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“Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

Chapter One

“The Golden Gate And The Dark Claw”

Colonel Henry Frazier ‘Hank’ MacLachlan, United States Air Force, stood on the bridge of the ‘*Golden Gate*’ expeditionary ship, trying to get the day’s work completed. As the commander of the Mars Colony mission, he was going through his daily checklist while his flight crew tended to the daily chores of running the ship. The captain could see the starscape ahead on a monitor and Mars was just coming into view, still just a tiny marble that he might have missed had the computer not highlighted it for him. This launch should have happened a year and a half ago but certain bureaucrats had held up key funding just to get their designated crew members assigned to his vessel. Some of them, he would not have personally chosen for this mission otherwise.

Six months now into the actual mission was starting to wear on the captain, since it had all been in almost zero-g for the entire time with the exception of the launch burn. He had also been on board with a good number of his crew for almost four months before the actual launch. They were just cooling their heels, waiting it out while the United Nations wrangled with several countries over the scope of the mission. In fact, even standing on the bridge for him was just theoretical, since he was using magnetic boots to stay planted on the deck plates. Sometimes it was easier on his mind just to strap into his command chair and avoid looking at the various items his crew allowed to float about the cabin for a while.

“Latest reports, Skipper,” a man offered as he coasted into view. The Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade offered up a clipboard while he used the hand-holds on the overhead to arrest his glide and turn himself to orient into a ‘standing’ position beside his superior officer. “Same stuff, different day.” he added dryly with a smile.

Captain MacLachlan began flipping the pages, then went to the last one and signed it. “Okay, Jacob, tell me what I just signed. Just the major talking points.” he put forth. That made his maintenance and security commander hesitate for a moment before he did as he was directed.

“Skipper, Engineering says we still have about seventeen hundred and twenty-five pounds of propellant marbles left after that last corrective burn. Book says we need one thousand, one hundred to complete the mission and return to Earth, provided we do so at the proper insertion points.”

“Sounds good, Jacob. Continue.”

“Well, PO3 Valdez from Flight Engineering got into it with Gunny Hatchett of Security over the quality of the water coming out of Gunny’s water dispenser in his office. Told Valdez he thought it tasted like somebody was pissing in the water, Valdez told him to piss in it himself

before he drank it. Some of the engineering techs pulled them apart before it went fist city. Coulda made a mess outa the chow prep area.” That made the one in charge sigh.

“All right, see to it that I have a meeting with both parties at the same time.” Henry ordered. “This whole Navy versus Marines versus Air Force shit has got to stop. I have too many good men letting the tension make them do stupid stuff. Anything else?”

“Somebody has been building a still down in the aft material requisition shop. Not completed yet but it’s close. I heard the breakfast cereal was getting kind of popular again, that’s why I asked around.”

“Ah Geez! Corn Chex booze again.” the Captain said with a hint of disgust. “Why don’t they try bread and raisins? My 57th Tactical Training Wing maintenance crew did that when I was stationed at Nellis as the base commander. I-G inspection found it in the paint shop, in the middle of a run of some very nasty rotgut liquor. That didn’t go well.”

“Will do, Skipper, put a stop to the still. Anything for me? Those were the only things worth noting in my reports.”

“Yeah, Jacob. Tell me what’s the scoop on deck. What are you hearing?”

“Sir, the Seabees are going nuts from not being able to build something up, bulldoze it over or blow it up. They have almost worn out the manuals for the domes we gave them to study. Some are using a terminal and the DVDs to look at the architectural, since the hard copies are so worn. I think I overheard, they’ve already found some flaws and designed fixes for them.”

“Well, as long as they don’t try to terraform the Golden Gate . . . you know what I mean?”

“Yes Sir, Skipper. I’m sure they might not do too bad of a job if they did do so.” LTJG Muncie commented.

Hank looked at the younger officer; slender, boyish good looks and a tightly trimmed crewcut of blond hair. His blue eyes stood out against his pale complexion. You wouldn’t think of him as a black belt in Karate or a boxing champ. “Jacob, why did you sign on with this project, anyway? Christ on a Crutch, you could have made Command grade on Earth before this bucket makes it back home.” the Skipper put forth. “And this may be a one-way trip, too.”

Henry thought that over; there had been some talk of not being able to return. They needed three hundred pounds of propellant for the retro-burn at Mars and an estimated minimum of two hundred pounds to burn for Earth, three hundred and fifty for Luna retro-burn and station keeping. That was only if everything went right. They were realistically, one unneeded hard burn away from a one-way trip.

“Sir, erm, Hank, if I may. I signed on because I believed in the project. And I did understand the possibility it might be one way.” The Executive Officer entered the bridge at that moment, seeming to be upset.

“MacLachlan, I’m hearing some scuttlebutt about a still. Know anything?” Naval Commander Phillip Alexander Frankton put forth very sharply. “Muncie, you know anything, since you’re in charge of ship ops?”

“We were just discussing the dailies, Phil.” Henry replied. “Cereal request is on the rise again. Might be a still onboard so I’ve asked Jacob to look around, see what he can see.”

“See to it you find it, Muncie.” the XO ordered bluntly. “News from NASA and the Pentagon came through. I’ll give you this much that seems like hot news; it would appear the Chinese want to drill for oil off of Unalaska, Alaska, well inside territorial waters. Talks are getting heated at the UN and we have a carrier group on site, facing down the Chinese carrier group. Might escalate in my opinion. Pentagon says they will sink the platform if they put a drill pipe down, even if it’s just to test the depth.”

“That sucks. *That* really sucks.” the skipper blurted out. “We’ll have to keep an eye on our Chinese bio-engineers. They’re good men and women but I don’t want them doing stupid things once they hear about this.”

“Sir, you might not have to.” the navigator offered up from her station. “I know I’m not good with going to war over oil but I’m sure the engineers won’t do anything stupid.” LTJG Xi Chin put forth. “Those engineers are dedicated to this mission, Sir.”

“I hope you’re right, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Sir. We’re all dedicated to this mission. Look at it this way, Sir. I had to train hard and make it through endless interviews plus the psychological tests to get here. Why would I jeopardize that?”

“I remember those egg-heads trying to drill into my head, Ell-Tee.” Colonel MacLachlan agreed. “I was sure at one point, they had put bugs in my house because of the questions they asked.”

“Same here.” Commander Frankton put forth. “Damned egg-heads, just screwing with us to see who would crack.” After a moment, he continued. “Henry, I’m here to take over shift. Anything out of the ordinary?”

“Well, there . . .” The commander put up his hand to stop the Colonel.

“I already heard, Valdez and Hatchett got into it in the mess meal prep area. Been waiting for that one. And we’re good on fuel.”

That surprised the *Captain Of the Boat*. “Um, okay. I guess you have your ear to the hull?”

“I try to keep a finger on the pulse of this ship. Jacob, you might look in the aft material requisition shop. Seems like I’ve seen copper and poly tubing in there. If I remember right, that hardware belongs in one of the landing primary supplies cargo box that has inside atmosphere access.”

“Yes, Sir, I’ll look into that for you,” Jacob replied, trying not to look like the kid with his hand in the cookie jar.

Henry and Jacob left Commander Frankton on watch, seeking some coffee in the Officer’s mess on the second deck down from the bridge. While they waited for the coffee dispenser to fill some squat containers with some fresh brew, the LTJG brought up what was now a sore subject.

“Colonel, what do I do about the still? The maintenance group will get caught with it if I don’t stop them.”

“Tell them to disassemble it and hide the parts. We will be on Mars soon and if I know Frankton, he will want to spearhead the base construction. They can then run their still up here or take it down and hide it in the shop they will have to construct on the surface.”

“They will want it on the planet.” Jacob put forth. He knew from experience, a still is a bitch to run in zero-g conditions. He ran one off and on for three months on the International Space Station and no one was the wiser. They thought it was just an experiment that kept going wrong.

“On the surface . . . I thought so.” Hank put forth. “You know, I heard somebody ran a still on the International Space Station. Seems like a lot of work, since you’re kind of restricted to only one of the experiment cubbyholes.”

“Well, if you pipe from one cubby to the next, you can . . .” Jacob stopped talking when he saw the smile on the Skipper’s face. “Okay, where did you hear about my still?”

“I roomed off and on with Captain Milton Hasegawa when we were training for this mission.” Hank explained. “He told me how you kept ‘failing’ the test and reloading it with more mash. What I want to know is, how did you get so much mash up to the station? I mean, it takes quite a bit of mash to get just a little bit of booze.”

“Chicken bullion cubes and compressed corn meal tabs, mostly.” he offered up. “I had enough to do four runs and nobody on the station complained about the quality. The sad part is when you have to pour off the head because of the toxic chemicals that come off the first part of the run.”

“Pretty damned genius.” the COB offered up. “So, where did you hide the mash?”

“It was in my clothing bag with my daily wear things, the supplies for the experiment and stuffed into the pockets of my flight suit. A butt-tonne of it.”

“Did you ever complete the experiment? And what was it?”

“Cooking cornbread in space as proof of concept for interstellar flight. You need food other than what comes out of a box or tube to keep the crew from insurrection. The proof was cooking in zero-g. I saw it as a novel opportunity. I was able to cook cornbread but it proved a real mess to eat.” A chime interrupted them, a wanted interruption.

A door slid open on the coffee maker to allow them to retrieve their containers of coffee. The short, squat container had a handle like a coffee cup but it was a closed system. The top that

screwed on had a valve-equipped spout to sip from and a port to pressurize a disk that traveled down the mug to keep the contents under feed to the spout. It was not perfect, but it seemed to work. LTJG Muncie put a fresh straw top on his, took a sip of the contents and commented.

“I just wished whoever chose these beans to make the coffee from has to drink this crap, too. I mean, I’ve had bad coffee but I think this is the worst.”

“No, my father made coffee you could strip paint with, good old fashioned boiled coffee. Some called it Texas Mud.” Hank quipped. “It was so bad, mom would take a cup, sip it and throw it out in the sink. I’m sure she thought one day, dad would make a good pot of coffee but you know, the sink enamel was starting to peel off about the time I went off to college.”

“That is bad coffee.” Jacob agreed.

“It was.” he agreed. “Well, I think I’ll go send the wife a message, then come back here for some grub at meal time.”

“Ill be back, too.” Muncie put forth.

Hank sat in his acceleration couch, using the harness to hold him in place while he was trying to compose a message to send home. He let go of his tablet, letting it drift in front of him while he thought of what he really wanted to say. The Captain of the Boat wanted to say a lot of things but his limit of one minute didn’t leave much time to offer up all of his thoughts and feelings.

Looking around his assigned space, he wondered how he would have fared if he had joined the Navy instead of the Air Force. If he stood, he could reach both side bulkheads at once with his hands and the room was just long enough for a bunk and a chair meant for holding him safely under thrust. The lockers were in the ceiling, or ‘overhead’ as the Navy personnel would say. There was a small writing surface provided but he didn’t use it much. Magnets held paperwork in place on the ‘desktop’ and walls but most of the work was done with the tablets or permanently mounted computer interfaces.

Turning back to his tablet, he tapped the ‘Record’ icon. “Honey, just checking in this week. I can’t tell you how much I miss one ‘G’ of gravity and solid ground beneath my feet. Rumor has it a still is being built somewhere on the ship. Remember that happening at Nellis? Yeah, need to put a damper on that quick.

“So, a few more weeks and we will be on the surface and we can set up the signal array. When we do, you can go to Houston control and talk to me. There will be a bit of delay but it’s better than this. Tell the kids I said Hi and that I love them and miss them. I miss you too.”

Henry hit the ‘Send’ button, then stuck the pad to his wall using the hook and loop fasteners that were found throughout the ship to keep things from floating around. He retrieved the clipboard with the daily reports, intent on making sure Jacob had covered all the major topics. Generally, his Operations Officer was on top of things.

About half-way through the stack of reports, the whole ship shuddered hard and a feeling of some part of gravity came to the room, possibly from acceleration. The red light over his door started flashing along with the klaxons sounding throughout the ship.

“Man Your Stations!” began sounding through the speakers as he made his way to the bridge. He could just tell something was going extremely pear-shaped as he threaded his way in and out of personnel going to their assigned posts. There was a feeling of gravity increasing as he made his way forward, something that should not be happening.

Once on the bridge, he could see the issue right off; something was in their way, an unknown object that had not been there an hour ago. A huge black zone with minimal stars beyond, not the starscape that should have been there. The edges of this anomaly could be observed, an odd twinkling effect delineating the edges. And it was huge. Mother-Honking huge.

“Navigation, Report!” he demanded as he took the command chair and buckled in. “What in the hell am I looking at? Any information?”

“Sir, gravimetric readings are totally off the scale.” his science officer, LTJG Richard Sinkovich replied, looking at his console and poking at buttons furiously. “Sir, I may be wrong, but my guess is we are looking at a wormhole. Tell me I’m wrong, but that’s my guess.”

“Navigation, change course thirty degrees Port, tell Engineering we may need the drive immediately.” the Skipper blurted out. “Whatever that is, I don’t want to tangle with it. Anybody got a range on that thing?”

“Sorry, Skipper. Our radar doesn’t see it.” LTJG Chin put forth. “It’s like it doesn’t exist, yet we can see it clearly. I’ll second a wormhole. Either that or it’s a black hole.”

“Just steer us clear, Chin.” Henry put forth. He was thinking it wasn’t a black hole because he could see stars inside the middle one-half of the anomaly. Actually, the more he looked at it, the more a vague resemblance to a star system was forming on the other side.

“Sir, we have a problem.” Chin put forth. “The vectoring thrusters are not turning us. We are being pulled into that . . . hell, that goddamned wormhole.” After a moment, she continued. “Thrusters are maxed out and our course has changed by maybe less than two degrees. Further orders, Sir? We can’t continue burning our thrusters if we plan on maneuvering once we’re at Mars, if we even make it there.”

“Well, crap on a popsicle stick!” Hank blurted out. “Consensus. We are going in, whether we want to or not?”

“Seems that way.” Frankton agreed, now that he had rejoined the bridge compliment. “Communications, get off a distress call if you can. Say it’s a wormhole.”

“Aye, Sir!” the Petty Officer Third at the comm console replied. “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! This is the Golden Gate, we are falling into a worm hole. Repeat, Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! This is the Golden Gate, we are falling into a worm hole.” After listening, the communications personnel made a comment; “Skipper, that message may not have went out.”

“Care to elaborate?” Henry asked while they event horizon grew closer.

“Skipper, after about a second, the message played back to me, loud and clear. It may not have went anywhere but to the anomaly and back.”

“Keep sending!” Frankton ordered. “Hank, what do you think? Can we make it through?” He motioned to the view screen and gave a shrug. “Nothing in the manuals about this, huh?”

“I’ll tell you what, Phil. Look at the starscape beyond. That’s a solar system ahead if I’m not wrong. If we end up in one piece on the other side, maybe we can land on a planet that’s in the “Goldilocks” zone and regroup. We may never be going home at this rate.”

“Skipper, we can’t turn this bucket in time or do a flip for retro burn.” Xi put forth. “We’re going in.”

Hank shook his head when the XO made his comment; “Well Hell! Let ‘er rip, ‘Tater chip.”

Everyone on the bridge braced when they made contact with the wormhole and for some reason, Hank was sure they scraped up against something when they entered the event horizon. The ride was shaky for a moment, then they were obviously in another galaxy altogether. The solar system ahead was foreign to all of them in that it had some smaller planets near the star and one gas giant in the sixth position of eight. The asteroid belt on this system was between the fifth and sixth planets, the fifth one being a small, almost moon-like orb.

“Well, what do we know?” he asked the navigation station.

“Sir, we might find one of the middle planets habitable, by their relationship to the star.” LTJG Chin put forth. “Sir, your orders?”

“Take us in, let’s check the third and fourth planets first. Looks like the fourth one is closest to us right now so we don’t have to burn to get there.”

Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan was sitting in the Officer’s Dining Hall of *The Dark Claw*, poking at her meal half-heartedly because she was just not that hungry. It might have been because they were stuck taking this ship home instead of the one she should have been on three weeks ago. As it were, they were fifteen rotations out by Rift Drive and she was ready to be home again. She leaned back and stretched, thinking about taking a hike to the aft gym deck and working out to relieve some stress.

“Denni? Are you feeling okay?” her Second asked as she prepared to sit down with her tray of food. “They have hamburgers up if what you have doesn’t do anything for you.” she added. The solid black Elazi femme sat down, still looking quite imposing. It was hard for her to not look that way, at some seven feet and two inches in Earth-measured height.

Denise looked up at her Adjutant and close friend. “That’s not it, Sa’Vesi. I don’t like traveling in these heavy cruisers. I get depressed and anxious to be wherever we’re going, just so I

can get off the damned ship and back onto solid ground. I have no idea how they did this all the time some twenty-nine Earth solar cycles ago, you know, when we made first formal contact with Earth.” That made the tall one smile.

“You know what, I’m glad I can speak English, Denni. You’ve been speaking in English ever since I came into the galley.” That information made her boss hang her head and shake it.

“I’m sorry, Vesi. I’ve spent too much time on Earth here lately, it seems. I have to focus sometimes to speak our native language. Actually, I learned to speak English and Elazi at the same time as a child, growing up. Sometimes, I’m not sure which one to call my native tongue.”

“Don’t be sorry, Denni. I enjoy having a semi-private conversation with you in English.” The ebony-hued one reached out and took her boss’ ruddy-toned hand in hers. “Fifteen days . . . rotations and we will be home.”

“We could have taken, I don’t know, fourteen or fifteen days of vacation, stayed at my parent’s place in the mountains above Auburn. They would have liked to have visited with us.” Ambassador Andrews’lan mused about sitting on the porch swing her father had built, enjoying the breeze and some ice-cold local craft beer. Her father would have his guitar out, playing and singing old Classic Rock ballads. She knew she would have gained ten pounds from her mother’s decadent Elazi style cooking, too.

“I guess we should have stayed.” Vesi agreed. “Then we would have went home with your parents?” Giving it some though she remembered the schedule. “We could have traveled a Tunn Jump Drive-equipped ship, right?”

“You would be correct.” the rust-colored femme offered up. “About three hours to get far enough out of the Sol system to jump, then about three more to get into our home system and dock at the personnel orbital transfer station after the jump, maybe six hours tops. Father has his *Fast Lighter* docked there so we would have went down the well with them. You do know they will beat us home, right?”

“We should have done that. Yeah, they will beat us home.” the tall one put forth.

“So, you say they have hamburgers up? Maybe cheeseburgers?”

“They were just putting them on the line when I took the last of the tacos that were out.” Sa’Vesi offered up. She took a moment to put some catsup on her tacos, then a bit of pepper sauce. Smiling, she thought of the look on that grocer’s face when she wanted to buy an entire case of Tabasco to bring back to Elazia with her. “I know what you’re going to say, Denni. Too many tacos are bad for you. I’ve heard both of your parents say that, too. Think that’s really true? I mean, when we went to Mexico on that side trip with your parents, I didn’t see a huge number of unhealthy Earthers.”

“It’s not like that, Vesi. Earthers, well, Americans, seem to eat too much fast food. Some say it’s an addiction or a disease. We eat fast food but one, Elazi fast food is healthy and two, we don’t eat out like Earthers. Elazi families generally eat at home for first and last meals.” She

poked at her meal a bit more, then looked up at her friend. “You know what, I think I will go get a hamburger after all. Cheeseburger if they have it.”

Sa’Vesi watched her boss put the contents of her tray into the recycler and return to the serving line while she nibbled on her meal. She thought about how an Earther in Roseville told her the practice of putting catsup on a taco was strictly bad form. She pointed out that he should tell that to an Elazi. The owner of that restaurant always brought a bottle of catsup to the table when an Elazi or *Fask’aal* ordered food there. Practically the whole base in Roseville, California had dined there at one time or another, it was that popular.

“This looks more like it,” the ambassador offered as she sat back down at the table. Vesi watched on with amusement while Denise put some mustard on her french fries and what might have been way too much mayonnaise on her cheeseburger.

“Having a burger with your mayo?” she had to ask, smiling at the mock look of indignation on her friend’s face.

“Nope, having fries with my mustard.” Denni sampled one of them before she continued. “I cannot fathom why somebody would willingly put catsup on fries! That is a culinary crime!”

“That is an Earth thing.” Sa’Vesi took another bite of her second taco, enjoying the flavors. “Doesn’t your father put catsup on his fries?”

“He does and so does my mother and brother. I mean, it’s not bad but mustard is better. Actually, sweet barbecue sauce is best but we ran out of that on the barbecue night, first evening out of Port Luna.”

“Those ribs were good.” the ebony-hued one offered up. “So, not wanting to change the subject but what are we to do about the Sarlii? They want a dedicated dock on Luna. I know it’s not a deal breaker but how do we respond? Just let them keep asking?”

Denise ran a fry through some of the mustard and ate it, thinking about what she wanted to say. “I think the Sarlii want a dock and warehouse to use so they can have ready store of what they import nearby. Did you see the plans for the proposed dock? You could fit my parent’s entire orchard inside. That’s not a dedicated port, that’s a major warehouse complex. The Comeri have a warehouse facility on Luna but you know what, they paid to have it built. It’s not that big, either. A full two-thirds smaller than the proposed Sarlii complex.”

“Plan of attack?” Vesi questioned.

“At the next scheduled meeting, we tell them they can have it if they pay for it. The *Fask’aal* are already planning a build and Comeria paid for theirs. We point out to them, this is procedure. Trust me, the Sarlii have the funds to build this. Did a bit of digging around on the subject.”

“That Sarlii male, the adjunct? The one you got drunk?” her Second questioned. They had taken two Sarlii adjuncts out to a bar one night in Sacramento, just to hear a band that specialized in Fifties’ era country music.

“Yes, Darim Freetlar, the shorter one. I got him loaded up on sour mash whiskey so he was just like a bit of branch water in a glass of some fine single malt whiskey; he opened right up for me. He told me they have a huge budget for trading and that included building a dock and a warehouse.”

“You are a horrible person for doing that!” Sa’Vesi said with a huge smile. She had sat in the corner of that country music bar with her date and watched Denni get that poor soul hammered. She had to hold him up to talk with him, he was that wasted.

“I felt bad, Vesi. You know, he didn’t seem that hung over the next day.”

“You didn’t see him hurling in the planter outside the conference room, then.”

“I missed that. I guess he was that hung over.” Denise was intent on expanding on that comment when the ship rang like a bell and everyone in the galley was thrown out of their seats. If she didn’t know better, the *Dark Claw* had collided with something substantial, at least sturdy enough to blunt their momentum. Before she could shout an order to Sa’Vesi concerning the craft’s status, they heard ship-wide warning alarms and a voice shouting orders.

“All personnel to their stations! All frames forward of frame forty-one need vacuum suits! I repeat, All personnel to their stations! All frames forward of frame forty-one need vacuum suits!” At that point in time, the voice began looping to allow whoever had made that command to turn to other needs.

“Denni, we need to go! Now!” the tall one ordered as she roughly brought her superior to her feet by one arm. They went to the passageway door and with Vesi in front, they began to literally force their way through the throng of sailors that were headed to their stations. They were joined shortly by Trooper Grade Seven Marlett Vennet’lan, Denni’s bodyguard when they were off the ship.

“Vesi, after me!” he shouted, turning toward their cabins and continuing their progress. He had his arms up in front of his face, elbows tucked in. He was hugging the bulkheads, creating enough space for their boss to move with them, Marlett leading the way and Sa’Vesi bringing up the rear.

Once they had made it to the suites assigned to the ambassador and her people, both Sa’Vesi and Marlett began to undress Denise, getting her stripped to her bare fur in just moments. Vesi started helping Denni into the pressure undersuit while Marlett readied the first sections of armor that would go on her. This was the first time they had ever had to do this armor dance under duress and it was nothing like they had practiced. Nothing at all.

“Dammit! I forgot my socks!” the rust-colored femme blurted out, the two females trying to work her feet down into the legs and attached booties the hard way. This was beginning to get frustrating to them as her toe claws were snagging on the fleece-like liner in the undersuit.

“Let me,” Marlett put forth, placing his boss on the settee rather roughly and getting one undersuit leg in his hands. “Point your toes for me,” he asked as he pulled the suit leg out straight

with one hand and slipped it right up her leg with the other. In just a few moments later, they were standing again, getting her tail down into its sheath as they pulled the suit up her body.

“I can’t imagine doing this with an Earth-design space suit. I would die before I got it on fully.” Denise muttered while they got her hands down into the sleeves and through the wrist seals. Once her head was through the neck seal and the zipper closed, Marlett and Vesi made haste to get the hard armor on her. Thankfully, her steel-titanium-cobalt alloy carapace was almost new so it went together quickly and more importantly, with no fitment issues.

She waited to put on her bubble helmet while she had them put her environmental pack on. Once it was engaged and showing blue, she put her helmet on and tested the suit for leaks. Standard operating procedures demanded that she kneel down and crouch forward, stand up and arch forward, arch back and put her hands over her head to look and listen for leaks. All was good so she removed the helmet for the moment to conserve oxygen.

Marlett had stepped into the next compartment for his armor while Sa’Vesi put hers on in the main room. Actually, putting her powered armor on was more like building a machine around her. Her armor was an older design, a more robustly designed powered armor, engineered for warfare in the extreme. It would take a small missile at close range to actually stop her once inside.

She stripped down and shimmied her way down into the legs and lower torso, tucking her tail into the right leg area. Once she turned on the power to the suit, she could use the suit itself to bring the torso up. She put her arms down into the armor and shrugged her way into the attached helmet, having to follow the pace of the torso rising up. Eventually, the system closed up the back of the powered armor, giving her blue indications on the integral HUD in the helmet.

“Comm check, can you hear me?” she asked, sounding tinny and far away in the suit speakers.

“I hear you, Vesi. Can you hear me?”

“I hear you, Denni. Hey Marlett, suited up yet?” she spoke loudly, seeing if he could hear her at all. His comm module had been wonky for a while now and the techs at Outpost Roseville hadn’t been able to figure it out for him. They had swapped out a few boards but they weren’t sure the problem was taken care of.

“I’m ready.” he replied as he came into the room. His powered armor matched Vesi’s, the only way to tell them apart when the polarizing face screens were activated were their rank and name tags. The ambassador took her helmet and put it on, setting the environmental temp to her liking. That was about the time she received a communication marked for the three of them.

“Ambassador, Marlett, Sa’Vesi, this is Temmet. I need all of you to meet me at the hatchway to the bridge, the Vaar side airlock.”

She looked up at her protection, all eight and one-half feet and nine hundred pounds worth of fighting bad-assery per soldier. “Well, you heard Tem. Lead on, I’ll follow.”

“No, Mere.” Marlett replied, firmly. “I’ll lead, Sa’Vesi will bring up the rear. You stay between us. Also, get your rifle and arm it, please. You’re not going unarmed. We don’t know whether or not we are being boarded.”

“Okay, Marlett.” she agreed, reluctantly taking her rail rifle out of its locker. She removed four extra one-hundred round magazines and stuck them to her suit with the magnets attached to the magazines, slammed a fifth one home and charged the breech. Once it was powered, her rifle showed good for eight hundred rounds of power available, more than she needed at the moment. “I hope like hell I don’t need this.” she commented sourly. She knew just how much damage the thumb-sized tubular rounds would do to a living body. It made perfect holes through living flesh, holes that bled out very quickly.

They started their way forward, not having nearly the issues they had earlier. Everyone seemed to have no problems with giving Marlett a wide berth, allowing them to pass freely with no obstructions. Sailors were even turning around and going to cross junctions to give them free movement through the ship.

Several times they had to stop and work an airlock that had closed by design, overriding the system with her ambassadorial codes because there was atmosphere present on the other side of the door. It took them about five *Elazi Munar*, or minutes to make it to the location in question once they could move about freely. Waiting for them in his armor was the XO of the ship, Division Commander Temmet Hone’lan.

“Denise, um, I’m sorry, Ambassador, we have issues,” he began, “We hit something, I think it was the event horizon for a wormhole. I have a huge tear in the ship, right through the bridge. Must of caught it on the Combat Bridge superstructure at frame forty-one. I have damage control bringing up material and personnel to patch us up temporarily but the reality is this; we have to land and fix this mess on dirt. It’s bad, so bad I would be afraid of firing up the rift drives for fear of tearing the ship apart.”

“What about landing in this condition?” The ambassador knew a compromised ship would be tough to set down, considering this ship was somewhere around one and a quarter kilometers long. At best, it was dangerous to attempt such a maneuver.

“Only the front two landing legs would be an issue under frame twenty-eight. Next ones are under frame seventy.” Tem offered. “If we land it slowly, we can pull it off. We will use a significant amount of reaction material for the maneuver but I have my orders to get you back to Elazia in one piece and still breathing. Wing Commander Andrews’lan said he would personally cut my balls off and feed them to me with chutney sauce if I failed that small duty.”

“You actually listened to my father?” she blurted out, trying to keep a straight face. “Tem, when we were an item, you never listened to him. Why do it now? I mean, it’s past us ever being joined. Friends, yes but you and I can’t live together. I think we agreed on that.”

“Yes, we agreed on that.” He turned to check a screen, then looked back at the one that could have been his *One Love*. “Environmental says we have four major compromised compartments. The Bridge, the Combat Bridge, Weapons Control and Communications. Frames thirty-eight through forty-one and the combat bridge have no atmo at the moment.”

“Where’s the Captain?” Denise asked.

“She just checked in from an escape pod off the bridge. Navigator Blane’lan is with her, doing first aid on her. She thinks they were the only ones on the bridge at the time of the incident.”

“Um, so they’re stuck in that pod for now?”

“Until I can get an airlock erected and pass them some suits, yeah. Sa’Vesi, Marlett, care to help me rescue the captain and our navigator?”

“We can do that.” the male trooper agreed. He stepped into the airlock and went through the procedures of evacuating the air before he stepped onto the bridge, and Sub-Commander Junior Grade Kevvit’lan took her turn next. Denise and Temmet stepped into the airlock for their turn but once the outer door was closed, he put his hand over the console for the locks while he motioned for her to kill her comm unit.

Putting his helmet against hers, he said what he wanted to say in private. “Denni, I know we can’t be lovers, we’re too much alike. However, I made a promise to your father and I will keep it. What I need from you is some help keeping order on this ship. That reasoning is because the captain won’t say it but she’s injured. Blane’lan says she’s in a bad shape. I need you to be acting XO while I’m the acting Skipper. Please?”

“I can do that, as long as you realize I’m probably not going to be sleeping with you.”

“Fair enough. Friends?”

“Friends.” Denni agreed. Temmet moved his hand so the Ambassador cycled the airlock for them, allowing them onto the compromised bridge. A portable airlock was already being erected by the two in heavy armor so the two former lovers examined the damage. Just ahead of frame forty-one, the ship was cracked open to the stars for over two arm-spans length that they could see. The split wasn’t wide, less than a writing stylus width but it was damage they couldn’t risk firing up the drives over. On the one remaining display still functioning was a forward view of their position, showing a solar system that they were headed into on a low incline.

“Earthers would say we would be looking for a planet in the ‘Goldilocks’ zone.” she commented. Denise thought about that Earth children’s book she had read as a small child. “Not too hot, not too cold, just right.”

“You know, we might be in luck.” Tem put forth as he performed a full spectrum scan. He did a second long range scan of the system, looking for outward signs of life. “Fourth planet out. Seems like I have some very low frequency radio signals coming from it. It’s an old Earth convention, I think. Seems to be a broadcast of some kind on twenty-two hundred meters, amplitude modulated. This sounds like it’s in English so you’ll have to tell me what it says. Let me put it on our channel.”

Tem fiddled with the settings until it seemed clear enough to understand. “__hears this, we are the Golden Gate Mars Colony Ship from Earth. We think we have went through a wormhole.

Do you copy? We are going to investigate the fourth planet. If anybody hears this__” The signal continued to loop, getting clearer as they continued on toward the system.

“Well? What are they saying?” He was anxious to hear her response, since they really needed to land this busted bucket and repair it.

She smiled at him. “They said, fourth planet might be the Goldilocks Zone.”