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## “Rift”

by Kellan Meigh

### Chapter Four

#### “Down The Gravity Well”

Master Chief Valdez was walking through the ranks of the people under his command, making sure everyone was wearing their new lightweight hard armor correctly. The Skipper wanted everyone in armor set up for vacuum incursion or a standard vacuum suit, just in case *The Dark Claw* had a catastrophic hull failure during atmospheric insertion. The armorer named Gil had equipped them last evening so they had taken the suits off to get some sleep. That required them to dress in them again this morning, following Na'Risa's orders.

“Okay, everyone is looking good, I guess. Gil set our environmental panel to English for us so we all need to put on our lids and check for integrity,” he put forth.

“Leo, I put the back of the helmet in its groove first?” Gina asked. She was trying to set hers in place like they had done last night.

“No, front first, then just push down. It will pop into place and you will hear the two latches on the sides click.” he corrected.

“Okay, Chief. Think I have it now.” she responded. They were wearing their armor ‘Comeristyle’ with headsets that were equipped with a boom microphone on them. PO1 Anderson popped her bubble, adjusted her headset and put the helmet back on again. “I heard these suits can stop up to a seven point six two round without leaving a mark on them.”

“Gil said they would stop a fifty bee-em-gee and just leave a small mark. I hope we get to keep these suits.” PO2 Haskell commented. “Okay, I set my suit temp at sixty-eight. Gil suggested that as a start. I have three blue lights across the top of the display. Leo, is that what we're supposed to see?”

“Three blues, people. Everyone have three blues? Raise your hand.” Chief Valdez stated. Looking around, he could see they were all good to go. “Okay, up to the observation deck.”

Following directions from Ronmet, they made their way to the nearest major ladderway in the ship. They were on deck twelve so it was bit of work to get up to deck two using the ladderways. According to Sa'Vesi, the ladderways were kept at a lower gravity, just so moving around in twelve pounds of armor was easier. They went forward to the correct frame and found Ronmet waiting for them.

“We set up an area for all of you.” he offered, guiding them up the last ladderway to the observation deck. As they arrived, the other personnel not directly needed for this landing were already there, guiding them to an area that was roped off.

“If all of you will go to ships’ channel one, you can listen in to the bridge. I apologize if most of what’s said on the bridge will be in Elazi.” Ronmet told them. “Press the aux channel, then talk-around five so you can have personal conversation without breaking in on the bridge. We have broadcast to the ship to let your group have talk-around five to yourselves.” He checked their settings, making sure they were on the right channels.

“Ronmet, why are we orbiting sideways like this?” Gina asked, since she could see the planet below clearly, off to the side. Other than the continents being different, Hasmlan looked quite a bit like Earth. She kept thinking about the prospects of putting boots to dirt and having full gravity again.

“We haven’t made our roll, Regina.” he replied. Looking at the crono on his suit, he continued. “About five Earth minutes to roll and insertion.”

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Denise walked onto the bridge wearing her regular light full armor set up for vacuum incursion with Tem right behind her, similarly clad. She was still smiling from their extra activities last night and this morning, activities that almost left them late for the landing. She hoped nobody noticed her glowing mood. The Skipper was sitting in an observer’s seat, wearing armor and already strapped in.

“Skipper! Um, are you good to be out of bed for this?” she questioned. Na’Risa had that look on her face that showed she was under the influence of heavy pain killers.

“Denni, no. I’m not up for this.” she agreed. “They took off the heavy cast and put one of those battlefield temporary casts in its place so I could get into my armor. It’s not doing a good job of fixing the bones in place, I have to say.”

“Want me to tape your arm to your body?” the ambassador asked.

“If you would, please. I’m still hurting, despite the medications.”

Denise located a roll of securing tape, the kind used to hold things in place like panels and consoles or maybe personnel when they’re jarred loose during battle. On Earth, the people in the theater profession called it “Gee-toms,” or Gaffers Tape On Major Steroids and they would pay good money for it when it was made available. The ambassador removed her gloves and began to prepare the first strip of tape for application. “Skipper, put your arm across your chest, please?” She helped with the placement, then added that first strip. Several more strips were added, fixturing Na’Risa’s arm in a better position.

“Tape my hand down, please?” the Commander requested, tentatively moving it to find that sweet spot with the least amount of pain. “Right there. That will work.”

“Is that better?” Denni asked as she smoothed down her handiwork.

“That’s good. Doctor Kammen’lan can get me out of this tin can after we’re on dirt and first contacts are over.” she explained. “Actually, I’m not joined to this light suit. He can cut this fracking thing off me for all I care.”

“That’s what I was going to suggest, Skipper.” the ruddy-toned ambassador agreed. “Well, looks like we’re ready, Mere. Give the command.”

“If you help me with my helmet, we can get going.”

“I thought you might need help.” Denni assisted the Skipper with her bubble lid, getting her ready to do her part this morning.

Na’Risa synced her comm unit to the ship and pressed the ‘All Call’ button on her chair arm, sending her voice ship-wide. “All hands aboard *The Dark Claw*, this is the Skipper. Brace for roll and insertion on my mark . . . Now.”

“You heard the Skipper, roll and insertion.” Tem commanded the navigator, bringing up a mirror of the nav display on his console so he could follow along. He clipped his flimsy to a corner, keeping it in his line of sight. “We’re going down to ten *Hazecan* and five hundred *Hazecan* per *Heth*, best angles and speed reduction, Navigator.”

“We’re in atmo, hull temp rising, one thousand Decit and climbing,” Denni stated from the XO’s seat, watching the Repulsors and Thrusters carefully. She already had a full ventral thrust command entered, just in case things went sideways. One double tap on that virtual button would bring full repulsors and ventral thrusters on line, saving the ship from a crash. “Fifteen, twelve, level us out at ten, navigator.” she added, looking at the altitude displayed on her console.

“Skipper, prescribed retro burn in progress.” the gray male at the nav console offered up, double checking the displays. “All output nominal blue. Hull temp within tolerance at twenty-seven hundred Decit.”

Denise went over to talk-around five so she could communicate with the Golden Gate crew. “If you all look forward, you can see the atmospheric compressional heat from hitting atmo at a little over twenty-two times sonic. That’s roughly seventeen thousand, five hundred miles per hour.”

“Ambassador, hell of a show up here.” Leo replied. “That is a lot of heat being created.”

Denni switched to another channel and made a broadcast. “Golden Gate Community, this is *The Dark Claw*. We are performing atmo insertion. Do you copy?”

“Dark Claw, we see your atmospheric insertion big time.” the male voice replied. “Things okay up there?”

“We’re good, Golden Gate. The heat show is SOP for a Deltrey Class Heavy Cruiser. Unless we have troubles, we’re on dirt next time around.” the ambassador offered up. “Make sure nobody is under the ship when we set down or the repulsors will crush them like a bug.”

“Copy Dark Claw, we are all at the community, watching the show. We should still have some buttered popcorn for you when you get here.”

“Copy Golden Gate.” she switched to talk-around five, then offered up something. “Chief Valdez, got anything to say to the ground?”

“Yeah, wish they were here to see the fireworks, Ambassador. Hell of a show from the observation deck. We’re shedding a butt-load of heat from atmospheric compression, so much that I can’t see the bow for the heat right now.”

“I heard that, Leo. I wish I were there, too.” Colonel MacLachlan offered up. “See you in ninety minutes or so.”

“We will be down on the next orbit, Colonel. See you!”

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Teval looked up and followed the white track as it drew a bright line across the Northern sky. They had heard a loud rumble earlier and this proved what they had heard was not a meteorite coming in. This indication, he knew, was another ship of some sort. He rubbed at one of his rounded ears, thinking this would not be a good thing. He was joined by Gemma, the one that was old and wise beyond the others in their community.

“Another one,” he commented, shielding his eyes to follow the craft as it crossed the sky. “Should we tell Veran? I am sure he will want to know. It has been a long time now, I was just a young one when the Coomeriani landed. This may be more Coomeriani.”

“Yes, Teval. Please tell Veran. I am sure he will want to travel to the Hoomania settlement again. They have to understand, this is our world, not theirs. We should set another beacon in the outer reaches, proclaiming such.” The graying female Hasmali turned to look at the younger male. “I wish you to be in the group. Go there. Find out who they are. Warn them to leave, now.”

“I will do so, Gemma.” Teval agreed. “I will travel this time. I will tell Veran and Farla. We will take our soldiers and show them we are not weak. You are right; this is our planet.”

Gemma turned and headed back to her home, shaking her head. Too many others had landed, bringing their ideas and devices. It had only polluted the Hasmali, not improved them. She had observed the last two hundred sets of seasons and the changes the others brought. First the Bickillamma, then the Hoomania, and lastly the Coomeriani. There were the others before them, the ones most often referred to as the Zeeanians but they had left when they had been warned to leave. They had also been warned never to return. The ones on the planet now, they had no way to leave so they were just unwanted guests. Maybe this new ship would take them all and leave. Take with them the pollution that damaged the Hasmali way of life.

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“Landing site on the forward viewscreen.” the navigator offered up, following his script to land *The Dark Claw*. They were on ninety percent repulsors and some small amount of retro-

thrusters keeping the ship from overshooting the dry lake bed. “Skipper, we are twenty *Hazecan* from our designated point. I have the beacon directly in front of us.”

“Looking very good,” Temmet replied, checking his screens too. “Drop us to five hundred *Catre*.”

Aye, Skipper. Five hundred *Catre*. Looks like they marked a centerline for us. Shall I stay on it?”

“Stay on the centerline, navigator.”

“Skipper, we’re two *Hazecan* out, reducing speed, speed and altitude adjustments in progress, all forward motion has ceased. Sink rate good, almost there, now we’re down on dirt.” the gray male stated as the ship settled onto its twenty-four landing legs. “All stop, Saar. We’re dirtside.”

Na’Risa smiled and punched the button on her chair for an all-ship announcement. “All personnel, welcome to Hasmalan. Please prepare the ship for ground-based operations.” The commander then turned to Denise to make a request. “Denni, unbuckle me, please? You and Temmet are with me. Have the Golden Gate crew meet us in bay three lower Vaar side.”

The ambassador unbuckled her skipper and helped her to stand, making sure she had her legs under her before she let go of her.

“Na’Risa, how are you feeling? Do I need a med tech to meet us in the bay?” she questioned.

“Yes, that would be a good idea. I think I need some more meds before we go meet the Golden Gate contingency.”

The trio began to leave the bridge only to be met by Sa’Vesi and Marlett. Their appearance startled the bridge command crew for a moment, until they realized just who it was that were wearing the new suits of powered armor.

“You look good in an Eighty.” Risa offered up to Vesi. “It is good somebody is making use of them. And you, Marlett. You chose an Eighty, too?”

“It is a mix and match, Skipper.” he replied. “It’s a twenty-three extra-long upper and a twenty-four extra-long lower with a twenty-one helmet. Doesn’t look too feminine to me and damn, it moves so smoothly.”

“You look good in it. Nothing feminine about it at all. Especially those impact plates. Are they ablative?” Risa asked as she tapped Sa’Vesi’s chest plating with her good hand.

“Standard ships ablative plating. Gil and his shop made them.” the Sub-Commander replied.

“Do not tell everyone, Gil will be swamped with work. Both of you will be in our delegation to meet the locals.”

“Yes, Mere.” Vesi stated. “Bay three lower Vaar side? Will we be using a shuttle?”

“Yes, Vesi. Have a medium personnel shuttle ready. One that holds twenty personnel.”

“I’m on it.” the tall ebony femme replied. She waited until the others were out of hearing range before turning to face Marlett. “See? That suit looks good on you and it’s not feminine at all. It says ‘Fighting Badass’ just like mine.”

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Colonel MacLachlan looked at the ship that had landed on a viewscreen at maximum resolution, the craft being too preposterously big to have landed at all. Best guess would be at least a kilometer long and well, he wasn’t sure how tall it was. The odd thing was, it looked quite like a World War Two American submarine in profile, all except the huge thrust cones at the aft end of the ship. This thing was bristling with gun emplacements, what might be torpedo tubes and a huge ventral mounted rail gun that probably packed a big punch.

Getting a better sense of size, a very small door opened on the starboard side and a ramp extended out quite a ways to touch ground. That’s when he noticed the personnel that looked like ants scurrying around. Maybe it was bigger than a kilometer long, now that he had thought about it. After a few moments, a small ship came out of that door and made its way up to the top of the hull, just in front of the superstructure. He could barely make out three crewmen hopping out of that small craft and beginning what must be an inspection right in front of the squat little conning tower.

“What do you see?” Jenna asked as she joined them, finding a comfortable spot to lean against with her cane.

“Big-ass ship is what I see.” he replied, shaking his head. “Here, take a look.” he offered, swiveling the screen so she could see it.

Commander D’mol took a peek, nodding her head. “That is a Bil design, a Deltrey class heavy cruiser. Heavy plating all over that is ablative. Not much short of a beam ship or a barrage of nuke-tipped torpedoes could damage it much.”

“How about that rail gun, if that’s what it is?”

“Colonel, that rail gun tosses roughly one hundred pound Marsten metal rounds at some percent of C. Enough Delta-V that it can punch through a small satellite moon. I’ve observed one of those make a hole through a Tunn mega-destroyer from stem to stern. Literally split it in half lengthwise. That is a major flagship, sister ship to the Korra’kiventi, or in English, The Dark Fang.”

“You seem to know those ships pretty well, Commander.” Hank offered up.

“I was the XO on The Korra’kiventi for a few years on a special program. Great ship, actually sort of a luxury war ship that everyone wanted a posting on. I would bet *The Dark Claw* doesn’t have that small promenade the Korra’kiventi has. It was expensive to build and maintain.”



“Promenade? Care to explain that?”

“Hank, they put what you would call a shopping mall in the center of the ship, about two decks tall if I remember correctly, it’s been a while. Food, clothing, bars, brothels for both sexes. You have to see it to understand.”

“Jenna, seems like company is coming.” They looked up to see a small shuttle headed toward the community, some kind of ship about the size of a small bus. It landed just beyond the gates and a door opened up in the side. That’s when the personnel began to disembark.

Eleven people in full coverage light armor exited the craft, all carrying olive drab duffel bags over their shoulders that might have been American military issue. They were followed by three more figures in that same type of armor and one of them had a green cape attached to their shoulders. Finally two more very tall figures exited the ship in some serious-looking battle armor that must have been powered. The one with the cape caught up to the one in front and gave that one what seemed like a playful nudge as they were finally within speaking range. That’s when they both reached up and removed their helmets.

“Hey Colonel! Look what followed me home! Can I keep her?” Leo said with a smile, pointing at Denni. Jenna smiled widely and Henry’s jaw fell. They stopped face to face and Denise put out her hand in greeting.

“Hello, I’m Ambassador Sa’Krista Denise Andrews’lan from Elazia. We brought your crew down with us just like you asked us to.”

“I’m Colonel Henry MacLachlan, Golden Gate Community Commander. Welcome and I must say, you speak impeccable English.” He shook her hand and turned to the security officer. “This is Commander Jenna D’mol, Community Security.”

“Nice to meet you, Commander.” Denni offered as she shook her hand.

“Govant-ah. Hemish ta venato gom drattin Golden Gate.” Jenna replied.

“Va Gesh, Seventri D’mol.” Denise replied. “You speak Elazi like a native.”

“I speak it but with a Southern Aarl accent. That language learning program, you know.” she offered up.

“Colonel, Commander, this is our ships’ Skipper, Wing Commander Na’Risa Tavvet’lan and our Executive Officer, Division Commander Temmet Hone’lan.” the ambassador offered up.

“Govant-esh, Seventri.” Risa greeted Jenna, shaking hands with her good hand.

“Govant-esh Seventri D’mol.” Temmet replied with a military bow.

“Colonel McLachlan, It good to finally meet.” Na’Risa offered as she shook hands with him. “Please excuse poor English. XO and I would like to meet, then I need return to ship. Must get ready for ground operations.”

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Temmet and Denise sat with Hank and Jenna in their Command office, it was just the four of them now that the Skipper had went back to the ship. The Colonel poured them some locally distilled whiskey and offered some nuts that were native to the planet.

“Ambassador, you said you were half human. How does that work?” Hank asked.

“Call me Denise, please. My mother is Elazi and my Human father was born in Roseville. California. Our genes are quite compatible, we discovered quite by accident. I was the first mixed Elazi-Human child born, as far as we know. There are more, now that we have normalized trade with Earth.”

“You know Denise, your last name. It’s kind of Earth-like.” he offered up. That comment made her smile.

“It *is* from Earth. We say Andrews’lan, which is House of Andrews. You might hear ‘van’ as a modifier, with is home of that name. There is also ‘san’ which is land of that name. My father’s name was Jeffrey Alan Andrews before he became part of our political house. After he joined House Tal-Hassanai and was joined, um, married to my mother, he was then known as Jeffrey Alan Sakaar, House of Andrews, or Andrews’lan.”

“So, your Commander Tavvet’lan, she seemed like she was hurting.” Jenna put forth.

“She doesn’t hide it well,” Temmet agreed. “She was thrown from her command chair, all the way to the forward screens when we hit the worm hole event horizon. She has the lingering effect of a concussion, you probably noticed her swollen eye and she has a broken arm. That’s why it was taped to her armor. She also has her jaws wired shut due to a broken jaw.”

That made the Comeri female blanch. “That is a long way to fly across the bridge.”

“She hit her console, the nav console, the navigator himself followed by breaking the left and center screens with her head and arm.” Tem explained in English, glad he had taken the suggestion by Denni to try the learning program.

“Temmet, you speak English very well. Is there a program where my people can learn to speak Elazi?” Henry asked.

“We have a learning system onboard that we can loan you. You listen to it while you sleep.” he conveyed. “It’s very effective and the only real downside is you’ll learn Elazi with a Southern Aarl accent.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Hank questioned. Denni smiled as she answered that question.



“No, you won’t be made fun of, if that’s what you were getting at. Being around us, you’ll lose the accent, just like my father lost his accent after a few years. When I was little, I don’t remember him sounding like a Southerner.”

Jenna took a sip of her liquor and asked a question. “Temmet, how much lifting capacity do you have available for use on the ground?”

“I have four rescue platforms, a medium lifter and a Simmon High-Gain Maxi-lifter that I can assemble.” he put forth. “Need something moved?”

She nodded in reply. “We have two good reactors still at the crash site of the Killark Feddri. Each one puts out enough electricity to power a small city and I can’t tell you how much we would like to have them here. We’re running on batteries charged by solar right now.”

“I think we can do that. The High-Gain Maxi can lift a Bil-manufactured Avsamaal class Corvette and take it into orbit.”

“The crash site is about thirty *Hazecan* West of here.” Jenna explained. “When you have time, we can put forth a retrieval detail. My people that survived the fight in escape pods and those that lived through the crash tried to move the reactors but we’re just unable to bring them up and out of the hull. Too heavy for our limited lifting capability.”

“There’s something I forgot to bring up with your Commander.” The Colonel stated. “We have neighbors. There is a very old settlement of Bil-Cmelas to our East about thirty or so clicks and the natives, the Hasmali live about four days South-west of here by their electric vehicles. About two hundred or so kilometers of rough terrain between us. We offered to cut a smooth road but they turned us down.”

Jenna decided to clarify the situation. “The Hasmali look like they might actually be related to the Sarlii. Hank says his first impression was ‘Yogi Bear’ or something like that. Very Ursine in nature, now that I’ve been through some Earth knowledge databases. Knowing them, they will be here in a few days to meet their new neighbors.”

“So, no Sarlii dirtside?” Temmet asked. “We found two beacons that seem to be Sarlii in origin besides yours.”

“One beacon is Sarlii for sure. That one is from the ship we hit with a torpedo right in the rift drive. They were going to jump while still orbiting the planet’s gravity well which is suicidal at best. That ship is the source of the ring with just a bit of our ship mixed in, too. Their ship, when we hit it did that predictable time dilation and stretch right before it came apart in partial warp while circling the planet, trapped by a gravity well that wouldn’t let that destroyed ship spin out into space.” Jenna took a sip of her drink before she continued.

“The second Sarlii ship got lucky and blew the last two hundred *Catre* of hull away from the Killark Feddri with their main rail gun, taking with it all of our drive components. We were going down so on the next rotation just as we’re hitting atmo, we see they’re trying to drop into the rift. They engaged, just as one of our previously launched torpedoes hit them square in the rift drive.

Instead of that flash when a ship slips into the rift, there was a huge explosion instead. Probably scattered their ship all through subspace.

“For you to understand the situation, those Sarlii ships were crewed by a rogue faction, the Decant-Em-Vah that had performed a coup on their military. The government of Sarl asked for assistance so naturally, by treaty we responded. Lucky me, found those two Destroyers waiting for me when I came out of subspace. They were following me very closely while trying to shoot me down with their Point Defense Cannons and rail guns so when the wormhole opened up, we all went through together.”

“The second beacon? The one that’s not on any common frequency and spewing garbled speech? Is that from the second ship?” Denni asked.

“That beacon was there when we arrived through that wormhole on the other side of the system. We have no idea who set that beacon and we’ve never been in a good position to go look at it or retrieve it for repair.”

“What’s the duration on that wormhole you came through?” Temmet asked. It might prove to be a way home for them.

“The period is just a bit over ninety-seven Hasmali years. It just cycled twenty-one years back when we came through so that’s out for us.” Jenna put forth. “By the way, that’s the wormhole the Bil came through and the other end of it is on the edge of the Sarlii solar system. I will imagine they will be here tomorrow in the afternoon to greet you. They are punctual.”

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Back onboard ship, Tem and Denni were getting undressed and they were certainly glad to be out of their light armor for now. They had been discussing ship business matters while they were in transit, so they were still figuring things out as they undressed.

“Denni, we will be setting up some of those snap-together buildings for the ground crews to use.” he put forth as he unzipped her pressure undersuit for her. “We could do a two building set pushed together, making you an office for your use during the day. An outer area for Sa’Vesi and a planetary representative plus an inner office for you to conduct meetings.”

“That would be nice,” she agreed, helping Tem to unzip his undersuit. “Tem, are you going to get a new powered armor? I talked with specialist Gil Deen’lan and he says there are Eighties that will fit you, based on your old Fifty-four armor size. There are a few Nineties, too.” He started to say something so she interrupted him by putting her hand over his mouth. “There is nothing feminine about the Eighties or the older Sixty-ones. That is an old misconception. Sixty-ones and later on, the Eighties were made for shipboard use by femmes and males that didn’t want a Twenty-three or a Fifty-four to clomp around in. They were popular enough that Drexel started making them in all the sizes. You know, *Lestim* tried to buy Drexel Industries at one time because of the Eighties.”

“You would want me to get a new Eighty or a Ninety?” he questioned.

“Gillat said he could trim it out in Command Black, polish some parts as an accent and put hot rod flames on it, like an Earth-style hot rod. That is, if the skipper would allow that.”

“I guess I could see that.” he mused. “Black and flames. I see that all the time in those Earth hot rod magazines I read in our digital library.”

“Tomorrow’s agenda?” she questioned as she powered up her tablet and slaved hers to his display.

“First meal obviously, then set up a recon crew to go look at those reactors. You know, see what we need. Master Chief Valdez and Petty Officer First Anderson say they can help with that and there’s a Comeri Spec Nine systems tech Devvin D’keechlar that can go with his assistant, a Mavver K’vennetjan. Glad I wrote that name down. The Maxi should be able to lift those reactors.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, the Navy Sea Bees are going to cut a pad for our temporary buildings. You saw the equipment they have already moved over by us. They said they would wait until they saw movement to come over and start making noise.”

“Hull repairs?” she asked as she went through his checklist with him.

“They’re supposed to start removal of the jacking screws and the damaged plating at first light. Thankfully, this cabin has soundproofing so we probably won’t hear any of that.”

“Transportation. What are we doing about that?”

Tem smiled at who was his former and now possibly future joined *One Love*. “We’re going to deploy everything. Thirty-seven months is a long time dirtside. Just as well make it easy on ourselves.”

She scanned the rest of the lines. “Looks like Day Watch, Sub-Commander Kett’van has the rest of the items in his queue. Hmm, says here the *Auto-Targ* in the forward enlisted galley is broken. How do you break an ice cream dispenser? Oh well, not our problem just yet. I don’t know about you but I’m ready for a shower.”

Temmet watched his *One Love* padding off to the bathroom in his suite, enjoying the sway of her hips, the gentle side to side swishing of her tail. He realized, had he made a better effort the last time, they wouldn’t have been apart for so long. He had missed her promotions to Commander and Flank Commander along with her indoctrination into the Diplomatic Corps. He knew he should have been there and he had failed her the last time. Making a vow to himself and *Od’tra the Wise*, he would not fail her again.

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Denise stepped under the shower head and set it for full flow, allowing the warm water to saturate her fur. This felt so good, to get the day’s grime off of her. She squirted some of her gel

soap on a soft brush and began to work on her arms and shoulders to get them clean. Making her way up to her neck, that part of her anatomy always seemed to get irritated by the neck seal of the pressure undersuit. Maybe she needed to shave that fur down with a number two guide. The ruddy femme spotted Temmet coming her way so she stepped away from the shower door, waiting patiently for him to open it so she could spring her deception.

“Kitten, when you’re done in . . .” she held the door open, keeping him from closing it and pulled him into the shower with her before allowing it to close behind him.

“You need to wash my back.” she stated firmly as she handed him her brush and soap before turning her posterior to him.

“Um, I do?” he replied, looking at the items she had thrust into his hands.

“My back brush is in my shower, which I am not in at the moment. Seems since there was no back brush available, a back brusher would have to substitute.”

“I’m your back brusher now?” Tem questioned with a smile. He started working on her pelt, being careful not to scrub too hard. “So, I need to get you a back brush for this shower, then?”

“You need to figure how to create us a bigger suite. One for us and my aides, Sa’Vesi and Marlett. They might be good with only one bedroom, if you ask them.” she reached out and took up Tem’s brush, lathered it and started in on her pelt again. “The Skipper suggested it to me earlier. She sees no problems and she asked me to field promote Marlett to Commander, Weapons Spec Three.”

“I can see what billeting can offer us.” he offered up. “Weapons Spec Three? Wow, that’s an odd rating you don’t see much of. I could see Commander, Tech Three. It will give him more opportunities down the line. You know, I think you should promote him to Tech Five as a field promotion. That would give him more options down the line for further promotion.”

Denni turned around to face Tem. “I’ll talk to the Skipper about that. You’re probably right, Tech Five would be a better fit with his duties. And, I’m good with us becoming a house again if you are. We can do it this time.”

“I’m good with our commitments, too. I will not fail you this time.” He leaned down and kissed her, first softly, then with fire and conviction in his heart. When they parted lips, she looked up at him with half lidded eyes and spoke very softly in a breathy bedroom voice;

“You haven’t finished scrubbing my back yet, Mister.”

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Marlett took off his robe and sat down on the edge of the bed, watching Sa’Vesi finish drying off in the booth. Earlier, they had set some ground rules with one another after finding out Denni had put in papers to promote him to Commander, Tech Five. This cleared their way to being a joined couple at some point in time.

“I’m dried off.” she offered as she stepped from the full body drying booth. “I guess it’s my choice what we do this time?”

“It’s always your choice.” he agreed, getting up and walking over to her. He held her gently and kissed her, enjoying the pleasure of her warm body against his. He took the item from the dresser and gave it to her. “Batteries charged, all you have to do is set the level and time.”

“I’ve never done this before.” she admitted. “I’ve owned this little thing for too many solar cycles and you know, I have never tried it.”

“Well, your thumbprint powers it on, then the settings are on the inside.” Vesi put her right thumb to the sensor pad, watching the lights go through diagnostics mode. She put the level setting at five, then brought it down to four after thinking about it. The time was set to one *Heth*, just so they would get a full knowledge of what it would or wouldn’t do for her.

Marlett took it from her hands and waited for her to lift her hair out of the way. He opened the fastener, hinged it open and slipped it around her neck. He gave her a kiss and confirmed the next action to be made by him. “Do you want to go ahead with this? Say yes or no.”

“Yes,” she agreed, waiting patiently while he slowly closed the Bil-designed Intensifier Collar down on her neck. When it clicked shut, an extremely intense surge of feelings shot down her spine and up her neck, stunning her just momentarily.

“Is it working?” he asked, running his hand across her shoulder very softly and gently. That made her shudder all over in response.

“It’s . . . It’s working.” she blurted out. “Oh Gods, is it working! Ungh, hold me, gently, please? Before I fall down,” she begged as she involuntarily flexed her hands, exposing her razor-sharp claws. Just the gentle breeze from the ships air handlers blowing on her was a bit too much in her opinion.

Marlett carefully held her, noticing how she was squirming up against him firmly and she was breathing very heavy, too. “Vesi, do you want to stop?” he asked, concerned for her health. He had heard some Elazi couldn’t safely wear one of these collars for more than a few *Munar*.

“NO!” she blurted out, slowly putting her arms around him. “Getting . . . getting used to it. Really intense right now. Put me on the bed *My Love*, I think . . . I think I’ll be okay,” she directed, still breathing hard from the effects of that collar.

“Very well,” he replied as he carefully helped her to lay down. Her eyes were trying to roll back in her head from the touch sensations of being put on her sleeping cot being amplified by the Bil device. He laid down in bed beside his future life mate and carefully pulled her over to him. “Are you still okay?” he asked.

“I . . . I’m . . . I’m okay.” she stuttered out as she tried to look at Marlett, eyes totally unfocused at the moment. “Just . . . just no sex, please? Don’t think I could take that right now.” she offered up in a whisper. “Hold me and kiss me, please?”

“I can do that much for you.” he agreed, holding her in such a way she could not see the tears in his eyes, tears of joy and love.

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One *Heth* later, the collar chirped and Sa’Vesi twitched all over as the device powered down, taking a moment to experience things without the intense amplification from the collar. She took a few deep breaths to clear her head, then kissed Marlett.

“Thank you for not trying to have sex with me.” she stated as she hugged him tightly. “I have to say, I’m still tingling everywhere. Can’t really feel my fingers or toes. I hope that’s not a bad thing.”

“Really? Do you want me to call sickbay?” he asked, concerned for his future mate.

“Um, yes.” she agreed. “I feel weird right now. I’m still floating, sort of.” She tested her fingers against the sheets on the bed, noting the distinct lack of touch similar to wearing thick composite gloves.

“I’ll call a medic.” Marlett stood at the end of the bed and made his call, asking for the doctor to be discreet in this matter. He relayed the symptoms, then smiled when the doctor made his diagnosis. He gave his communicator to Sa’Vesi and laid back down with her.

“This is Sa’Vesi Kevvit’lan.” she told the doctor, still blinking her eyes to clear them.

“Sub-Commander, what level did you set the collar to?” She could hear him typing on a terminal.

“I had it set on four.” she conveyed.

“Sa’Vesi, I recommend you not set it higher than two if you use it again.” the medic stated firmly. “The Bil can go to a much higher setting, sometimes to twelve because of their scales. We can’t, it’s just that way.”

“Yes, doctor.” she replied. “Not over two.”

“If you still can’t feel your fingers and toes in the morning, come by sickbay so I can check you over. That Bil collar can be dangerous to those that don’t have at least some training on its use or trying to use it without the proper instructions for it.”

“I will do that.” she agreed.

“Thank you for calling me.” the doc stated. “Hopefully I won’t see you in the morning.”

Marlett took the communicator from her and he put it back on the stand by the bed while he was up. Returning to the bed after a few *Munar*, he gave Sa’Vesi a cold drink of water that she finished quickly.



“How are you feeling now?” he questioned while they removed her collar. She seemed to be more alert now, after drinking some water and moving about just a bit.

“I can feel my fingers and toes now, still tingling a bit but good enough to know I didn’t hurt myself.” she offered up. The tall ebony femme was looking the collar over, thinking about something. Marlett noticed her poking at the settings and such so he asked a question.

“Something wrong with it?”

“No, not at all.” Sa’Vesi powered it back up and snapped it closed around her neck again. She jumped just a bit from the sensations of it coming back to life, swallowing hard as she began to tingle all up and down her back. “I set it to the lowest setting this time. You missed out on most of the fun last time so I thought we would try it again. Safely, this time.”

He ran his hand along her side, reaching around the small of her back to pull her close to him. She gasped in reply as she slowly wrapped her arms around him in response. “Vesi, still okay with this?” He didn’t want her to hurt herself on his behalf.

“Oh, that is just like being touched by you for the very first time. It’s . . . it’s so electric, Mar. Just go easy, please? This is like our very first time, only better.”