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## “Scribe”

by Kellan Meig'h

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### “The Calm Before The Storm”

After Jeff watched Na'Krista head off to her second day of her instructor duty, he stood in the shade of the vehicle garage and mused about the situation. His intended had been promoted to junior officer grade and she had been offered a posting that would keep them somewhat stable for as long as Krista kept extending the post. From what had been said, this would be the last class she would instruct personally and in three ten-days or what would be three weeks, she would be the officer in charge of the video training department.

Having been asked to meet with the station mechanic this morning, Jeff headed off in the general direction of the operations building. It was a typical shop used for offices, some storage and maintenance to the equipment used in their orchards. Through an open bay door, he could spot his truck, being fussed over by two mechanics.

“Saar Andrews'lan,” the lead mechanic greeted him, offering a hand to Jeff.

“Good morning,” the human replied, taking the hand offered. “You wanted to see me?”

“I am Herret Gran'lan, chief mechanic. Saar, your vehicle is ready for a test run.” the pale tan Elazi replied. “We have drained the Earth fuel from the fuel system, filled it with our bean-based fuel and primed the system. I had some difficulty with the manuals you brought with you but I think that I have performed the procedures correctly. I have test-started the engine and checked the exhaust temperature. It seems within specification.”

“Uh, Herret, please call me Jeff.” he stated as he started his inspection of the work done. After looking under the hood himself, Jeffrey climbed into the cab and turned on the ignition switch. After a moment, he cranked the engine over, pleased when it caught on the first try.

“Jeff, that is a very robust sounding powerplant.” Herret observed. “I would suggest we take your truck for a short run around the station, just to make sure it is happy with this fuel. I think, based on what I have deduced, this Earth fuel that is made from what you call petroleum is the same general viscosity and lubricity as our compression ignition fuel.”

Herret climbed into the cab with Jeff so the Earther carefully backed out of the work bay. Once clear, he turned toward the roadway and began to feel out how the Cummins 4BT liked this new alien fuel. Checking the gauges, everything looked fine so he accelerated to about forty miles per hour. That was close to the posted Elazi speed of *Thirty Hazecan per Heth*.

“Jeff, how does it feel to you?” his mechanic asked.

“I think it feels just fine.” he replied. “I can see a little smoke when I accelerate, so the fuel must be pretty close in calibration. Do you have a way to check the exhaust emissions?”

“Yes, I have a tester. It is required by regulations to submit a yearly test results form for each vehicle. I am the designated official for the station.” After a moment, Herret continued. “This is so exciting, to ride in an Earth vehicle. While utilitarian in nature, it has great style to the design.”

“Yeah, Nineteen ninety-seven was a great year for International Harvester Corporation. They outsold Ford, GMC, Plymouth-Fargo and Jeep that year.” Jeff agreed. “If Chevrolet hadn't tanked in the year Nineteen ninety and Chrysler-Dodge-Mercedes the year after, International might have had some competition.”

Herret gave that some thought before he spoke up. “It sounds like your planet has a very active competition in manufacturing.”

“It does.” Jeff replied. “I noticed there are not too many different vehicle manufacturers on Elazia, though. Is there a reason for that?”

Herret nodded. “Lestim Industries bought up a few smaller concerns, just to get rid of their competition. You see, if you make an inferior product, you can't have competitors.”

“On Earth, that is what is called a *“Monopoly”*. I don't know the word for it in Elazi but it means only one concern controls the whole.”

The Elazi male nodded. “It is called Lestim Industries on our planet.” After a few moments, he continued. “You do know, the Keth'lan family holds the majority shares of Lestim Industries, don't you? Kalram is the head of the Controlling Quorum at the moment.”

“I did not know that.” Jeff admitted.

“Kalram wants to allow other manufacturers to compete with Lestim. I have heard rumors of an Earth manufacturer that wants to build vehicles on Elazia, a company called Ford.” Herret pointed out. “Kalram says it will be good for all, forcing Lestim to bring up its quality. It is bad enough that Tafra, Simmon and Shee-Fir outsell Lestim collectively. He thinks an Elazi-based company would really incite the Quorum to demand better build quality.”

“Shee-Fir?”

“Yes, Shee-Fir builds utility vehicles like your International. They tend to be overbuilt and slow but for a utility vehicle, none better can be found. They are expensive, being built solely on Comerica Prime. We have two on the station that I really like.”

While Jeff followed the roadway around the station, he gave thought to this. He really needed for Na'Krista to sit down with him and give him a full accounting of her life and her holdings. There was one thing, though; she was full of surprises. That pizza last evening was very good, even if it was made by people that had never been to Earth.

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Na'Kayla was glad to be home in her own bed for a change, even if she was injured. No hospital bed could ever match her own for sheer comfort. Even with the interruptions by her staff, trying not to bother her, home was a good place to be right now.

Sampling the N'ga berries that had been brought in for her a while ago, she enjoyed the taste of early-ripe fruit. They had the right amount of crunch and certainly the nicest tartness to them. Maybe her staff could make a pie or maybe some turnovers. Kalram had sent her some modified Earth recipes that might do well with these berries.

The taste of the fruit helped her to get her mind off of the news delivered to her by a noted surgeon from *Post Fontaneauz*. The sawbones had made the trip out to meet her at her home and give her a full examination. After a detailed check-up, it was of his opinion that she would fully recover and return to service, if she so wished to. According to her surgeon, he had observed far greater injuries that had healed properly. He had also taken the liberty of increasing the settings on the regen unit. How thoughtful of him.

While the regen unit was quiescent at the moment, there were some things she needed to take care of. Urgent things, in fact. Working herself over to the edge of the bed, Na'Kayla got her legs over the side, allowing her to sit up with the use of a grab bar over her head. Along with the use of a cane, she stood and made her way to the master bedroom's privy. Just as she had gotten herself situated on the throne, her Head Of Staff and cook interrupted her.

“Oh, I am sorry, Na'Krista. I have news for you.” Na'Veri offered up. “A vehicle of Earth design, I think, has been delivered. Your sister's mechanic, Technician Gran'lan has prepared it to use our compression fuel.”

Kayla rolled her eyes. “Gah, I had actually forgotten about my new truck!” she groaned. “I have a mobility chair that was left for my use, somewhere in the house. If you find it, I want to make sure my new Ford made it here in one piece.”

Na'Veri found the mode of conveyance and helped her employer, actually her sister-in-law, to get comfortable in the seat. The smoky gray female pushed Na'Kayla through the house to the portal by the garage. Once outside, there was the pickup truck, sitting in repose with its deep cerise finish glowing in the afternoon sun.

Na'Veri handed the keys to her relative and smiled, noting how this had brightened Kayla's mood. Helping her to stand, they walked around the vehicle, checking it over carefully. After the lap of inspection was over with, finding no issues, they went to the driver's door. Na'Kayla opened it and motioned for Na'Veri to climb in.

“Kayla, are you sure?” she asked.

“I'm sure, Sister Na'Veri. Besides, I'm sure you know that I don't think I can get into that road beast right now,” the pale gray femme replied, tapping the regen unit for emphasis.

The dark femme made herself at home in the drivers' seat and after a briefing on the controls, she started the engine. Na'Kayla smiled, hearing the sound of a Super PowerStroke diesel in all its glory. There was just one thing left to do. Pain be damned, it had to be done.

“Na'Veri, I need you to find something to help me get into the cabin. You and I are going for a ride, whether my injury likes it or not.”

As asked, Veri found a crate in the garage that would get her relative up high enough to get into the four wheel drive F-250. It took a while but eventually, Na'Kayla was behind the wheel. Na'Veri took the passenger seat and with the pale femme smiling widely, they backed out from in front of the garage and turned toward the road.

Na'Kayla kept the speed down on purpose, both to keep from jostling herself around too much and to get a good look at her orchards. She followed the paved road between her and Krista's orchards, then at the 'T' intersection, she turned right. Down the road a ways, she slowed and took a narrow gravel path between the Kebra trees.

Keeping an eye out for a particular tree, she knew she was close to the area where she had early fruit each year. Locating a branch that was very convenient, she pulled to the left a bit, rolled down her window and picked a pair of fruit from the tree.

“Na'Veri, cut these for us, please?” she asked, smiling at her mate's sister.

The dark furred femme cut open the fruit with her pocket knife, giving one piece to Kayla. The pit was a dark brown, indicating a good watering schedule. The flesh was a nice orange, just perfect for market. The flavor, while slightly tart as it should have been, was spot on. While they enjoyed the treat, a spot watering tractor stopped in the row to their right, then Hammet made his appearance, smiling at the two femmes.

“Eating the profits, I see.” he commented, taking a piece of fruit from his sister and sampling it himself. “I think I need to get the crew to harvest the diagonal zone of early fruit trees. These are just right.”

Kayla shrugged her left shoulder. “I don't know. Maybe wait one ten-day before we harvest? The fruit would be sweeter.”

“You might be right.” he mused. “I'll have Jerrel give the fruit a close inspection. If it looks like we can wait, we will.” After a moment to examine the pit for color and hardness, he continued. “So, how does the truck run?”

“It seems to like our fuel.” she replied. “And, it is powerful, too.”

“I was in town today to get parts for our Shee-Fir Thirty-Three,” Hammet began, “There is a Ford sales and service center to open soon, near the Shee-Fir center. Our worries about parts and such were short-lived, it would seem.”

“That is good,” Na'Kayla mused, finishing her fruit. “I think, based on how I feel, that I have been out of bed long enough. I am going to head back to our home now.”

Hammet helped her back out of the orchard by guiding her between the trees, then he stood and watched two females drive off toward home, two females that were very important to him.

Na'Kayla was the one that made his world complete, and he didn't know what he would have done if she had gotten killed while they were on Earth. He also didn't know what he would do if he lost his sister Na'Veri. She had been very lucky to return from the Varpor Wars and that failed first attempt to take back Refinery Facility Alax Six. Most of her squad, the ones that escaped death in the attack, found themselves having to wait out rescue in a Heavy Landing Craft with a totally breached hull. It was adrift for several days before a rescue craft could reach them.

Hammet was glad they were all getting out of the business of war. *Od'Tra The Wise* was right; there were no winners in war.

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Later on that day after Krista had returned home from the base, she informed her future husband that they were requested to be somewhere that evening. They had consumed a quick repast and headed out in her roller to this meeting.

Jeff settled himself better in the passenger seat, still wondering what this was all about. As far he could deduce, they were to meet with somebody important. At least that was all he could pry out of Na'Krista and their head of staff.

“Still not going to tell me who we're meeting with?” he asked for the third or fourth time.

“That information would spoil things.” she replied. “Just sit quietly and enjoy the view.” Krista replied.

Jeff looked over at his future wife and smiled, noting her excitement over meeting with a person or persons that had asked for them to pay a visit. Krista had driven them several hours Northeast through farm and livestock country until they had arrived at an Ag Station that must have been held by one of Na'Krista's relatives.

The gate sign simply said “Keth'lan” in a plain script, next to a road that led them up to a low-set home about a half-mile from the main thoroughfare. They got out of the roller, straightened their clothes and approached the door. Before Jeff could knock, the door opened and an elderly Elazi male stepped into view.

“Om-father Jessett!” Na'krista blurted out, giving the dark buff-colored patriarch a hug and a kiss. “We came to see you as soon as we could!” she continued.

“I am glad you came to see me as I had requested,” he retorted, giving her a hug in return. “I see you brought your future *One Love* with you. I did want to speak with him before the joining ritual.”

Jeff stepped up and cleared his throat. “It is good to meet you, Saar.”

“Call me Om-father Jessett or just Jessett.” the Elazi male replied as he shook Jeff's outstretched hand. “I am only called AfJessett'an Sakaar Keth'lan in formal meetings and by those who either do not know me or I do not count as a friend.”

“Yes, Om-father Jessett,” Jeff agreed, giving him a courteous bow.

“Jeffrey, Krista, please come inside. Na'Kimsa is anxious to meet the new member of House Keth'lan.”

They followed Jessett inside, where it was obvious the home's natural air conditioning kept the interior at a nice cool temperature. The décor reminded Jeff of what would become his new home, with that stucco-like finish and the wood floors. There were what must have been antiquities here and there, paintings and photographs on the walls, several tapestries which Jeff recognized as House Keth'lan designs along with a number of edged weapons on display.

In one alcove Krista stopped and looked at the battle armor on display. It was scorched, scratched, dented and pockmarked from what must have some form of projectiles. Jessett must have realized they had stopped so he returned to see what had taken their attention.

“Om-father, you brought out your armor again.” Krista stated softly. “I thought Om-mother Na'Kimsa . . .” Her thoughts were interrupted by Jessett.

“Na'Kimsa asked me to put our armor back on display. Hers is in my study room, waiting for me to make a space to put them on display side-by-side.” That thought intrigued Jeff.

“I take it they were on display together at some time in the past?” he asked.

“I put them on display in the entry hall after we were joined and we moved here to the old Keth'lan homesite.” Jessett explained. “I noticed how sad it made Na'Kimsa when she would walk by them so I put them away, out of sight. Some cycles ago in a fit of patriotism, I wore my armor during the parades on *The Planetary Reclamation Day* several rotations ago. I guess she could see how proud it made me feel to do that. Last year, she wore hers alongside me.” That snippet made Krista smile.

“I will be dirt-side for *Reclamation Day* next year.” she offered up to her Grandfather.

“You will? I thought you had more time to serve on Terra Prime.” Jessett questioned.

“I am now a Sub-Commander, Junior Grade. I will be in charge of Video Training in less than thirty days.” Na'Krista stated.

“That is good, you have made officer grade.” the elder male mused. “Please come and sit with us on the patio. I have cold drink and sweet snacks waiting.”

they walked through the house, which seemed to be carefully kept, until they stepped through a portal onto the shaded patio that seemed more like a courtyard to Jeff. Like his new home, this one had trees, greenery and seating areas. Waiting for them on a cozy semi-circular couch was Na'Kimsa. She stood and extended a hand toward Jeff.

"I am Na'Kimsa, Jessett's second *One Love*. It is good to meet with you, Jeffrey." the pale buff-colored femme said as she shook Jeff's hand, Earth-style. She then turned and hugged Krista. "I am so glad to see you becoming joined to such a handsome human." she added.

"It is good to see you again, Om-mother Na'Kimsa." Krista replied as they took their seats. "We came as quickly as we could, once I received the message from Om-father."

"I asked you here because I wished to discuss something with you. I want to be a part of your joining." Na'Kimsa put forth. "You know that I was a very close friend to your Om-mother Sa'Kayla. We went to school together and we served together in the same squadron during the Varpor Wars. I want to be there in her stead, to remember her to the others. I know she would have wanted me to do this."

Krista showed excitement at that thought. "I was worried about who would perform that part of the joining ceremony. We would be honored to have you be a part of our ceremony."

"Thank you," Na'Kimsa said softly, trying to hold back her tears. "Jessett and I have been torn by my asking. I was afraid you would say no."

"I would have asked you anyway." Krista admitted. "If Om-father is to be present at my joining, you must be there too. It is tradition."

"We were concerned." Jessett spoke up. "We did not know if you were going to follow the full traditional joining ceremony since you were joining to an Earth man."

"It will slightly non-traditional." the buff-colored femme pointed out. "Jeffrey will be wearing his full dress kilt outfit and I will be wearing clothing that will be somewhat non-standard."

"How non-standard are you going to appear?" Na'Kimsa asked.

"It will be suitable for the ceremony." Krista replied. "I chose my garments carefully and I made sure they were fitted correctly. This will be a very important day for the both of us. I wanted the memories to always bring a smile to our faces."

"Very well, then." Om-father Jessett acknowledged. "Jeffrey, if you would come with me for a few moments, you and I have something to take care of."

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Jeffrey followed his future Om-father back into the home through another doorway, into what must have been a back hall. They passed several doors until they arrived at a particular one. Jessett opened the door and bid Jeff entrance. What he found inside was obviously Jessett's study which could have doubled as a war museum.

What must have been Na'Kimsa's armor was on a stand in the corner of the room, in an area that had no bookshelves or weapon displays. On the walls there were long arms, handguns and swords of all types on display. The wall behind the lone desk in the room opened up to reveal a store room and that was where the elder male busied himself rooting around.

“Jeffrey! Come here!” Jessett bid. Once Jeff had done so, he could see that his future grandfather-in-law was unpacking a box within that closet. After a few more bundles were removed from that crate, he brought forth what must have been a ceremonial breast plate. He gave that to Jeff to hold and retrieved the back plate that went with it.

“Jeffrey, it is traditional that the eldest male of the family provide a garment piece for you to wear at the ceremony.” He explained. “My father Temram supplied this armor for Kamram, Kalram, Tegram and Jagram's joinings. Since you have no family here on this planet to do so, I am acting in that capacity since I am the eldest Keth'lan. I do hope it will work with your chosen garb.”

They got busy and while Jeff held the front plate to his chest, Jessett applied the back plate and adjusted the closures to fit the human. One of the closet doors was opened all the way so Jeff could use the mirror on the back of it, just to check the fit. As far as he could tell, it would work just fine.

“So, you are the oldest Keth'lan still alive?” Jeff questioned while minor adjustments were made to the clasps.

“I have an older brother. His name is Merrett Vakaar.” he replied. The elder male looked at the floor and pursed his lips for a moment before continuing. “He left this province almost one-hundred cycles ago. I really do not know where he went or if he still lives. There was some conjecture that he might have went space-faring or some say he joined with a pirate faction. I'm not so sure about that idea. He was a law-abiding person.”

“Have you ever thought of looking for him?”

“No, Jeffrey. I am an old one and I do not long to be among the stars anymore. If there was one place he would have went, I think that would be the Bil homeworld.” Jessett sat on the edge of his desk and continued. “We fought in the uprising against the Bil as did most of the older members of our family. Merrett and I were aboard a ship we had renamed *The Fury*. She was sleek by the standards of the day and the fastest of our stolen fleet. When we arrived at the Bil-Cmela homeworld, our job was to wipe out their orbital space docks.

“We began by sending a demand to evacuate the docks before we destroyed them. A Commander from the Bil Regular Army relayed back to us, informing us they would need several days to get everyone off of the docks. When we informed the Commander we wouldn't wait, our weapons crew began to destroy one dock, just to show we were not playing a game.

“That really upset Merrett, when dead bodies began floating around in space amongst the debris, all because we wouldn't wait. The further destruction that followed seemed to really hurt him, that we had went rogue and killed mindlessly. When our Global Senate decided to rebuild what we had destroyed on the Bil homeworld, Merrett Vakaar Keth'lan was practically first in line to go. He stayed there until the end of operations, five cycles later.”

“What did he do after that, if I might ask?” Jeff had to know the end of the tale, if it really was the end to it.

“Merrett was home for what may have been a cycle, then he was gone. I have been studying your race and something I read about one of your presidents had a similar feel to it. I believe he was called Jimmy Carter and his program was called Habitat For Humanity. I think by what Merrett had said right before he left, he might have went back to the Bil homeworld and started his own program of sorts.”

While Jessett helped Jeff to remove the armor, the Earther gave thought to an idea. Maybe Merrett was still alive on the Bil homeworld. Na'Krista had said at one time the Bil homeworld was just a few days travel by slipstream, so maybe they could go see if they could find Merrett Keth'lan. There was something, however that Jeff wanted to know.

“Jessett, could you tell me a bit of the Keth'lan history? Since I am becoming part of the family, it would be nice to know something about my new family.”

“I can do that.” he replied. “Let us return to the patio and I will give you a short history lesson.”

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Once they had made their way out to the patio, Jessett made good on his offer of a brief family history lesson.

“My father was Af'Temram'an Delaar Keth'lan and my mother was Sa'Vesha Naria Connen'lan. Merrett and I were their only offsprings. His father, my Om-father, was Al-Jurress Sakaar Keth'lan. His first name did not carry the common spelling conventions and he spoke with the accent of a Southern Freelancer.

“He came to this province as an unknown and found work with the local Ag Stations. Once he had enough money saved, he purchased the first forty units of this station from the Connen'lan family that live across the road from here. He married Sa'Kallis Vinna Kevvit'lan, the eldest daughter of Vallis Kevvit'lan. My father was their first offspring, then they brought forth Al'Taffret'an Belaar Keth'lan. My Om-father's marriage to Sa'Kallis gave him eighty more units of land that she brought to the joining.

“They were very successful, purchasing several more surrounding stations to create the original Keth'lan holdings in this area. This is the largest station in the area by quite some measure and by deed and decree, it shall be in the possession of the Keth'lan family or a descendant of our bloodline for all time. I think I speak for all Keth'lans when I say we will be proud to include your bloodline, Jeffrey.”

“Thank you, Jessett. I am honored.” Jeffrey put forth.

“There is one thing, though,” Jessett continued, “As I have said, Al-Jurress came here as an unknown. In the same time frame, another male, named Jarek the Red gave the lawkeepers fits in the Eastern Sweptlands. He was what I think you would call a Highwayman. He would rob those travelers that would cross his path, never killing but certainly leaving them with no wealth.

“When Al-Jurress came here and settled in to work, all activity associated with Jarek the Red ceased. That suspicion was cast upon him, that he was in fact Jarek the Red. You see, he had a

rust-red pelt that is not common to see. Only those that came from the Southern shores would on occasion have that coloration. My brother has that same odd coloration, too.”

“Do you think he might have been Jarek the Red?” Jeff asked.

“It would just be my foolish pride taking a front stage here, but I think he may have been Jarek the Red, or Al-Jarek Sakaar Kett'van, his proper name. I was very young when a male came to the station that was named Al-Marress Velaar Kett'van. He spoke with a heavy Southern accent, asking about my Om-father.

“My mother called Al-Jurress in from the orchard and he seemed both happy and sad at the same time to see Al-Marress. I hid in the bushes that are at the corner of the building, right over there and I listened to this stranger speak with my Om-father. I am very sure he called my Om-father 'Jarek' until he was told to use Al'Jurress.”

“Did he stay around here after the meeting?” Jeffrey wanted to know.

“Yes, he did.” Jessett confirmed. “My Om-father purchased twenty-five units of land for him, enough to have a say in the local government. Al-Marress joined to Sa'Vesi Connen'lan and produced a number of offspring. Af'Tammen'an Kett'van still runs the station, a fourth generation Kett'van.”

“I should ask; do you call them family?” Jeff needed to know.

“We call them family even though they carry a different last name. And, speaking of names, you will need an Elazi name for the joining.”

“An Elazi name?” This puzzled Jeff.

“Such as my name, Sakaar. It is one of a group of names all Keth'lan males have carried. It would be appropriate if you take on the name of my Om-father and my name, Sakaar.”

“Okay, how would I use that name?” This was exciting but confusing at the same time to the Earther.

Na'Kimsa spoke up. “You would put the name after all of your given names but before your family and house name. That would be the proper placement for your Elazi name. You would be known as Jeffrey Alan Sakaar Andrews'lan.”

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Argess Wrraal looked up from his evening meal, noting the Bil soldier was intently watching them consume their fare. Admittedly, they had deprived him of food and water since he was captured but it was a necessary thing, to force their hand by this subtle form of torture.

“Would you like some of this?” the *Fask-aal* asked, motioning to the meal on the table. That seemed to anger the dark male.

“Think you traitor am I?” he spat back. “Die first will I! Help you not will happen!”

<I speak Bil. It will be easier for you and I both to communicate. Would you like something to eat?> Argess put forth.

<You speak my language crudely, like a Comer. > was the prisoner's retort.

<Crudely asked or not, are you hungry?> Argess stated again. <You can eat for yourself or I can feed you through a feeding tube down your throat. Your choice.>

<You leave little room to bargain.> the soldier of fortune admitted.

<You seem to understand that concept. All I want is the name of the person that hired you to kill Retten Trent'lan.>

<I do not know a name.> the Bil offered up. <I was contacted via Elazi Planetary courier with a communicator number to call and the time to call that communicator. I was given my orders by a programmed synth voice and I gave my account number at the prompt to receive the payment. That is all I know.>

<That is all you know?> Arrissa asked.

<I may be a mercenary but I am not a liar. That is all I can tell you.> the Bil male put on the table. <Do with me what you will. I am dead now that I have failed my mission. That was part of the agreement with the one paying the wages in Crown.>

<Crown hard currency or just by electronic transfer?> Argess had to know. If it was by hard currency, it would be a face-to-face encounter.

<I was told it would be by electronic transfer only. The being didn't want to meet with me.>

<I see. Well, I guess you should eat some of this food, just to keep your strength up.>

Once the Bil had been released from his bondage, he joined the others at the table. It was difficult, though to eat at a relaxed pace, considering how famished he was. He knew, however that he would be brought to task again, answering other questions that would be put toward him.

Argess looked over at Retten and Arrissa, shrugging his shoulders. They were no closer than they were before this all happened. It seemed to Argess that Retten needed to give them something more to work with.

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The Elazi femme pilot Na'Cira looked over at her charges, smiling at their obvious excitement at the thought of being dirtside. They had left the express cruiser *The Phantom* just moments ago, descending toward the planet's surface at a relaxed pace. She had been tasked with getting the two Earthers to Elazia by a certain time stamp and as usual, she had not failed.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked, meaning the vista in front of them.

“I'm still pinching myself, to think we are here on what is an alien world to us.” the graying male replied as he took in the view of the planet below. “I'm sure Jeff will be surprised to see us, too.”

“Saar Andrews'lan and Mere Keth'lan do not know you are arriving. I was told, your presence is a gift of sorts from my immediate employer. Saar Keth'lan wanted you to be there as part of the ceremony.” the gray femme offered up.

The blond female looked over at their pilot. “I heard Jeff has to fight another male for the right to marry Na'Krista. What is that all about?”

“It was a challenge.” Na'Cira Dannen'lan replied. “It is an old custom that you may be challenged for the right of joining. Na'Krista has already fought a challenge and now an old suitor has challenged Saar Jeffrey. I have been told they have . . . um, stacked the deck? Is those the right words? They have ensured Saar Jeffrey will prevail.”

“Is is possible for us to be at the match, unnoticed?” the female Earther asked.

“I will see what we can do to accommodate that request, Mere Andrews'lan.” Na'Cira replied with a polite nod of the head. “I will contact my employer Saar Keth'lan once we have landed.”