

*The characters Jeffrey Alan Sakaar Andrews, Na'Krista Nahala Christina Keth'lan, Kamram Keth'lan, Na'Kesta Keth'lan, Tegram Keth'lan, Traci McDonald, Bosteg Haas'lan, Kestam Ramm'lan, Treman Baze'lan, Merret Treet'lan, Tascal Hone'lan, Hallett Trasc'lan, Hammet & Na'Kayla Nahala (nee Keth) Craine'lan, Gillat Deen'lan, Marlett Blane'lan, Sa'Densa Nasia Andrews'lan (nee Deen'lan), Argess & Arrissa Wrraal, Rellen Sandren'lan, Sa'Jenna Nasia Deen'lan along with the characters Torvald and Victoria Svensen are the properties of Kellan Meig'h and may not be used without express written permission.*

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## “Scribe”

by Kellan Meig'h

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### “Making Commitments For Life”

~Part 2~

The hall had been quickly converted to resemble a reception hall so Jeffrey and his new bride stood at the doorway and greeted everyone as they came back into the room. It was amazing how many uniformed soldiers were in attendance today, friends of Na'Krista or the Keth'lan family. Jeff recognized a few of them as officials on the House Tal-Hassanai senate. Jeff's sister-in-law Susan came through the line, smiling widely.

“I'm so glad we were able to be here!” she blurted out excitedly, trying to keep out of the way while the last of the guests made their way into the room. “Harv and I would not have wanted to miss this for anything!” she added.

“I was concerned Jeff wouldn't have family here.” Krista put forth. “I hear you're staying for thirty days. You must come out to the station while you're here.”

“Well, about that,” Susan began, “We had told Na'Cira in passing during our trip that we were both retired Marine Corps officers and we were retired educators. When Commander Fellen'lan heard about that information, he offered us reserve commissions in the Elazi Trans-Atmospheric Forces, Ground Division. He thought we would be of great help in training the troops in the finer points of the English language or perhaps teaching Earth geography and local customs.”

“Well?” Jeff questioned. This turn of events was quite surprising, to say the least.

“We told him we would let him know in a few days.” Susan replied. “I mean, we haven't worked in a while but he *was* offering quite a bit of Crown and perks. I guess we could sell our home on Earth and buy one here. Na'Kesta said the homes are affordably priced.”

“With two incomes, you will live comfortably.” Na'Krista chimed in. She then looked up to see they were being motioned to the front of the hall. “I think we had better take our seats. They are ready for us.”

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Dassan looked at the reply to his communique, sure that he had misread the offensive text on the display. Checking that he had the right contact selected, it was clear he had not misinterpreted the rather caustic riposte to his very simple question.

Trying his best to keep his rising anger in check, first the communicator, then his tablet found the far wall from his desk. Not feeling satisfied by that action, he stood up, went to the pile of damaged electronics and kicked at it, misjudging the distance to the wall when he did so. The score was stucco wall '1', Dassan's bare foot '0'. He hobbled back to his desk, ranting and raving at Sevran and that damned Trexis mercenary he had hired as a backup. Without being there, he had a good idea what had transpired. Sevran had a change of heart and killed the merc instead.

Searching through his desk for a spare communicator, Dassan's fury began to take a toll on him. When he noticed the spots dancing before his eyes, his narrowing vision and the heavy pain in his chest, his search quickly turned to his heart medication. As his motor skills began to betray him, the bottle was found and opened but the contents spilled out on his desktop.

He managed, just barely, to pick up two of the small pink tabs and get them into his mouth. That was when his vision went away, scaring him thoroughly. As he chewed the tabs, the medicine was absorbed into his bloodstream, bringing down his blood pressure and heartbeat.

Once his vision came back sufficiently, he put his monitoring bracelet on and put it into diagnostic mode, reading his overall condition. The small device sent a detailed analysis to his computer and a copy of that result to his doctor. Scanning the readout on the screen, he knew his physician was not going to be happy with this.

Sitting back in his chair, he took a deep breath. He needed to get this whole issue with Na'Krista and her land taken care of as soon as possible. His health was not going to last much longer at this rate.

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Jeff and Na'Krista sat down at the head table, with Na'Kayla and Hammet to her right and Harvey and Susan to Jeff's left. A small table was set out for Na'Krista's parents to occupy just to the right of Hammet, at the head of the room. Jessett and Na'Kimsa sat at their own table to Susan's left. Once everyone had settled down, Harvey stood with his glass of *White Fire* and did his part as Best Man in hastily learned Elazi;

“For those of you that do not know me, I am Jeff's younger brother, Harvey Andrews'lan. I can say without reservation that I am an expert on most everything about Jeff. He has seen some very happy times, before our war between the Unites States of America and the Peoples Republic of China. That war brought sad times for him, when his first *One Love* and their child were killed in the first bombardments of our country. I hope that he has finally found happiness again in Na'Krista. She seems to make his world complete when they are together.

“Everyone, please stand for the toast.” he enunciated decently. Once everyone was standing, he continued. “I propose a toast to Jeffrey and Na'Krista, wishing them a long and fruitful life together. May they always be healthy, their ledger balanced and their bank account full.”

Everyone toasted, then it was Jeff's turn. "As most of you do not know, I first met my *One Love* at gunpoint in my home." Jeff had to get the attendees to quiet down before he continued. "Now, there had been some fighting just down the road from my home, and I had to take an alternate route back to my domicile. I actually watched part of the engagement from behind an outcropping of boulders so when the soldiers all left, I went on home. Little did I know I had a passenger with me.

"Na'Krista thought my truck was an old abandoned vehicle to hide in while the fighting continued but when it started to move, she told me that she was afraid to bail out while it was in motion. When I got to my home, I parked my truck and took my day's groceries inside. She followed me inside after a few *Munar*, firearm in hand since she had no idea how I would react to her presence. After a moment or two of indecision on my part when she passed out, I took care of her injury and as we got to know one another, we realized we were in love."

Jeff sat down so Krista stood to give her part. "I knew Jeffrey would tell that story. I might add that I wasn't sure if my armor or for that matter, my body would withstand the impact with the roadway if I had bailed out. I had been chased up the edge of the clearing by RUSA gunfire so that truck bed seemed like a safe place to hole up in until the firefight died down.

"I did not know I was injured until later. When I decided indoors with an injury and possibly becoming a prisoner of war was preferable to outdoors in the snow with an injury, I had my neural disruptor on a low setting so it would have just stunned Jeff a bit had I needed to use it.

"I followed him through the door he had used to enter the house and I crept through the cabin quietly to find him at the front door, looking out at the weather. I put my hand over his mouth, told him to come back inside and close the door. When I turned him around to look at me, I knew I was in trouble. I was having difficulty focusing on him, the room was spinning and I couldn't hold up my weapon any longer. I managed to tell him I was injured, right before I passed out.

"I came to later that day, staring at the light fixture over his dining table while he was working on my injury. I was not a model patient at that moment, trying to sit up and I tried to get my dirty fingers into my wound. I also did not stay still when Jeff told me to rest. I even managed to drip blood through his home when the initial work on my injury didn't hold. But, as Jeff has said, as we came to know one another, we knew we were destined to be together for all times."

Once Krista had sat down, her father stood and offered his thoughts. "I would like to offer a prayer that my daughter and my new son through joining will have a long and happy life together." The crowd toasted the new couple, then her father continued. "I have to say, I dislike surprises to no end. When I arrived on Earth, thinking my daughter was just lost or injured, I was surprised by this fine couple asking for my permission to be joined.

"I was skeptical at first but as I came to know Jeffrey and how much he meant to my daughter, I could only do what any father would have done and agree with their plans. I also know it to be quite impossible to change Na'Krista's mind, once it is made up. May they always find happiness in each other."

Once Kamram had sat down, Jessett started to stand, then bowed to his *One Love*, giving deference to her. He helped her to her feet and took his seat afterward. "I would like to bring some

remembrance of Sa'kayla, Jessett's first *One Love* and Na'Krista's blood Om-Mother. I have had her in my heart ever since this joining was conceived. I know she would have seen the love between these fine young ones, who I am sure will be together for all times. I knew from the first time I met Jeffrey, he was a kind soul that would care always for his bride. I also know Na'Krista is hopelessly in love with her husband. I give a prayer for them to enjoy a long life together.”

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From the back of the room, a lone femme figure in ceremonial robes watched on, wiping at her tears. She could see the love between this new couple and she was sure they would be together for all times and beyond. When Na'Kimsa looked her way, she smiled, waved at her and turned to leave. She did not leave through the front doors, but rather faded into the background.

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A chair was brought over in front of the head tables so Jeff and Na'Krista took up their places, her in the chair and Jeff by her right side while the eligible males were gathered. Jeff waited for Krista to pull up the hem of her dress, slowly and provocatively, exposing her thigh and the item that would be the focus of the next event; the garter. While this was going on, the gist of the action was being explained to the males.

Jeff ran his hands lovingly down her leg before he carefully removed her right shoe, then he gently used his thumbs and index fingers to shimmy the elastic goodie off of her leg. Jeff made motions to shoot the garter several times, then let it go into the center of the group. When the commotion finally died down, a gray male stood triumphant with the garter in hand. He was Sa'Densa's current love interest, Kemmet Jannen'lan.

Jeff looked at his new bride and smiled. “I think our House will be growing sooner than we thought.”

The chair was taken away so another table could be brought in, the one that would provide a place to perform the cutting of the cake. Everyone was somewhat surprised by a tri-level cake that was brought in, decorated in a distinct Earth style. A double stack Groom's chocolate cake followed shortly behind. Traci and Susan had baked the cakes last eve, just so they would have them for the event.

Jeff took the cake knife and stood where Na'Krista could stand in front of him and hold the knife, too. They carefully cut the bottom cake and gently put a slice of it on a plate for themselves. The couple took the spork-like utensils provided and picked up a scoop of cake apiece while they held the plate between them.

“Now remember, you promised not to smash the cake in my face.” Krista reminded her hubby.

“And you promised not to do the same.” Jeff reminded his bride.

It was clear, while Krista had promised not to smash the cake in his face, she was making sure to get as much frosting on his lips as she could. Once they had fed each other, she made Jeff put down the plate so she could kiss him. She did offer him a napkin afterward.

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The rest of the reception went well, the Groom's cake being a big hit because it was chocolate flavored. The wedding cake was a hit, too because vanilla was not a flavor found on Elazia. Kam had made a point to find a source for vanilla extract on the next trip to Earth. Harvey had brought some old big band dance tunes in mp3 format and a player that had been rigged to play through an Elazi entertainment center, providing the music for the dances.

Later that evening, after the reception ended, Na'Krista allowed her new husband to assist her out of her father's skimmer, once they had arrived back at their home. They had decided to spend the night there, then strike out in the morning for a nice honeymoon location. The couple stepped back from the air vehicle and waved at her parents as they left for their own home.

Na'Krista had brought a bag with her, one that her mother had prepared for her beforehand. After they were inside, Krista suggested they sit down at the high counter meant for first meal. Once they had done so, she took out the articles from the bag in her possession while she explained each items' use.

“These are for tonight. I have claw caps that we may glue onto my claws, I have a polymer film that sticks onto the males' back that my claws can't poke through and lastly, I have the very old-fashioned leather gloves.” She smiled as she added, “This will be your choice.”

Jeff seemed unsure of a selection as he looked at each item closely. “Which would you prefer?”

Krista shook her head 'no' in return. “This, my *One Love*, is your choice. By the customs, I must abide by your choice in the matter. I have no say in this.”

“Okay. Since I want to experience this properly, I'll try the polymer film. I know as a soldier, you use your claws as weapons. The label on the claw cap adhesive seems to sound pretty hard to remove after the fact. The film says I take a hot shower in the morning and you can just peel it off for me.”

“I knew you would pick the film.” she said with a smile. “Now, we should partake of the pre-consummation meal.” She went to the cooler unit and brought out a plate of fruits, nuts and vegetables, all cut into bite-sized pieces. She finished her chores by pouring two stem classes of a bubbly drink that had a sweet aroma to it.

“What do these represent?” Jeff asked as he took a bright green berry and popped it into his mouth. It had a taste that was very sweet and highly tart at the same time.

“These will give us stamina.” she offered up. “This combination of edibles will help keep us going for some time, maybe until tomorrow if we are lucky. The compounds are all natural so we will not get sick from them.” She took two small plates and divided the snacks accordingly.

“Wow, this one is spicy hot!” Jeff commented about the slice of fruit that looked like a blue apple. The fruit kind of burned his mouth a bit and for some reason, he was beginning to feel a bit warm under the collar, too.

“Mmm, just wait a bit for the edible to digest some,” Krista commented, enjoying the slices of a sour root stock that came from the mountains, “You will be ready for me in less than a *Heth*.”

“I've been ready for you since that morning in the mountains, when you first shared my sleeping bag.” the Earther admitted.

“I'll bet you have.” she commented with a sly smile. Looking to see the snacks were finished, she took her new husband by the hand and making sure she had the film with her, she led him to the bedroom.

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They slowly took turns undressing one another, one item at a time in turn. After each time a piece of clothing came off, Jeff made sure to hold his bride and kiss her, getting her in the mood. In turn Krista did the same, touching and caressing her new mate.

Once they were down to the buff, Krista brought out what looked like giant felt markers and began to place the ceremonial designs on his body. She worked with the three colors, traditional for House Keth'lan, her birth House. She then gave Jeff the white marker to start with.

“You must complete the markings on my body by copying what is on one side, onto the other.” she pointed out. While Jeff did as he was directed, she was losing her control from his soft touches to her body. Several times she gritted her teeth and clenched her hands into fists while he was working on her bare leg, then her bare arm. While her face was being painted, she just leaned against her husband, head back, enjoying the warm contact between them.

She had Jeff lay on the bed, face down so she could take care of one of the last things needed this evening. She unrolled the film, folded it in half and aligned it to his spine. Taking the backing off in steps, she carefully applied the protective film to his skin. Jeff reciprocated by rolling over and kissing her deeply, making her heart beat fast and forcing her to try to hold off for just a few more moments. As they slipped into the bed, Krista applied a thin molded polymer guard to her teeth, just in case she accidentally bit his shoulder during the throws of passion.

Jeff turned off the lights and rolled over to face Krista, who was waiting for him. Her natural spicy musk in overdrive was the last straw, making him lose the final bit of control he had. In turn, Jeff had no idea he was letting off pheromones that were driving his new bride wild. Thankfully, there was no creatures around to bother with their songs of true love, short of Sa'Densa's two land striders.

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Some time later, Jeff rolled off of his *One Love*, still breathing hard from his exertions. What he had just experienced was a female that was in desperate need of his attention and he had tried to satisfy those needs as best as humanly possible. He rubbed his left shoulder where she had bit him, glad that she had put the guard in her mouth rather than left it out. That might have hurt.

“Sweetheart?” she questioned.

“What, kitten?”

“Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah. Just slightly winded, that's all.” he admitted. “How about you?”

“You rocked my world.” she put forth as she snuggled up against him.

“You have really made my life special.” Jeff offered up. “All the men on Earth should be jealous of me right now.”

“They will never know, will they?” she mused.

“No, they will not. I will *never* tell.” After a moment, he asked a question; “Um, are you tingling all over, lips kind of numb?”

“Sort of. I think it's the snack we had before bed causing that.” She urged Jeff to roll over toward her so she could kiss her husband on the lips. “Ready for more?” she questioned.

“As long as you try not to bite me again. I think I have a bruise from that little nip of yours.”

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The sun was up when Jeff awoke with a start, still feeling some lingering effects from the fervent night before. Na'Krista was snuggled up close to him and her closeness allowed him to catch a whiff of her natural musk. It was not nearly as strong as it was last eve and that was probably a good thing.

He rolled over onto his back to stretch out but that idea was quickly forgotten. The pain from laying on his posterior made him bail out of bed, waking his bride. She bailed out of bed right behind him, concerned that something was wrong with her husband. That's when she saw his back, covered in blood.

“Oh My Gods!” she blurted out. “Sweetheart, that film didn't work.” she stated carefully as she tried to ascertain the extent of the damage.

“Is . . . is it bad?” Jeff wanted to know. He felt like his back was on fire at the moment.

“Let's clean you up. I can't tell, there is too much blood smeared around to see clearly.”

Krista guided him to the shower and turned on the water to a medium temperature. She used her hands to help wash off the blood on the film, just to see how bad it was. When the top of the polymer came loose, she teased it off of his back carefully. That's when the extents of the damage was quite apparent.

“Well?” he asked.

Krista swallowed hard before answering. “Maybe a handful of bad scratches, possibly a few more. I need to wash the blood off of your skin.”

Jeff gritted his teeth while she used an antibacterial soap on a wash puff to clean his back, groaning each time when she had to work on a scratch to clean it up. All told, there were eleven scratches that broke the skin deeply. His bride helped to dry him off, then Krista took his robe and slipped it on, waiting until later to dry off her pelt properly.

While Jeff laid down on the end of the bed, face down, the medical kit that Jeff brought with him was located and brought into the room. The bride opened the pack and with her hubby's direction, found a particular mil-spec disinfectant to use.

“Ergh, this smells strong!” she commented once the screw-on cap of the foil pack was opened.

“Has to be strong.” Jeff replied. “There are less germs in a handful of dirt than what you would find under the fingernails. Or claws, for that matter. Put on a pair of those blue nitrile rubber gloves or that stuff will stain your hands. squirt some of the disinfectant on a gauze pad and wipe the injury sites real good.”

Krista cleaned at the injuries, trying to keep from crying over the situation. This was their first night together and she had already injured him from what she felt was her negligence. After a few *Munar* of time had passed, she had all the sites cleaned properly. There was one, however that was still bleeding due to being the worst of the scratches.

“Use this,” Jeff suggested, using the arm dangling off the bed to poke at the pack, opening the needed pocket of bandages. “It's a steristrip suture. Stick one side on, pull it a bit to close the wound, then stick down the other side.”

She did as she was directed, applying the strip and a clear poly shield over the site to protect the injury afterward. Krista took the time to touch up each of the smaller scratches and scrapes, using that same disinfectant. She slipped off the gloves, laid her head against the bed and tried not to cry as she spoke her mind;

“I think you would say on Earth, I really fucked up big time.” she put forth.

“No, you didn't.” her husband retorted. “That was my choice. So the film didn't work for its intended . . .” Krista started to get up and go somewhere, interrupting his thoughts.

“I'm going to blunt my claws before I hurt you ag . . .” She was stopped short before she could get all the way off of the floor when Jeff grabbed her arm, holding her near him.

“No, don't do that. Don't.” he blurted out as he pulled her to him and held her lovingly. “Those claws are a part of you and to me, they make you so . . . I don't know, the claws and your teeth are like handling a grenade with the pin pulled.”

“I don't understand.” Krista stated. It was very clear she was confused by the look on her face.

“You're not like an Earth woman. You, are Elazi. You are different. The teeth, your claws, the pelt, that mischievous nature of yours. That's what I am in love with. I knew the job was dangerous when I took it.”



“I think I know what you might be getting at but I still don't understand fully.” she offered up.

“Okay, try this.” Jeff replied. “I love you just as you are and I don't want you to change anything. Well, maybe stop biting my shoulders? That really hurts, you know.”

“I know it hurts.” she agreed sheepishly. “I bit my wrist to shout into it instead of screaming into your ear. My wrist is still sore.”

“Those are just a few things we need to work on.” he suggested. “Now, let's wash off our striping and have a first meal as husband and wife.”

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After a trip through the shower, proving it was more than big enough for certain activities, they were dried off and dressed casually for the day. Jeff had helped to make their first meal, which was not normally done by the male but he wanted their marriage to be on an even footing. While they enjoyed their meal of pancakes, eggs and *Targ* strips, Krista used her tablet in a stand to show Jeff where they could potentially go for their honeymoon.

There were some hot springs in the foothills that seemed nice, a coastal resort that had ocean views and finally, a mountain forest retreat and spa. The resort was situated on a huge lake by Elazi standards, offering various therapy spas, the 'new' sport of water skiing was being touted to the guests and meals were served three times a day. That seemed like the winner. One quick call with the family names Keth'lan and Andrews'lan dropped, netted them a cabin with a lake view.

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Jeff found himself finally understanding the displays in Krista's skimmer, a Lestim Nine-Zed coupe. His bride had been giving him lessons as they flew North-East to *Lake Azimn*, in the *Berkaal* Mountain Range. Now that the indicators and the icons on the all-glass dash display had been explained, he thought a skimmer might be easy enough for him to fly. Currently they were using the standard Auto-Flight!® system, a Lestim invention to control the craft.

“So, you trust the autopilot to fly this skimmer?” Jeff asked off-hand.

“You can tell when it's getting ready to disengage.” she countered. “First, you notice a bit of left-right roll, followed by some yaw to the left. When it can't correct the yaw, it disengages. That's why the placard on the dash is there.”

Jeff examined the rather large label, which stated the pilot was not to allow their attention to wander for any reason whatsoever. “How long did it take you to figure out that flight attitude change was a disengage indicator?”

“All Lestim coupes are the same.” she said in an annoyed tone. “I heard a Japanese firm, Kawasaki is it? Well, they want to bid on upgrades to the Auto-Flight!® systems. I don't think they could do any worse than what we have already done.”

“You might be right.” Jeff agreed. He was taking in the grand vista spreading out in front of him, one that was almost breath-taking. The *Berkaals* were magnificent, reminding him of the Eastern side of the Sierras near Carson City, Nevada. They were losing the *Sedrim* groves as the *San'raa* trees took over at the higher latitudes. They were more like a conifer in shape but he knew that the *San'raa* trees had long, skinny leaves, not needles like a pine tree back home.

“I had told you about this, so I think you can feel the craft's attitude changing.” the new bride offered up.

Jeff could indeed feel the slight left-right rolling motion that seemed to get worse on each cycle. Then he could see the left yaw on the glass screen, first one, then two degrees to port. Since Krista had the stick in hand at the moment, he suggested something.

“Um, has anyone looked at the encoders that transmit yaw input to the computer?” he asked.

“No, not that I know.” she replied. “I almost think the sensors for yaw are in the same case with the flight director. That is where the Auto-Flight!® computer gets its signals from. That Auto-Flight!® computer is positioned under my seat.” Right at that moment, the blue light for the autopilot went out. “I told you so. Disengaged.”

“You know, how much air flow does that electronics package get?” the Earther mused.

“I . . . I don't . . . you know, I don't think there's any airflow from the equipment cooling package to the box under my seat, or yours for that matter.” she offered in response.

“What pieces of the avionics are under my seat?” Jeff asked.

“That would be the flight director.” Krista turned her head to look at her new hubby. “Don't tell me the fix is that simple.”

“I noticed my seat was getting warm so that's why I asked.” he stated.

Na'Krista remembered what was said during a walk-through inspection with her father at the Lestim plant that builds the skimmers. Some engineers were debating the need for extra avionics cooling. The eldest of the engineers finally stated the debate was over, no extra cooling because it would cost Crown on the front end that the factory couldn't recoup on the back end. Could the fix really be that easy? Was this the piece that needed extra cooling?

“Jeff, if you look between my seat and the center console, you'll see a cooling air tube for the seats. Same thing should be on your side. If we take the compartment cover off the auto-pilot and plumb it in to provide cold air, it might stop the disengagement issues.”

“If you think so.” he mused in reply.

“I think so.” she offered, smiling about it. It would be nice if the autopilot would do its job correctly without constant disengagements and fiddling with it to come back on line after a failure.

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The check-in at *Lake Azimn Resort And Spa* was just like any other place Jeff had been, with the exception of the head staff wanting pictures with them. A cart, driven by a staff member had brought them in from the landing pad and that same cart took them out to their cabin. There was a smaller cart for them to use to get around in and a cold bottle of Comerian sparkling wine was awaiting them inside, on a table set with plates and snacks.

The cabin itself would have been right at home at Lake Tahoe, a log cabin made from locally sourced *San'raa* trees. The vista from the lounging area was expansive, allowing them to see the lake and the Eastern side of the *Berkaal* mountains beyond. The bedroom had a huge bed and a very nice bathroom with a choice of a shower or tub. The tub was interesting, being made from a clear composite material.

They changed clothes, putting on their swim togs for a quick dip in the water. Krista had brought a little black bikini that she had purchased back on Earth, so that was her apparel for their swim. They grabbed a fluffy towel apiece that was hanging by the door to the beach and went down to the water's edge.

The mountain air was about seventy degrees so after being in what was an average of ninety-five degree temperatures all of this time, the coolness felt nice to Jeff. The water was hovering about seventy-five so the lake felt inviting as they waded out on the sandy bottom. Once in to his waist, Jeff dove in and swam underwater for a ways before he came up. Momentarily, Krista came up in front of him, smiling.

"If I could, I would just live here, in one of the private homes on the other side of the lake." she offered up as she wiped the water off of her face.

Jeff turned and looked to examine the small estates across the water. "Are they expensive?"

"We might be able to buy one of the smaller places." she replied as she laid back to float in the water. "I know my father would like to live here but he doesn't want to fly for two *Heth* each way, every work day."

Jeff smiled. "The age-old problem of commuting is found someplace other than on Earth."

"He has a point." Krista offered up. "Would you want to do that every day?"

Jeff smiled at his *One Love*. "I see what you're getting at." After he kissed her, he continued with his thoughts. "You know, if Harvey and Susan stay here, maybe they would go in with us and maybe your parents, too. We could buy a small estate to use as a retreat."

"Maybe mother and father would be interested in that offer." she mused. "What I want to know right now is, whether or not you're going to water ski while we're here."

"I love to ski but it's been a few years since I've been skiing, ever since my neighbor Stan Galli sold his boat to his kids. That was maybe four years ago."

"Why don't you give it a try?" she suggested. "I think all you can do is fall down and get wet, am I right?"

“Okay, I’ll try it.” He looked at his timepiece, checking the time. “We had better go do that later, because I don’t like to ski on a full stomach. Gives me cramps.”

“Tomorrow, then.” Krista agreed. “I would guess you’re getting hungry again?”

“You would be right.” Jeff retorted.

“And you would like your new *One Love* to fix that meal for you?” she queried with a smile.

“That would be really nice.” he said with a big smile.

“I think we have meat slices in the cooling unit, provided for us.” Krista offered up. “I can put us together a cold meat sandwich apiece and I spotted some fruit on the counter that would go with our meal.”

“That sounds good.” Jeff mused. “Let’s go do that, then.”

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Arrissa Wrraal shook her head as she closed Retten’s eyes, knowing she had done what she could to save his life. It would have been nice to have had a doctor to help but he was the first to fall from light arms fire coming from outside their supposed safe house.

The Bil mercenary, whom they had come to know was named Chalmka Avan, was killed trying to pull the doctor from the line of fire. The femme *Fask-aal* did not escape injury either, having taken a round to the left arm, a grazing shot that opened a stripe on her hide that was bleeding profusely. Taking a bandage roll in her good hand, she wrapped her bicep tightly to stem the flow of blood. Just about the time she finished her wrapping, her hubby stepped through the frame of the shattered glass door, thoroughly pissed off.

“He was a *fracking* coward!” Argess growled as he came back into the cottage, carrying a body over his shoulder. He let the pale gray Elazi male drop unceremoniously to the floor, obviously deceased. “The *Grakking Naq-fra* took his own life, rather than tell me who he worked for.” The huge leonid male chuffed in disgust as he threw the assailant’s identification to his wife.

“He was not smart,” she mused, looking to see who they had been fired upon by. “A good merc doesn’t carry identification.” When she looked up at her hubby for confirmation, he tossed her a ring.

“A member of the *Tah’Ganh*, if that is what he was, should not be acting as a mercenary. They were pacifists and politicians.” Argess retorted. The ring looked like a *Tah’Nash* ring, only the stone in the middle of the bauble was a deep orange.

“*Tah’Ganh?*” Arrissa questioned. “Have they not been disbanded for several tens of cycles?”

“I think they have become active again. I have heard some mutterings that suggested a splinter group of *Tah’Nash* were reactivating the *Tah’Ganh Order*.” Argess offered up. “He carried the traditional ‘Knife Of Bends’ that was a trademark of theirs.” He pulled the unusual weapon

with an undulating cutting edge from his belt and gave it to his mate for examination. “The ring, that knife, it all says they have returned.”

“I’m sorry, Argess. Retten is dead. I could not save him.” Arrissa put on the table. His death had deeply disturbed her.

“He knew.” the male felid stated. “Retten knew who we were to find. I think we should go back to his flat and search his files for the answers that he would not provide us, for whatever reasons he had. I will also mourn the passing of a fellow *Tah’Nash*.”

“Yes, we will do that.” she agreed. “We will need to avenge the death of Retten. He was a soldier in arms.”

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Krista was fiddling with her communicator, acting as if she were trying to take a selfie of her and her hubby. Jeff was confused by the fact she was not even getting him in the full frame on each attempt. That was not like her.

“Kitten, having problems?” he asked as they enjoyed an evening meal on the hotel patio.

“Yes, Sweetheart.” she replied. “Could you scoot closer to me? Your head is in the way.”

“My head?”

“Yes, you are in the way. Scoot over here,” she asked again, showing him where she wanted him to sit.

Once Jeff had moved over as asked, Krista took another picture. “Sweetheart, act as if I took a picture of us.” she whispered quietly. While he watched and made various comments about a picture that was not on the screen, she sent a picture of two Elazi beings sitting at a table behind them to Na’Mara. Momentarily, the two unknowns behind them got up from their meal and left the area quickly.

“What was that all about?” Jeff asked.

“That pair has followed us, ever since we landed. I took a picture of their registration numbers on their skimmer but the ident number didn’t come back as a viable combination.” she offered up. “I’m not sure if they are reporters or whatever but I want to find out who they are.”

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Once out of range of the dining patio, the male Elazi stopped the femme with him. He checked to see that they had not been followed before he made a comment.

“I think she has made us.” the pale gray male put forth. “What do you think?”

“Maybe and maybe not. She looked like she was trying to take a picture of the two of them.” the blue-black femme replied.

“Tomorrow, we will have to be more careful. We must stay in the shadows.” he suggested.

“What if they go do this water skiing thing? I overheard their conversation in the water.” she asked. “We will not be able to follow them if they take part in that activity.”

He looked back toward where they had come from. “We will have to play our hand when it is appropriate. Until such time, we will just watch and take no action.”