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“Scribe”

by Kellan Meig'h

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Becoming Familiar”

The newly wedded couple returned to their cabin after their late meal only to find an unknown femme Elazi sitting on their front porch, fiddling with a tablet. As Jeff parked their cart, the smoky female stood and straightened her clothing, something that could be called business casual. This unidentified being waited until they were within comfortable speaking range to introduce herself.

“Hello, I am Na'Cemi Gammel'lan from the Port Provincial News. I was hoping to get an exclusive interview with the two of you.”

Jeff shook her hand that offered in an Earth manner. “So, you know who we are, then?”

She looked down in embarrassment. “I have my contacts here and there. I was alerted when you landed at the resort.”

Jeff was curious now. “So, you had no idea if you would get an interview or not if you just showed up on our doorstep, unannounced.” he stated more than asked.

“You are correct, Saar Andrews'lan.” she admitted. “I'm not affiliated fully with the Port Provincial News. I work article by article for my pay.”

“I see.” Jeff mused. He then turned to his mate. “Kitten, do you feel up to an interview?”

“I don't have any objections.” she offered up.

“Come inside, Mere Gammel'lan.” Jeff bid. “We will give you a short interview, as long as you can keep the interview from being biased.”

The reporter nodded in agreement. “I will keep it non-biased. In fact, I should mention that I am for mixed species joinings.”

Once the had entered the cabin, Krista offered the reporter a lounge chair before she went into the food preparation area to put together some refreshments. She brought out some sparkling water and some fresh berries to snack on, placing them on the low table in the sitting area.

“I want to thank both of you in advance for this interview.” Na'Cemi offered up. “House Tal-Hassanai posted some video of the event on their news channel but it was just that. I thought an actual in-person interview would be very newsworthy.”

Jeff nodded. “Where would you like to start?”

“How about some background for both of you?” the reporter replied.

The human male nodded and cleared his throat. “Very well, I was born in a city called Roseville, in the state of California. That is on the Western coast of the North American continent . . .”

“What is he saying?” the ebony femme asked, still trying to lip-read what Jeff was telling to the news-femme. Her accomplice was using a better set of spyglasses to do just that, figuring out what information was being exchanged.

“I am having trouble with this,” her gray accomplice replied in an irritated tone, taking a moment to adjust the blinds over a window in their cabin. “There is a bush that keeps getting in the way when the wind blows and I am having a *jekking* time reading his lips. How he can talk properly with such a small mouth, I will never know.”

“Well, what can you make out?” The femme was at another window by the back door to their digs, trying her best to spy on their marks.

“He seems to be telling of his time in service to his planet.” was the answer.

The femme frowned. “Dallen, can you read Na'Krista? I can't see her clearly from my vantage point. A tree is somewhat in the way when she leans forward in her chair.”

“I cannot see her face, Sa'Vesa. That blasted reporter is directly in my line of sight.”

The dark femme frowned. “We need a listening device in their cabin, if it is possible. We need to know when they plan to return to their station.”

“Maybe while they're doing this water skiing activity?” Dallen suggested.

Vesa nodded. “Yes, while they are occupied.” She got up from her post and went to the food preparation area, taking her time in putting together a light treat for them. She brought the snacks out and sat them on the table, waiting for Dallen to close the blinds. Sa'Vesa turned on the lights over the table real low and opened a bottle of *White Fire* from Na'Krista's distillery before she sat down.

“*White Fire* and extra dark chocolate,” Dallen commented, joining her at the table. “Do you have something in mind?”

she smiled back, offering him a glass of the potent drink. “I thought, since we can't do what needs to be done until tomorrow, maybe you and I could get a little wild in bed.”

“This looks like you're wishing to be very wild, if you ask me.” he replied. “So much chocolate just for the two of us?”

“I will only have a piece or two.” she put forth. “I do not wish an alcohol and chocolate induced headache in the morning.”

“Well then, just a piece or two.” As she reached for some, he had to comment on her intended choices. “And not those two big pieces. That will be too much.”

Sa'Vesa smiled at him mischievously and took the two largest, almost palm-sized portions for herself. Dallen rolled his eyes and shook his head in dismay, knowing this would be a very long night for them.

Mere Gammel'lan tapped on the screen of her tablet, arranging the notes to help make sense of them later. That was one of the first things she learned in what passed for a college on Elazia. Happy with the results, she sat her device in her lap.

“Thank you again,” she offered up. “I hope I haven't kept you from things you wanted to do this evening.”

Jeff nodded. “No, we were not planning anything. I do want to ask you a question; why are you for mixed species joinings? I'm curious now.”

Na'Cemi picked up her tablet and tapped it a few times to bring up an image of her, standing with a soldier, most likely a *Fask-aal* by his uniform of black leather. “Ggarl Rremmra and I are planning to ask for permission to be joined. He has already asked for permission to join my birth House, House Tal-Reshentai. They seem to be accepting of him but they have not ruled yet. If they rule against, I will go to his planet and we will be joined there. By doing so, Elazia has to acknowledge our status. That is by charter between our planets.”

“Now I understand. You have a stake in this, so to speak.” Krista mused.

Na'Cemi smiled. “You two have set the precedence. I'm hoping, by bringing this story to the masses, it will help them to be more accepting of mixed species marriages. We have let the Bil incursion into our culture to be a sore spot that will not heal. There are a number of Elazi-born Bil that live and work on this planet. It is unfair to make divisions like we have that prevent their being a full citizen with rights to join. The Bil are peaceful now and they are our major planetary trade partner. They do not deserve this. None of us deserve this.”

This piqued Jeff's curiosity now. “So, Ggarl is *Fask-aal*? And what is his position or rank?”

She smiled again. “Ggarl is Saa'naani born, a citizen of Saa'naa. He joined the *Fask-aal Protectorate* as a Rite of Passage called *Shem-Gaa*. It is something that a young male goes through, a ritual that is old and maybe dying on their world. He is a Squad Technician Rank Six, in charge of the electronics in their group. I do believe he could build a tablet from castaway common home items. I think on Earth, he would be called a MacGuyver.”

“I can relate to that.” Jeff stated. “Always the man you look to in your squad to fix whatever it is that needs repair.”

“That is his way.” Na'Cemi agreed. “I should be going now. I have taken up enough of your time already.”

The newly joined couple saw their guest to the door and as soon as she had left them, Jeff turned to see his bride getting naked, right in the middle of the gathering area.

“I see,” he mused, smiling at the mischievous look on her face. “So, what are we going to do about your claws?”

Na'Krista went to their bedroom and came back with a wooden box that reminded Jeff of another box he has observed somewhere else. She opened the container to show off a set of ceremonial claw caps, sized to her claws when they were fully sharpened.

“They are dull.” she pointed out. “This way, we don't need any other form of protection.”

Jeff took one from the case and tested it just to be sure. Just as she had indicated, they were highly rounded at the tip.

“Satisfied?” she asked.

“I think so. These will do just fine.” Jeff took her by the hand and led her to the couch where he made her sit down. Kneeling down in front of her, he carefully applied the sheaths, making sure they were tight as he went. Once her claws were covered, he took her by the hands, helped her to her feet and guided her to their bedroom.

Na'Krista waited patiently while Jeff undressed and rolled back the covers. They got into bed but before he turned out the lights, he had to know;

“Kitten, nothing to help get us in the mood tonight?”

“Not tonight, Sweetheart.” she replied. “I want this evening to be very relaxed and for us to take our time. I want to know you better, your touch, your hands on my body but I want you to take it slow and gentle. Make me remember this night always.”

Jeff killed the lights and rolled over to take his *One Love* in his arms. He kissed her gently on the lips, then he made her lay flat on the bed as he started to make his way down her body in exploration. She giggled when he tickled her neck as he kissed her there and gasped loudly when his lips made it to her left breast.

Krista laid there squirming on the bed, trying not to pounce her husband while savoring every gentle touch and caress to her body. In her opinion, he certainly knew what was needed to ignite a fire inside of her. She just hoped she had the control to last a while longer.

That issue was quickly becoming debatable when Jeff gently cupped her sex, running his fingers ever so softly through the short pelt surrounding her womanhood. She knew this was going to be a rough night, even if it was enjoyable for her. She had asked for this, after all.

Several *Heth* later, Na'Krista tried to get her breath back, having been 'treated' to a complete over-stimulation of her body and mind by her *One Love*. Her whole body tingled and she was seeing spots dancing before her eyes. She knew she would remember this night forever.

“Are you okay, Kitten?” Jeff asked while laying on his side, watching his mate recover from their slow, heartfelt interaction with one another. He had followed her wishes and took his sweet time in pleasuring his new wife.

“I . . . I . . . um . . . ungh.” Krista tried to say something but her head was still spinning. She took a deep breath and tried again. “I had no idea an Earth man could do those things to me. I, um, I almost passed out several times. I have never felt like this in my life.”

“Did I rock your world again?” he asked out of curiosity.

“You rocked my whole universe, all the way to the farthest quadrants.” she admitted. “I can see why Elazi femmes want to join with an Earth man. I have heard from the femme troops on Earth, no Elazi male can measure up to an Earther.”

Jeff pulled her over to him and started to scratch her back, gently, right above the base of her tail while he nibbled her neck some more. She arched her body toward him in response as the intense feelings shot straight up her spine to her pleasure center.

“Sweetheart, you're fanning the flames again.” she warned.

“I'm doing exactly what I intended to do, Kitten.” he retorted. “Any complaints?”

“Nuh . . . No, I will not complain.” she offered up as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. “I will remember this night until I am gone, having passed through the mist and I am just a distant memory in my descendant's minds and hearts.”

Na'Kesta arched her back as she straddled her mate, then she laid down on Kamram's chest, nuzzling against his neck. It had been a while for them, when they had taken the time to just be with one another, giving very personal pleasure.

“What do you think Krista and Jeff are doing right now?” she asked quietly in his ear.

Kam hugged his mate before he answered. “They are probably doing what we are doing. What else would a newly joined couple do?”

Kess nipped his ear, gently. “They might be arguing. You remember Kalram and Sa'Kimsa had an argument over which side of the bed belonged to whom. That was a silly argument.”

“Well, I guess if you put it that . . .” His communicator chimed, letting him know it was a secure call. He pressed the accept button and announced himself. “Saar Keth'lan.”

“This is Dallen.” the male voice offered up.

“News?” Kam asked.

“Just a reporter from the Coast Provincial News. She left about thirty *Munar* ago.”

“That's fine. I told her where to find them but I instructed her not to say I told her their location. As fortune would have it, I still knew the code for Na'Krista's skimmer tracking module.”

The voice asked an important question; “Saar, any further requests?”

“No further requests. You have Marlett's communicator code and he is just five *Munar* away with one-half of Orange Detachment.”

“Thank you, Saar.” The connection to this mysterious “Dallen” closed with no further words exchanged.

Kess crossed her arms on Kam's chest and raised an eyebrow. “Would you like to explain yourself, Saar Kamram Saanar Keth'lan?” She almost never used his full honorific unless he was in trouble with her.

He held onto his *One Love* as he rolled over onto his side. “I received an anonymous call that alerted me to a Trexis Mercenary that had been found. He was in the hills across from our retreat compound and by all indications, he may have been murdered at what is believed to be a short distance. Initial inspection suggests he was killed by what might have been a close support carbine of some manufacture. Empty casings for that type of rifle were found nearby.

“Hallett found a picture of Krista in a pocket of this mercenary's clothing. A recent picture. In the Trexannis language was a note on the image that said she was the target.”

“No . . .” Kess blanched at that news. “You sent someone to watch them, then?”

“I'm sorry, I should have told you before now. I have sent a highly trusted associate to do my bidding.” Kam kissed his *One Love* and held her tight to comfort her. “I have sent out feelers, to find out who is behind this. I have my suspicions but I cannot openly make accusations. I have to be sure of who it is that's behind this.”

Na'Kesta hesitated before voicing her feelings. “You know, It was always rumored that Dassan killed Sa'Kayla and their father. It was clear he was never happy with his sister getting first pick of the divided lands. Whoever killed both of them knew them. There were no signs of struggle in either murder.” That statement bothered Kamram. It was a fact, though.

“Kess, I feel that may be one of many logical assumptions but I cannot make that accusation without hard facts to back it up.” her partner replied. “I do not know what to think concerning

Dassan. We are related, you know. How could a being kill their own blood kin? Was it over the land deeded to my mother?"

Na'Kesta knew she had to say something about it. "Kam, I have heard rumors that Dassan is sick with Phasic Disease. It is in the middle stages, from what has been whispered. Phasic causes a male to become mentally unstable. I heard he contracted it during the first assault on the Northern Varpur smelting plants. He came into contact with liquid Phaslanic Sulphate that the Ezed-Comeri were using as a smelting flux."

That brought up old memories for Kam. "I remember when he had come into contact with something toxic. They were taking him with the others from the first wave to the infirmary aboard the *Fire Lance* while we were loading out. Our assignment was to go down to the smelters for the second attempt at taking back the facility." Kam offered up. "He was old even then, being forty-one cycles older than me and a Flank Commander at that. I was only a Trooper Grade Five at the time. We had no business sending the older males to fight a war that was for the young. The Ezed-Comeri sent their young, most not more than twenty cycles old. They died by the scores as did our troopers."

"So, Marlett and half of Orange Detachment are where, that they are so close by?" Na'Kesta asked.

"They are on a ridge at the far Northern end of *Lake Azimn*, using an armored troop carrier as a base of operations. They have two armored skimmers that they can use to be at the other end of the lake in five *Munar*." That seemed to settle her mind a bit.

"I trust Marlett with this, even if I am upset about the situation." she offered up.

"I too am upset." Kam agreed. "We can only do what we can without overstepping legal boundaries."

Sa'Zarren walked into Dassan's study and stood at the archway for a moment, trying to decide how to phrase this piece of news. She had received a communique from a Lawkeeper out of *San'Hedron*, a small, quiet enclave North of *Kas'Madelle*. The message was in regards to a tragic event that involved family.

"Zarren, is there a problem?" the old one asked.

"Yes, there is. I was informed by a Lawkeeper just a few *Munar* ago, Retten is dead. He was murdered by an assailant that took his own life afterward. There were two other beings in the home with them, a Bil mercenary and an Elazi doctor."

Dassan looked down at his desk as he shook his head slowly. "He was a good male, someone that you could rely on."

His mate had to know. "Did you know Retten was *Tah'Nash*?"

“I did not know that.” Dassan replied. That was an outright lie he just told to his *One Love*. He knew Retten was *Tah'Nash* and because of his affiliation, Dassan knew his nephew would follow orders.

Sa'Zarren felt something was wrong with this answer, the way he said it, but she decided to keep her mouth shut about it for now. “We were Retten's last elder relatives. It is up to us to see to his passing rituals.”

“I know.” the old one offered up. “He will be interred in the Trent'lan Crypt, near his parents. There is more than enough space for his body to be placed on the shelf below them. He will be right next to his brother Tannen. You remember Tannen died when *The Ground Support Ship Farangh* was destroyed in the first wave. That was when we went to take back the capitol of Comeri Prime.”

“And how would you know the amount of free space in the Trent'lan crypt?” she asked. That seemed like an odd fact to know.

“I was there a few ten-days ago.” he replied. “I was inspecting my final resting spot, on the shelf right below my parents. Actually, there is enough room in that spot for both of us. I guess I should tell you something but I think you know already. I have Phasic Disease. Second stage.”

“I had suspected as much, Dassan. You take medications that are only for Phasic Disease. You have been taking Quelazine and Darkrln. Those are only prescribed for Second Stage, nothing else.”

“Then you understand?” he asked. Dassan stood and went to his *One Love*, taking her in his arms and hugging her tightly. “I don't think I have much longer. Six, maybe ten years at the most. I will also admit that I am afraid of death, Zarren. I am afraid to pass through the mist.”

“Das, there will be family waiting for you.” she stated as she held her *Significant Other*, feeling him tremble in her embrace. “You know the answer to *The Riddle Of War* and our ancestors will help you pass through the mist. The scriptures say so.”

“I know that.” he offered. “It is a foreboding feeling, though.” He knew why it was foreboding; Sa'Kayla and their father would not let him pass through the mist, no matter what. At his end, he would have to be judged by *Od'Tra The Wise* for his crimes and transgressions. That resultant judgment would without a doubt, send him to the *Eternal Fires*. That was his biggest fear.

Sa'Zarren left her *One Love's* study and made her way to the sitting area in their bedroom. Taking a seat in her soft recliner, she made herself comfortable as she turned on the light beside her chair. While she waited for her tablet to finish booting, she gave thought to the conversation she just had with Dassan.

He was sick, just as she thought he was. Phasic Disease was fatal, with one exception. The Comeri claimed it was the same illness that befell their troops during the siege of Varpor's smelting facilities. They had found a cure but the monetary conversion from Elazi Crown to Comerian Vannt was very high. One would have to be rich to afford the cure.

How would it benefit Dassan to gain land, she mused. Even if he had the entire Keth'lan holdings, he would fall quite short of funds for a chance at a longer life. There must have been something there that was worth a fortune, something that he had killed for before and something that he would kill again to achieve.

“Maybe it is time to speak with Kamram and Na'Kesta about this.” she mused out loud.

“Zarren, do not. Do not alert Dassan that you suspect a thing.” a voice spoke up. Her father through joining stepped into the light and sat down on the hassock by her feet.

“Father Rellen?”

“I cannot stay long.” he offered up to his daughter through joining. “We have told you before, we are watching over this. We will allow no harm to come to any of our family.”

The dark femme was shaken but she had to know. “How are you watching over us? You are dead!”

“I am . . . neither living nor dead, in the literal sense.” he replied, taking her hands in his. “I can exist fully only on the nether plane of this existence. I cannot pass through the mist nor return to your plane of life until Dassan dies and accepts his fate for Sa'Kayla's and my murder. Which way I will pass when he is judged, I do not know. Only *Od'Tra The Wise* knows and as the scriptures say, he will not tell a soul.”

“Father Rellen, I must . . .” He let go of her hands, or rather they started to lose substance.

“I will return.” Rellen at that moment just vanished before her eyes.

Sa'Zarren reached into the pocket on the side of her lounge and removed her bottle of *Sarraun* Brandy. A handy water tumbler made an acceptable receptacle for several fingers worth, which she slammed back quickly. Now she wished in her heart that she had never met Dassan.

Trooper Sa'Vesi Derrel'lan placed her communique on hold so she could step inside her office, close the door and continue her conversation in private. She did take the time to sit down and make herself comfortable before proceeding with what might turn out to be a distasteful parlay.

“Now, what were you asking of me, Commander?” she questioned, not sure she had heard the request right. If the individual was petitioning this of her, it was a wrong thing to do.

“I was asking you to keep track of the Keth'lans for me and report their locations. I need to know where they are at all times. It is important to me, Trooper Derrel'lan.”

That request irked her to no end. “Why should I do such a thing? I have a great posting as *Number One* in Orange Detachment. Why would I jeopardize that?” She looked out at the

remainder of her detachment, asleep in their cots, the ones left under her command while Sub-Commander Marlett Blane'lan was on an impromptu mission of sorts.

“You owe me for our time on Varpor's second moon and for saving your behind when the *Fast Interdiction Ship The Konneg* went down. I saved all of you from sure death.” the voice suggested.

His faulty recollection of the situations he spoke of annoyed her to no end but she had to use her indoor voice to continue their conversation and keep it private. “Commander, if I remember right, I was the one that led all of our units' assaults on the smelting complexes, since I operated the electronic jamming and directed the heavy rifles. I also remember dragging your sorry *jekking* behind into the last escape pod and manually kicking it away from *The Konneg* when her batteries finally failed!”

“How dare you speak that way to a superior officer!” the male blurted out. “I should . . .” Sa'Vesi rudely interrupted him.

“You, Commander, are retired, no longer in service to our planet!” she hissed back. “I may show you some respect for your rank and your cycles in service to The Trans-Atmospheric Forces but I am under no writ that says I have to follow your orders!”

“You are showing no respect to me right now!” he countered.

Sa'Vesi lost her cool at that point. “Respect is earned, *Flank Commander!* You cannot buy it, you cannot use blackmail to get it, you cannot gain it through sleeping with an enlisted trooper, against her will! I should have torn your reproducing glands from your body and shoved them down your throat with the butt of my squad impulse rifle when I had the chance, *Flank Commander!*”

The voice on the other end was getting heated, too. “You wanted it, Trooper!”

“I did?!?” Trooper Derrel'lan riposted. “Why was I tied to your bunk? Why don't you tell me, Flank Commander? You got me drunk, fed me some pills to keep me from passing out and you had your way with me, Saar! Does your *One Love* know you did that to me? Does she? Should I tell her what you . . .” Now it was Sa'Vesi's turn to be interrupted.

“You do not have the nerve to do such a thing to your Commanding offic . . .”

“Commander, *I would.*” she stated bitterly as she broke into his diatribe. “I would and I should, just to stab you in the *fracking* heart! I probably should tell you, I have a copy of the cabin video from that encounter. I have held onto it *all this time* because I knew you would eventually come crawling back, asking for something. Well, now you have. *What say you*, Commander?”

“You wouldn't dare!” the voice shouted loudly.

“I would dare, Flank Commander! How much Crown is this *Heth* of video worth to you? It would destroy you politically and wreck your joining! I ask again, *What Say You?*”

That information fired the commander up. “Why, you sorry *jekking* excuse for anti-radiation reflecting chaff . . .” She interrupted his rant one more time, tersely.

“*Frack You, Commander! Frack You, you sorry, uneducated, Jekking Grakker!* If you do not stay *The Frack* out of my sights, I *will do whatever is needed to destroy you! Do You Fracking UNDERSTAND ME, Flank Commander?!?*”

Sa'Vesi broke off the call before she knew she would really start screaming at that sorry old bastard and wake everyone up. Carefully setting her communicator on her desk, she took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves enough to keep her composure. Taking a stoker, something like an Earth Macanudo cigar and a few items with her, she walked quietly through the quarters and out of the front door. Fortunately, nobody was on the patio at the moment.

She cut the blunt end of her smoke to expose the fill, then she notched open the tapered end. Putting it to her lips, she carefully lit the big end with her jet-lighter. Several puffs later, enjoying the aroma and taste of the bad habit perched between her fingers, she realized a breeze was coming off of the Western slope of the Central *Berkaal* mountains. That cool air always made things better.

“*Number One?*” a voice behind her asked, startling her. She turned to see Trooper Ronmet Crail'lan standing just inside the door, looking concerned. “Sa'Vesi, is something wrong? I heard you shouting at someone on your communicator.”

“Come out here, Ron and close the door. We don't want to wake anyone up.” she directed. When he joined her, he had a pack of Earth-sourced Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes in his possession. He shook one of the ebony cancer-sticks out and lit it, taking a long drag on it to get that first hit of nicotine.

“I don't know what I'll do when I run out of these.” the ebony-hued male mused. “Now, is there something we need to help you with, *Number One?*” he asked. “It is our duty to assist you in any way. This is just between us, *Number Two* to his *Number One.*”

“No, I don't require your assistance, although I am grateful.” she replied. “It was an old distasteful acquaintance that asked for something that I would not do for him.”

Ronmet nodded in understanding. “You sounded pretty riled up in your office. Um, by the way, since my bunk is right by your door, it was hard not to overhear your conversation. That Flank Commander must be a total *Grakker* by the sounds of it.”

“Ron, that's what I like about you; you are very honest with your thoughts.”

“Thank you, Sa'Vesi.”

“I do have a question for my *Number Two.*” she put on the table. “How many packs of those Russian cigarettes did you Gray-Zone import?”

“Not many.” he replied sheepishly. “I paid some extra Crown to ship two pallets of them back with us.”

“Above board. I like that.” she mused. “I hear you have a little enterprise on the side. Pray tell, what would you deal in that might interest me?”

The dark-hued male shrugged his left shoulder. “Mostly cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, light roast coffee beans and good Russian Vodka. I also try to get Jack Daniels and Johnny Walker Red when I can.”

“Do you have Stolichnaya?” she hoped.

“How much would you like?” Ron smiled slightly as he stated, “The *Dresh-An* brought me a pallet of Stoli.”

Sa'Vesi just shook her head. It would appear to her, Orange Detachment will be a great group of soldiers to serve with.

Sub-Commander Marlett Blane'lan and Medic Tascal Hone'lan were sitting in some folding chairs, enjoying the evening breeze and a light repast. The others were sleeping or trying to sleep, finding themselves at a heightened state of alert. Marlett and Tascal, however were elder troopers, used to the tedious aspects of such a mission.

“I hear they are doing something called Water Skiing behind a watercraft.” Marlett stated. “I think, if I can find time, I would like to give this a try.”

“It seems interesting.” the solid white paramedic offered up. “I watched for a bit before dark. They have planks with boots mounted to them that they put on their feet. The watercraft then pulls them across the water. It does not look easy.”

“I didn't think it would be easy,” the ebony-hued commander agreed as he checked the readouts on the perimeter motion devices. “Hmm, another *Tevinaugh* approaching. Just about directly South.”

“I have it.” Tascal commented when his infra-red goggles came to life, showing him exactly where the small, toothy critter was located. “You know, on Earth there is a creature called a squirrel. Imagine a *Tevinaugh* without meat-tearing teeth.”

“I observed many of those when I was on Earth. At least they didn't try to eat me.” the taller one mused.

The medic removed a small improvised hand weapon from his bag and readied it. The grip and body were made by a hot electro-print process, using a high strength polymer. The prods at the front were sourced from a decommissioned chest retractor and the elastic was a piece of polyhydric elastane surgical tubing.

Tascal pulled back the elastic, nocking it into the trigger sear to charge his weapon. He then placed his projectile, a thin, straight piece of wood used to skewer the last meal meat they barbecued, into its track. The fletching was made from surgical tape, carefully applied.

He took careful aim, controlling his heartbeat and steadying his nerves. At the proper moment, he pulled the trigger, launching the projectile into his quarry all the way to the fletching. The small mammal dropped in its tracks.

“There you go, Saar.” Tascal commented. “I’ll go get it and you can prepare it. First meal will be very tasty tomorrow. I think that makes eighteen that I have gotten on that same dart.”

“Yes, fresh meat for first meal.” Marlett agreed as he readied his skinning knife. Nothing beat the little critters for a meat to add to a meal.

“Marlett, how do you feel about being in charge of Orange Detachment?” the medic asked once he returned with his kill.

“It is a good posting.” the tall one replied.

“I have been thinking of retiring.” Tascal somewhat blurted out.

“Retiring? How many cycles do you have in service?” his superior wanted to know.

“I have thirty. That is enough to retire with close to full benefits and pay. I served seven of those cycles in a hostile zone with two cycles on the surface of Varpur Prime and one cycle on Terra Prime, before I joined Orange Detachment.”

Marlett did the math in his head. “Yes, almost full pay. Ninety-six point three-one. Not bad. What would you do when you retire? Do you have a *One Love* I don't know about?”

“My *One Love* is back on Earth. She is human.” After a moment, Tascal continued. “We thought we might start a medical clinic somewhere that does not have one local to the community. My *One Love* is a doctor, too.”

“When will your *One Love* join you?”

“I think I will be returning to Earth.” the white-furred doctor offered up. “On Earth, the indigenous First Americans have issues with health on the small portions of land allotments they live on. Sarah Longbow is First American, a Sioux and I will say, she is very proud of that fact. She wishes to return to her people and help out where she can. I think that would be a life-long commitment.”

“How will you fit in on Earth?” the Sub-Commander asked.

“I have been to several reservations, their lands where I was received warmly by her people. Human anatomy is not far off at all from Comeri so I think I would fit in well.”

Marlett finished his task by putting the prepared *Tevinaugh* in the cooler, keeping it for mornings' first meal. This conversation with his medic forced him to give thought to what he would do once retired. As a soldier, he didn't have a large skillset so it would be necessary to return to school for some additional training. Even at that, he had no idea what he would do for a living. There was one thing that did interest him; working as an interpreter. He could speak

English with almost no accent, if need be and he had a firm grasp on the ins and outs of the language, as it was said on Earth.