that, too,” Denni agreed. “Well, I understand I will be allowed counsel. Sa’Vesi, you’re my Elazi counsel. I will be given a Hasmali counsel, too. Not sure how much good that will do me, though.”

“You need to have something to eat,” Temmet pointed out, turning her toward the tables of food that had been set out by members of *The Dark Claw* Number Two cafeteria crew. He headed her in that direction and as they reached the start of the serving line, they noticed the Hasmali contingent standing between them and their ships. “Looks like they’re taking your flight risk seriously.”

“Veran certainly is,” she offered. The graying black Hasmali was talking with the soldier that might have been the ranking member of that guard, making his point with abrupt hand gestures while he spoke. When he noticed he was being watched, he came over to them and sort of pushed his way in between the ambassador and Sa’Vesi.

“We are watching you,” he stated rather bluntly to Denni. “Your offer of aid was strange, Ambassador. It was welcome but it will gain you no edge with our lawmakers.”

“We caused the injuries,” she put forth. “The proper response should have been to fall back and regroup but that didn’t happen. There were injuries on both sides, Veran. We have several soldiers with broken bones from those kinetic rounds.”

“Maybe our response was unjust,” he said in a way to make it sound like it wasn’t his opinion. “You don’t understand the situation, Ambassador. We have fought to keep our way of life on Hasmalan. This is the sixth time we have had to deal with unwanted incursions.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Veran. Maybe I can help to show that we were never here in the past and maybe when we leave here, the Hasmali and the Elazi will be friends.”

“That is left to be seen,” he commented. “The food seems to have a nice aroma,” he offered up as the servers put a bit of everything on his plate.

“If you like something, just come back for more,” Denise offered up.

They all went over to the tables that had been set up for them and they all sat down to a first meal as a group. Denise took off her helmet and powered gloves, much to the Skipper’s consternation. She noticed the captain of the ship looking at her so she spoke up.

“Skipper, I’ve been wearing this armor since yesterday about this time. I have to say, this has been the longest I’ve been in armor and it’s getting to be uncomfortable.”

“You should take it off, then,” Na’Risa suggested. “I know I would have. I’m not so sure these beings would harm you. So far, it’s just been intimidation, from what I can see.”

“I’m certainly not feeling that,” Denni retorted. “If that were the case, I wouldn’t have

weapons pointing at me right now.” The Skipper and XO both looked around to see she wasn’t kidding. There were at least one half-dozen of those big bore rifles pointing in the Ambassador’s general direction. “See what I mean? They are already concerned I’m a flight risk and I’m in no hurry to find out how that film feels while out of armor.”

“That I understand,” Risa put forth. “I watched as our forces were incapacitated by that polymer material. We observed how it works on camera. The way it deploys would indicate the round has a proximity sensor that detonates the payload, causing that film to spread out and wrap around whatever it’s aimed at. That film only seems to stick to itself, too. Certainly an anti-personnel round, in my thoughts good for riot control.”

“Those kinetic rounds weren’t exactly riot control in my opinion,” Sa’Vesi put forth. “I mean, they didn’t leave so much as a dent in my armor but they sure were attention getters. I was literally stunned for a moment by each impact. That’s beside the fact they injured the ones in light combat armor.”

“That was regrettable,” Farla offered as he sat down with the Ambassador and her small retinue. “I have been arguing my case with Veran. He still seems to think the Ambassador is a flight risk. He has asked for her to be restrained on the flight back to our community. I do not see a need for that restraint but I am not in charge, either.”

Sa’Vesi turned her head to look at Farla and gave the mayor a very hard stare. “I’m not good with how my boss is being treated. I love her like a family member and in my mind, she is not being afforded proper diplomatic treatment.” She sat her breakfast utensils down and leaned over toward the Hasmali, insinuating herself into his personal space. “I will be her counsel in this matter. I am also acting as her bodyguard. Any one of you gets foolish, I’ll put a very quick end to it.” The ebony femme touched her rail rifle for emphasis. “It’s loaded with far more lethal rounds than yesterday, ones that will punch through that Comeri powered armor like a Vibro-knife through tissue paper.”

“I understand your concern,” Farla replied. “I have spoke with Veran, voicing those very concerns. If you feel your superior is being mistreated, you may file a complaint with the senate. They will take the filing very seriously. The Hasmali do not want to be known as being unresponsive to all concerns brought before the senate, whether by Hasmali or any other race of beings.”

“We shall see,” Vesi muttered under her breath as she turned back to her breakfast.

“Sa’Vesi?” the Hasmali spoke up, trying to get her attention. She turned back toward the male and asked what was needed.

“You have a question?”

“I do. Are you serious when you say you could actually penetrate the Comeri-manufactured armor?”

“I am very serious, Farla,” she confirmed. “I was told last day, not to load up with offensive rounds. I was firing an aluminum and polymer round that well, I know that one soldier found out

I could make him dance. Still didn't penetrate his armor but I did damage it, rendering it inoperative."

"Veran said we were lucky that soldier didn't die by your hands."

"Well, that was yesterday," she put forth. "Things have changed. Tell Veran I want my boss' armor back to full power, too. I also want her MDR reinstalled. I don't feel safe, to tell you the truth."

"Very well, Sa'Vesi. I will argue your points and I will see if we can come to a compromise."

Everyone was ready to travel after first meal was completed, especially the Hasmali powered armor group. They were standing by with armed rifles while the loadmasters for their contingent secured the ambassador for transport. They were using narrow composite fabric load straps to carefully secure her arms across her upper body armor in almost a straitjacket sort of rigging.

Several straps went around her upper arms and around her back while two more went around the front. When tightened by a pair of ratchet assemblies, they kept her upper armored arms fixtured firmly to her sides. The loading technicians then used two more straps to secure her forearms together and tight to her body, preventing all movement there. The Hasmali were being careful, most likely due to Sa'Vesi standing over them, rail rifle at *Vaar* side arms with the safety off.

"Boss, you okay with this?" she asked, looking over their handiwork. Denni did appear to be soundly secured at the moment.

"I'm okay," she offered up as she tested her bonds. "I mean, no stress is being put on my body, since the suit joints won't over-articulate at the shoulders and elbows." She then switched to Russian. "You have my MDR sleeve, right? I'll be honest; I'm not feeling very safe right now."

"I have it in my duffel and they have no idea I have it in my possession. I also have the items Temmet brought for you; your uniform, toiletries and a twenty rotation maintenance kit. Your padd is in with my things and I brought a signal extender. The Skipper is going to fly several relay drones for us so we have signal at the Hasmali community. She is also going to maintain a forty compliment armored ready unit to be able to drop in at a moment's notice if either one of us calls for assistance."

"Well, I guess we should get this over with." Denise commented sourly. This was something that needed to be done but in her mind, not in this way. They went to the troop transporter and boarded, taking the two front seats directly behind the flight deck. Several of the Hasmali armored soldiers sat behind them while several Elazi troopers took up positions in the back of the cabin, having a line of sight to the whole ship. Marlett made sure he was included in that group.

Veran boarded the ship along with the rest of the Hasmali contingent and made one of the soldiers move to a different row so he could sit directly behind Denise. Once the loading door to the craft was closed, the pilot lifted it off the ground and turned toward the Hasmali settlement.

Setting the navigation system from an extrapolated location off of Farla's padd, they settled in for a short flight.

"Your pilot had better not try to be sneaky." the Hasmali in charge suggested to no one in particular. That made Vesi turn around to look straight at him with a grim look on her face.

"Veran, your soldiers had better not try anything at all. Our troopers in the back have a clear view of the ships' interior and they're loaded out with armor piercing rounds. Trust me, you wouldn't stand a chance against them."

"Armor piercing rounds?" he questioned. "They will penetrate armor? Our armor?"

"Don't make us show you just how easy it would be to punch holes all through your people. This must become a bit more diplomatic in nature." She looked over at her boss, then back at Veran. "Just like the Ambassador, I want to be diplomatic so don't force my hand. I'm already unhappy with the way you're treating my boss. Don't piss me off further or I might become a loose cannon and that is never a good thing."

"*Sa'Vesi, that's not very diplomatic.*" the Ambassador suggested in Elazi.

"*Sorry, Denni. I'm upset with the treatment you're getting. I'll try to tone it down.*" the tall one replied.

"*I'm not good with this, either.*" Marlett offered from the back of the cabin. "*Just so you know, I'm staying as your bodyguard, too. If they don't like it, they can try to tell me to go home. It's not like I would, just going to be that way.*"

"*I'm glad I have you two watching over me. Hopefully we will be going home to the ship tonight and all will be good again.*"

While they made this short flight, Denise kept thinking about how adamant they were about the Elazi having been on their planet before. If it was so far in the past, why does it matter so much? The padd Farla had in his possession seemed to be fairly recent manufacture so that means they have a good working knowledge of electronics and wireless networking. Why would they all of the sudden decide to turn off the networks? It didn't make sense to her.

What did seem odd to her was the willingness of most of the Hasmali to take a flight in a ship they had never observed before. The powered soldiers were trying to make it seem like they didn't care, but they boarded quickly when they were directed to do so. They were also talking among themselves, seeming to be enjoying the trip. What the Ambassador did notice was the similar sounds of Hasmali and Sarlii. For that matter, more than just a few words seemed to be Sarlii in her mind. As she listened to Veran and the soldier next to him talking to each other, she could follow the conversation to some degree.

"*Vesi, I swear they're speaking a dialect of Sarlii.*" she offered in Elazi.

“I was thinking the same thing.” the tall one replied. *“Veran and that soldier are maybe talking about how to keep an eye on us, maybe spy on our conversations. I think they just said they should try to turn down the power on my armor, too.”*

“I think I heard that, too.” Denni offered up. *“Let’s try something.”* She turned to Veran behind her and asked, “Are you enjoying the flight?” in Sarlii common.

“Yes, I am rather enjoying this . . . wait, how do you speak the old tongue? Who taught you the sacred language?”

“I speak Sarlii common and Northern Sarlii. I am a linguist, so I try to see patterns in speech and make sense of them. Your language is a dialect of Sarlii common, I think. Northern Sarlii is a bit more complex in texture and meaning so I ruled that out.”

Varan looked disturbed by her statements. “Ambassador, I would ask that you do not speak the old tongue again. It is sacred, only spoken by our holy people. Myself and my people will speak Englannish with you and your people. Please return that favor by only speaking Englannish while in our community.”

Denise thought about that statement, then offered a solution. “Why don’t you help me to speak your dialect of Hasmali? I am a linguist, so it couldn’t be too hard. I’ve had to learn a language in just a few days so I could do my job.”

“I will give that thought.” Veran looked at the floor, then back at her. “Actually, you speak the old language clearly. I think that’s what startled me. I will see about finding one of our people to teach you our dialect, as you say.”

The flight hadn’t taken very long, less than three *Heth* in total. While they were in the air, Denise thought about how this was playing out. She remembered what her mother had told of her parents’ kidnapping when some extended members of the family decided they were in physical danger. They had ended up on the *All Races Trade Platform* in orbit around Elazia, her father’s hair and her mother’s pelt all colored a Chattel Blue Five. They had eventually escaped their detention, but it was still something she wouldn’t have wanted to go through.

That made her think of the Bil Restraint Harness that her mother had ended up with, one that she had to wear for a few days until the electronic key could be made. Her mom had even went so far as to help her put it on, and even activated it, at least allowing the control fob to be in her possession. The offer had been made for her to take the harness when she became joined but Sa’Krista didn’t know at the time if she wanted to take it or not. It did look very pretty on her, though. The one she had now seemed to fit her better so maybe passing on her mother’s harness was a good thing.

Denise looked down at the ratcheting fasteners for the straps encircling her torso, keeping her secured firmly. It appeared they had put a locking pin through each one, preventing them from being tampered with. Well, she guessed they were taking her flight risk quite seriously. What they didn’t know was her dedication to being a diplomat. Denni wanted this to be a win-win situation

for both races.

Up until now, the only race they she had ever had trouble with were the Tunn. They were odd, in that they wanted other races to visit their planet and spend their funds but they didn't particularly want others to live on the Tunn home world. They were also very shrewd bargainers at the table, too. It was a bad bet that a Tunn would parlay themselves into a lesser position in any agreement they were a part of.

The base on Luna was a prime example; they wanted more than they were willing to agree upon and that bothered her. Denni would not be there for the next round of talks due to this bad turn of events. She really hoped Ambassador Sallen Taffet'lan, newly assigned to offworld business from homeworld affairs, would be able to handle the situation.

As they were growing closer to the Hasmali community of Northern Vectar, Denise was noting how they were passing over fields that were being farmed. There seemed to be at least a dozen different crops being grown, from what might be fruit trees to some that were possibly fields of vegetables. There were other fields that seemed to be short bushes of some kind. All in all, they were agrarian to a degree.

Farmlands gave way to what seemed to be a small amount of light manufacturing if she had her guess right, then different types of housing. At that point, Veran got up from his seat and pointed out a place to set down, so the Elazi pilot put the craft on the ground at the designated location. The Hasmali then turned and looked straight at Denni.

"Ambassador, this is Northern Vectar, the place where you will be interrogated. You will follow directions given by my soldiers to the holding facility at the Northern Vectar base."

"I will comply," she offered up. "I will not try to run."

Vesi made her thoughts in the matter known, rather bluntly. "I'm going with my boss and so will her bodyguard. She will not be left alone with any Hasmali, no matter what. Get used to it."

"We have procedures . . .," Veran started to say, then stopped his diatribe when he observed the look of death on the tall femme's face and the fact that her hands were getting a defensive grip on her rifle. "Very well. I expect you to keep yourselves under control. Follow my soldiers."

Sa'Krista, Sa'Vesi and Marlett followed the Hasmali contingent onto the main road of the town only to discover they were obviously the main event today. While the citizens of Northern Vectar weren't approaching them, they were all watching them travel by with great intent. A few of the younger Hasmali children came out onto the street and walked with them for a ways but no adult did so. Mostly they were busy telling their young ones to get back from the prisoners.

In the ambassador's opinion, things were going fair at the moment, until a very large contingent of heavily armed Hasmali citizens stepped out into the roadway, blocking their

progress. The lead citizen, a solid black male, shouted out his concerns to the mayor.

“Farla! Why do you allow these prisoners to be in town while in armor? And why are two of them armed? You know this is not allowed!” That outburst seemed to anger the mayor of the city.

“Corvan! As mayor of Northern Vectar, I am allowing them to travel this way! Please stand down!” Farla replied firmly. He shook his head, knowing Corvan Halvoe was a hothead and he was probably the reason for this stand-off.

“I’ll make him stand down,” Vesi muttered in Elazi, just loud enough to be heard by the ambassador and Marlett through their suit communications systems. Denni also heard the tall femme’s rifle charging, a sign she might actually carry through with her threats. Almost at the same time, Marlett used a fighting claw to slice through the straps binding her and shoved his rifle into her grasp. Denise then heard his Mounted Defense Rifle spin up.

“Farla!” Marlett shouted through his suit speakers, “You had better get your citizens under control or we will make this a very messy and extremely short engagement! Do it now!”

The mayor turned around to see who was shouting and that’s when he noticed a full squad of forty Elazi Elite combat troopers air-dropping out of a *Mustang Fast Lighter* and a second *Mustang* was lining up its centerline rail gun on the middle of the Hasmali civilian contingent. One figure in a mostly gloss black-toned Drexel Model Ninety powered armor dropped from that second *Fast Lighter* and jogged up to the ambassador to confront her.

“Denni, I’ve been watching and listening through Vesi’s suit cameras,” Tem put forth as his shield opened, pulling the bits of shredded strapping off of her armor as he spoke to her. “This looks like it was going sideways so I gave the order to intervene. I think the whole ship is concerned about your well-being, to the point I actually had to pick this contingent. Almost three-quarters of the fighting personnel onboard wanted in on this action.” They were joined shortly by a very stressed out Farla and a very agitated Teval. Veran was not far behind, fit to be tied.

“This is a problem, Ambassador,” Farla began, trying to defuse the situation while trying to keep a lid on Teval and Veran, “If I might suggest something, we may be able to reach the military base without any loss of life.” After a short conversation and some tense agreements, they reluctantly regrouped into something that approximated a rudimentary breaching party, both Elazi and Hasmali. The Elazi in the front row flanked either side of the four Hasmali carrying the huge rifles, eventually forming into a pod that surrounded Farla, Teval, Veran, Temmet and Denise. The call was given and they started walking in unison toward the barracks some one-half *Hazecan* away, Temmet giving directions to the Elazi soldiers while Farla and Teval directed their soldiers.

Corvan and his best fighters tried to stand in the way of their progress but quickly decided that it was in their best interests not to impede the phalanx. That was after several of his best were subdued by careful application of that anti-personnel film. They finally gave up and decided to just follow at a distance, even though the pair of *Mustang Fast Lighters* over their heads had rotary cannons tracking their every move.

The mixed soldier formation made it to the Northern Vectar Barracks gate with no further

opposition and Teval made sure the gates were closed securely behind them before any unwanted civilians could make their way in. That's when he observed Sa'Krista with a rail rifle and Temmet with her, armed with an Impulse rifle. He pushed his way through the group of soldiers surrounding them and made his thoughts known.

"Ambassador! Who is this with you and why are you both armed?" he demanded.

"I'm Division Commander Temmet Hone'lan, the Executive Officer of *The Dark Claw*," Tem replied, offering a gloved hand in greeting that was not taken.

"I remember you from this morning, now that I can see your face," Teval commented. "I'm not happy with any of this right now. The Ambassador needs to be in custody and you need to remove your soldiers from our compound. I would prefer that done as soon as possible," he added.

"I want a small contingent to stay nearby," the XO countered. "I'm not happy with any of this either. Our ambassador is being treated badly and to be honest, I don't feel she is safe here. Her second and her bodyguard will be with her while she is in your custody. She will never be alone with any Hasmlali with no exceptions, not until we have determined her life is not in danger. I think you realize we could just load up and leave, if we wanted to. However, this should be a "*First Contact*" with your people and that is what we will be working toward, a good, mutual first contact."

"I will agree that you could just leave, since you seem to have us at a disadvantage," Veran stated as he observed the Elazi soldiers in powered armor, completely surrounding them and the two *Fast Lighters* loitering overhead. "This problem is not something we take lightly. The peoples that were here before your appearance were told to leave and they did so. We thought we had saw the last of the Zeeanians until you arrived."

"We are Elazi, from the planet Elazia," Tem put forth. "I'm not familiar with the word or name Zeeanian." While Tem was talking with Veran, Denni spotted a female Hasmlali headed their way, having a very animated conversation with a soldier she was sure had been with them during her abduction and subsequent journey to Northern Vectar. At the last moment, the soldier hung back and seemed to cringe as the gray femme insinuated herself into their conversation, much to Veran's obvious displeasure.

"Please excuse my barging in. The ones that were here last were called Elazi. They claimed to be from the planet Elazia," she offered up in decently enunciated English. She then turned to Denni and Temmet before continuing. "I am Gemma Barrenan and for the record, I have no official title on this planet other than being older than dirt. If anything, I am a . . . a consultant and observer," she added. Gemma then nodded to Veran, making him just that much more upset.

"Temmet Hone'lan, the Executive Officer of *The Dark Claw*," the XO put forth, introducing himself. "I have to say, you speak English quite well."

"I lived with the Golden Gate community for most of ten sets of seasons, when they first arrived," Gemma put forth. "They were lost as to how to grow crops in our soil and deal with our weather that must have been strange to them. I learned the English and Comeri languages while I

was with them. I have also studied the Bil language, although I would say I am not proficient with it.”

“You learned well,” Denise offered up, hearing that familiar Sarlii lilt to her speech, as if she were a native of the planet Sarl or if she were a human, from Ireland. “I am Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan from Elazia. I want to ask, how long ago were these Elazi on this planet? I have heard they were here quite some time ago from Teval.”

“Never ask Teval about time or anything number based,” the gray femme put forth with a slight smile. “Teval, how much is two and two?” she queried of the brown and black male.

“That is three,” he replied. After seeing her reaction to that answer, he posed another answer. “No, it is two point two.”

“See?” Gemma mused as she shrugged her shoulders. “The Elazi that were here left forty-one Hasmali years ago. Their ship was possibly damaged from coming through the Lesser Star Eye so they landed to repair it. I feel whatever damaged their ship may have caused the Lesser Star Eye to remain closed after they arrived on the planet. It should have winked forty-one years ago when they left here and twice more since then. It has not done so and I do not know why.”

“Gemma, I would like to talk to you concerning the objects you call the Star Eyes. It may be useful to our leaving here,” Temmet put forth.

“I will discuss that with you, once we have settled your ambassador into a suitable quarters befitting her title.” Gemma turned to Teval and made her intentions known. “I know I have no real direct power here but if you will remember, I am an advisor to our senate. I do not want to be the cause of an emergency meeting being called, that would no doubt end with you standing on the speaking platform to be interrogated, concerning your actions. I have heard what has happened since you left here on your mission. I have been asked by the senate to quickly and more importantly, quietly mitigate your actions. I asked you to go on that mission but you have let me down by your rash decisions.”

“Gemma, it was not my intentions to let you down,” Teval explained, “You told me to tell them to leave. When we realized who they were, you know we were under direction by the senate to arrest them.” he replied.

“I think it may be you who could be placed under arrest,” she retorted, indicating the Elazi contingent surrounding them. “Do not cause undue embarrassment, just escort the ambassador and her entourage to the guest suites. I’m sure there will be no issues with that? Also, if they would wish to, the Elazi troopers will be welcome to use part of the drill pad to park a ship and the visiting soldier barracks nearby should hold their current contingent. Do you agree with me?”

“I agree with you, Miall Barrenan. I will set things up,” he replied begrudgingly. It was clear he did not agree with anything that was put forth but this was not the time nor place to cause an uproar. Teval then turned to Temmet and Denise. “You all may wait in the shade of the plaza, over there. I will not be long.”

They all walked a few dozen *Catre* to the plaza only to find it was built with a misting system

to provide comfort. Denni took off her helmet and enjoyed the conditioned air, glad to feel a cool breeze on her face. Gemma walked up to her and extended a hand in greeting.

“I’m glad to meet you, Abassador Andrews’lan,” she offered up.

“Good to meet you too, um, Miall Barrenan. I do hope that I used the right honorific. For somebody with no official title, you seem to have some sway over the others,” Denni commented.

“I no longer have an official title, which is true. That was stripped from me many Earth years ago,” the gray femme admitted. “However, I was never told I did not have an unofficial title. You see, most officials would have not done what I have just done without fear of retribution. Since I do not “officially” report to no one particular council or member, I act as an unofficial *Art-Do-Grep*, or facilitator in English, for the senate. I may act by their direction, with leeway to do what is needed.”

“I see,” Sa’Krista mused.

“If I had an official title according to Colonel MacLachlan, I would be titled a General Shit Disturber,” Gemma offered up. “Now, before Teval returns, tell me your protocols for communications. My padd has been buzzing all morning but I didn’t want to connect without asking permission first.” That made Denni and Tem both smile. The XO decided to let her know what needed to be done.

“Well, just tap the icon that initiates communication and the drone network will log you on. The authentication is done on our end. I will let our ship know you are authorized to use our system. If you want to call someone, go active and ask for that person. The ship will help make the connection for you.”

Teval had escorted the ambassador and her retinue to the biggest of the guest suites, the one normally used by the Government President Pro Tem when she was visiting. That made him wonder when the quorum would finally decide to elect a permanent President for Hasmalan, one that would take action against the outsiders. President Kaverren was pro-unity with the aliens, something that was not in keeping with the majority of the population. She was also rallying for the wireless communication network to be restored and Gemma put back in charge of its administration.

Waiting while his terminal logged him in, he looked over at his tablet, sitting on top of his desk in its charging cradle. Remembering the conversation he had with one of his soldiers, he wondered if it was true that Farla had somehow used his tablet to directly communicate with someone. That was somewhat against Hasmali law to do so. That icon on the top right corner of his tablet was supposed to enable communication in some way but he was too young to remember ever using what the humans called ‘wireless’ connections to communicate with.

He remembered how astonished the humans were when the age of their codeware on their system had been revealed to them. Colonel McLachlan thought it was absurd to use such obsolete codeware to communicate with. It was Gemma that had offered up the notion that if codeware

had no issues, why redesign it? Teval agreed with that completely.

His login completed, Teval began to download his daily jumble of notes, requests and the occasional demand from Central Government for some item to be answered. There was an alert for a robbery suspect from the *Southern Falten Zavan* community but that was many days by vehicle and at least three seven-days on foot. He would disseminate this bit of information to his troops.

There was a request from the Government concerning the possibility of an incoming space craft and they wanted to know if he had any information concerning this matter. Well, he thought he had better send a reply to them, just so they wouldn't pester him further or think him remiss in his duties. Starting a reply to that request, he kept looking at his tablet. Finally giving in to his curiosity, Teval picked up the device and tapped that unused icon.

He wondered if that program no longer functioned, that was until his tablet vibrated in his hands, then an Elazi face resolved itself on the screen a few moments later.

"This is communications. Do you need to speak with an individual?" the gray being asked in English. Now he felt embarrassed to have activated the device but he knew he had to save face.

"This is Teval Kovvelan, Constable of Northern Vectar. I wish to speak with the Executive Officer of the ship," he replied, hoping this ruse would work.

"One moment," the comms officer bid, then after looking at another screen for a few moments, he came back to speak to Teval. "Saar, the XO seems to be about one hundred *Catre* away from your current location, in an adjacent building, from what I can deduce. Would you like me to signal him?"

"No, I was under the impression he had returned to your ship. I think I know where he is right now. Thank you for your efforts." Teval then tapped the icon again, making the screen go blank. Taking a moment to compose himself, he sat his tablet down and shook his head. That was really stupid of him and the proper thing would have been to go see the ambassador and ask some questions first. At least he would not be feeling so embarrassed right now if he had done so.

Tem and Marlett supported Denise and her armor while she opened the suit, since her charging stand was not available at the moment. The ambassador chinned the button sequence and waited patiently while the suit began to lean forward at the waist so the back could open up for her egress. Sa'Vesi stepped in to assist, holding the front of the suit from falling forward while her boss wiggled her way out of it.

"Oh, how nice to be out of that can," Denni offered up as she disconnected the sensor mesh before climbing the rest of the way out. Once extracted from her armor, she touched the button that closed it up and stood the armor back upright. "Now, I've got to get this mesh off and I need a shower," she stated as she stretched her arms out.

Marlett was bringing a piece of equipment over to where her armor stood, preparing some cables for use. "I have a charging pack at your disposal. While you shower, I'll start charging your

armor.”

Sa’Krista turned to Sa’Vesi and asked her, “Did you bring my light armor with you or should I have the ship send out my set for me?”

“You will have to have the ship deliver your set, if you want to wear a light tin can.” That made the XO speak up;

“I can bring your personal light armor out, since you still need the charging stand for your powered armor and I need a stand for mine. In fact, all four of us need charging stands if we’re going to be here for a while,” Temmet volunteered.

“Would you, please?” she asked of her future *One Love*, giving him a kiss on the lips. That made him smile before he made a comment;

“Keep that up and nothing will get done.”

She waited until her future spouse had left before she stepped into the shower and looked at the controls, noting the wording on the knobs was quite readable to her. Hot on the left, Cold on the right, reversed from Elazi standards but common on Earth and Sarl. This language had to be Sarlii or related to Sarlii in her opinion. The knob in the center was the flow control for the shower head so that all made sense. Turning on the water, she had almost instant hot water that she quickly mixed with the cold tap to reduce the temperature.

While she showered, Denise thought about what had transpired; apparently the Elazi had been here recently and left at the insistence of the Hasmaili government. Who were they? The suggested time period would have put them right in the middle of the Ran’wila incursion into Comeri space and the resultant multi-cycle war in space and on Comeri soil. In fact, that was the second war on Comeri soil in less than one hundred cycles where the Elazi had offered support to them.

The Ran’Wila were a race that seemed to be similar in appearance to Earth-bound raccoons, more or less. They were slightly shorter than an Elazi as a whole and they seemed to wear only vests and knee length leather or fabric breeches regardless of gender, unless they were of a high rank in their society. They could also be quite articulate when they wanted to be understood, something she had a first-hand knowledge of. She had been on the first ambassadorial mission to Ran’wila Prime as the lead negotiator.

They were almost as good at bargaining as the Tunn, making the whole procedure of setting up trade agreements entirely too tedious. By the end of the mission, she could speak and comprehend high Ah-Ran well enough to know when something was not quite right with a particular aspect by the side bargaining being carried on by different Ran factions at the meetings.

Denise finished her shower, then stepped into the drying booth and quickly dried her coat, making sure to brush it to kill the fluff. She brushed her teeth and straightened her facial fur, then went back to the main area of the suite. Sa’Vesi was waiting by a side table that had some clothing laying on it.

“They sent us some utility suits to wear, just in case we didn’t bring clothing to wear out of our armor. Several each of a number of sizes,” she offered up. Vesi unfolded one that might fit the tall one and continued; “I like the dark gray color but I found these in the clothes, attached to the size tags.” She spread open the collar of a suit to expose something attached to a label. What was revealed was a small circular disk that had four small holes that allowed someone to sew the devices into place. “Trackers, and they actually seem to be active trackers at that,” was her explanation. “Each one has its own code, a serial number maybe, that’s being broadcast.”

“Good find,” Denni retorted. “Well, I appreciate the gesture but I think I’ll just wear my personal utility uniform for now. I think I would like to be clothed in case a Hasmaili official shows up. If they’re like the Sarlii, they will not appreciate bare fur.” After a moment, she asked a question; “Is Marlett guarding the door?”

“Yes, he’s outside the door on our talk-around channel set,” Vesi confirmed. That made her boss think of something that might be appreciated.

“Vesi, why don’t you take a shower. Plenty of towels and you might like that fur soap they have in the shower.”

“If you insist,” the tall one replied as her armor began to open up for her to exit. Denni helped hold her suit up until it could be put into the upright stored position. “I was getting a bit sweaty in there,” she commented after extracting herself. “The older Drexels had better suit cooling in my opinion. Might have to get Gil to look at that issue for me.”