

Lust, greed, and desire know no boundaries in space, time. With the invention of the subspace warp engine, the universe opened to humanity. What would aliens want from us? To Earth's horror, it would be man himself.

Senah

By Paul Van Tine

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SENAH



Lust, greed, and desire know no boundaries
in space, time, or among different species

PAUL VAN TINE

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Chapter 4

Talak 4 was located at the extreme edge of known space for the Pavonians. It was far enough past any existing outposts that any fear of discovery by Imperial agents was remote. The place was a mineral treasure trove. New deposits of gold, silver, platinum, copper, and iron ore were discovered daily. It was precisely what Senshâ Trenah PerValen had commanded Senah to find. The samples of the latest mines they had collected were neatly packed away, awaiting their return. The first shipments of ore had already been dispatched to Kanpur. The Senshâ was ecstatic and soon dispatched additional personnel to expand exploitation of this resource-rich, uninhabited planet. That was the only flaw in the otherwise perfect solution to House QuaTrebia's problems.

Centuries previously, the Pavonians had conquered a planet close to their mother world. A planet called Ghurid. The native population had proved to be as valuable to the Pavonians as the planet's resources. The Ghurids were a sturdy race. They stood almost two meters tall and possessed tough, leathery skin ranging in color from a coppery brown to a dark, mottled green; they had red eyes and tremendous strength and stamina. But best of all, at least for the Pavonians, they were docile and would do anything their masters demanded of them. "One master is as good as another," was a Ghurid saying; they were more than cattle but less than men in the eyes of the Pavonians. A few days earlier, a new shipment of Ghurids had arrived to help expand and accelerate the production of gold and silver from Talak 4.

Senah examined the sack of ore that was placed before him.

"Where did you find this?" he asked.

"To the west of the mountains, close to the coast," his subordinate, Qalaat, replied.

"Show me."

The trip over the mountains would take about an hour. The juvenile behemoth, only around 100 meters long, crossed the distance quickly and quietly. What the survey master showed him astounded

Senah. Yet another massive vein of gold had been discovered to the west. Twenty Ghurids accompanied Senah and his survey master. They were given instructions on what to look for and dispatched across the region to find what they could.

Senah and Qalaat leaned over an outcropping, trying to determine the quality of the ore. The sound of footsteps and a falling rock got their attention.

“Senah, look,” Qalaat said. “We have visitors,” he added. “What are they?”

The aliens looked as startled to see Senah and his party as Senah and his party were. Stepping a few steps forward, he examined the creatures that had so suddenly appeared. They looked almost Pavonian, but there were significant differences.

“*Sto kra tin?*” (Who are you?) Senah yelled.

Andrew shrugged his shoulders before responding.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand,” he replied.

Taking a few steps closer, Senah stopped and sniffed the air.

“Do you smell it, Qalaat?” he asked.

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “How is this possible?”

Senah struggled to keep his mind clear, yet the subtle scent of pakraa filled the air.

Qalaat raised a horn that hung at his side and sounded it. The sound of the horn filled the canyon, echoing beyond. Almost immediately, the Ghurids began to return, responding to their master’s summons.

Andrew and Mark stepped back, alarmed by the appearance of these new aliens. The two in front of them looked essentially human; the others, however, did not. They appeared to be about six feet tall, humanoid, with leathery, mottled green skin. Worst of all, their eyes were red and lidless.

Slowly and inexorably, the Ghurids began to surround Mark and Andrew.

“Andrew, you make a break for it. I’ll hold them here as long as I can,” Mark said.

“I’m not leaving you. Either we both make it out or stay here,” he replied.

Moving his hand up to his collar, he called the *Intrepid*.

“Come in, *Intrepid*. Do you copy, Diego?” he said.

“Loud and clear, Andrew. What’s up?” Diego responded.

“We have found what may be indigenous locals. So far, they have shown no overt aggression, but Mark and I are surrounded. Contact the girls at base camp and have them evacuate to the *Callisto*. If necessary, have them activate the autopilot and return to the *Intrepid*. I’ll keep you informed as to conditions here.”

“Andrew, I can pilot the *Ganymede* down to pick you up if necessary.”

“It may come to that. But for now, we don’t appear to be in mortal danger. Talbot out.”

Senah raised a hand and barked out an order. The Ghurids stopped moving and stood still.

“We have alarmed them with our servants,” Qalaat said.

“The one with yellow hair was speaking to the wind, or so it seems,” Senah replied.

Senah barked another order, and the Ghurids began to back up, giving Mark and Andrew a wide berth. Slowly, Senah approached them, opening his arms wide. Tentatively, Andrew stepped towards him and repeated the gesture.

“*Brin salak ru, Senah*,” he said.

“Did you catch any of that? Mark asked.

“*Brin salak ru, Senah*,” he repeated, pointing to himself, “Senah.”

“I think he might be telling you his name?” Mark suggested.

Pointing at himself, Mark repeated his name, then pointed at Andrew.

“Andrew, Mark,” he kept repeating.

Senah stared at him with his purple eyes, smiling slightly.

“Mark,” he said, looking at him. Turning to Andrew, he repeated his name.

Making a sweeping motion, he invited them to follow him.

“What do you think he wants?” asked Mark.

“It’s obvious he wants us to follow him,” Andrew replied.

Looking around at the Ghurids, he was filled with indecision. At last, he straightened his back. Looking over at Mark, he made his decision.

“Well, we came here to explore. Let’s explore.”

They climbed down the embankment where they had retreated for security. Surrounded by Ghurids, they followed Senah and Qalaat back to the behemoth. Astonishment couldn’t describe Mark and Andrew’s reaction to this vast living airship. The behemoth lowered itself to the ground, opening a membrane that covered what appeared to be a ‘man-made’ structure strapped to the bottom of the creature. Filled with trepidation, they stepped into the behemoth and, by doing so, entered a vast and ancient alien civilization.

The membrane closed. They felt the movement as the behemoth lifted off the ground. They were seated in a large enclosure filled with various cases and boxes. This space was illuminated weakly by what appeared to be electric lights. The dim illumination, combined with the eerie red eyes of the Ghurids, was deeply troubling. But the Ghurids sat passively on a bench on one side of the room, and slowly, Mark and Andrew began to lose their initial fear of them. The two others sat close to Mark and Andrew, staring at them curiously.

Andrew reached up to his collar and activated his comm line.

“Are you still tracking us, Diego?”

“Copy that,” he responded. “I have a strong signal. You are moving eastward over a mountain range. I will keep monitoring your location.”

“We are in no apparent danger. I’ll keep you informed. Talbot out,” Andrew concluded.

Twenty minutes passed before the behemoth descended to the Pavonian base east of the mountains. The ‘ship’ settled on the ground, withdrawing the membrane for them to depart. Following Senah, Mark, and Andrew stepped out of the behemoth, gazing at the activity surrounding them. This was a large mining operation, and lines of Ghurids were hauling ore out of the side of the mountain. There, they crated the ore and carried the crates into giant behemoths, lined up at the base.

Senah motioned for them to follow him again, and they walked over to an encampment at the edge of the mining operation.

The tent-like structure that opened before them was well-appointed. Everything looked familiar, but alien at the same time. Certain items had apparent uses, like chairs and a long divan. Others bore no similarity to anything they had ever seen before. The two aliens invited Mark and Andrew to sit on the divan. Standing in front of them, they once again repeated their names.

“Senah, Qalaat,” the taller of the two repeated.

Andrew stared at them with wonder. Both had jet-black hair and a fair olive complexion; they looked human, for the most part. The most stunning aspect of them was their deep purple eyes.

“Well, isn’t this a stimulating conversation?” Mark quipped.

Andrew stood up, facing Senah and Qalaat. Once again, they sniffed the air in a distracting manner. On a table located near the center of a room, Andrew noticed what appeared to be a topographic-style map. He pointed at the map and made a broad gesturing movement towards it. After examining the map for a few moments, it became apparent to Andrew that that was precisely what it was. He noted the extended mountain range to their west, and a large shaded region near the top of the map had to represent the heavily glaciated part of the continent. A blue mark indicated the mining base. Mark pointed at the base. Making a circular gesture, he pointed to the mark on the map again. If the two aliens understood him, they did not indicate it. Andrew returned to the map, setting his finger down on the broad plain just west of the mountains, then pointed at Mark and himself.

Senah pondered the gesture for a moment, then understood what the aliens were trying to say. He touched himself and pointed at the blue mark. He gestured towards Andrew and Mark and then touched the spot they had indicated. Thus, the first interspecies communication between humans and extraterrestrials was accomplished.

“Now for some magic of our own,” Andrew told Mark.

Reaching up to his collar, he activated his comm line.

“Diego, do you copy?” he said.

“Loud and clear, Commander,” he replied.

“Take the *Ganymede* and meet us at these coordinates. Do not come in too quickly. Circle over their base several times as you home in on us before you land. No need to alarm them unduly. Keep sharp and be ready for anything.”

“Copy that. See you guys in about twenty minutes. *Intrepid* out.”

After about fifteen minutes of awkward silence, Andrew pointed at the structure’s entrance, making the sweeping motion that both species had come to associate with ‘follow me.’ Stepping outside, Andrew scanned the sky, soon spotting the shuttle *Ganymede* approaching these coordinates. The appearance of the *Ganymede* started a commotion in the camp. Andrew pointed at the descending shuttle, then pointed at Mark and himself. Senah understood and barked orders at the panicked Ghurids, who began to calm them down. With a stately grace, the *Ganymede* approached the mining camp. The shuttle’s sleek lines reflected the late-afternoon sun. Andrew noticed that the tips of the *Ganymede*’s pulse cannons were glowing. “Good for you, Diego,” Andrew said, “Always prepared.” The blue glow of the *Ganymede*’s engines faded as the shuttle settled gently on the ground. The hatch to the shuttle opened, and Diego stepped out to survey the scene. Waving back at him, Andrew and Mark walked towards the *Ganymede*.

Turning to face Senah, Mark made a sweeping motion towards the mountains and the coast beyond. If the two aliens understood him, they did not indicate it. He would know if they showed up in the next day or so. Andrew would have to decide whether to seek them out, ignore them, or retreat to the *Intrepid* and home if they did not.

Senah watched the *Ganymede* disappear behind the mountains to the west. He breathed deeply; again, the faint scent of pakraa still lingered in the air. Who were these aliens? What were they doing here? Where did they come from? These and other questions filled Senah’s mind. He didn’t know the answers to any of them, but he intended to find them soon.

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Three days passed, and Andrew began to think that they had seen the last of their neighbors on Γ-Pav 4. Linda had finished the last of her research on the native life forms she had managed to collect.

Anything further would require a more robust expedition and a submersible to explore the breadth and depth of Γ – Pav’s oceans. That would be for later.

“Do we stay, or do we go?” Andrew asked the assembled crew.

Linda stood up and placed her hands on the table.

“I must see these people. You, Mark, and Diego are the only ones who have had the chance to interact with them so far. This is the discovery of the millennia. We can’t just walk away from this so casually.

“Angela? Andrea? What are your feelings on the matter?” Andrew asked.

“I agree with Linda. We can’t sail off into the horizon without discovering who they are, where they came from, and what they are up to. I think we should stay,” Angela concluded.

“Mark? What is your opinion?” Andrew asked.

“I think we should get out of here. They give me the creeps, and I feel this is way over our heads. I would advise NASA of their existence and let them send a proper expedition with biologists, philologists, and other experts to approach this first contact more scientifically.”

“Well, this gives us something to think about. If our new friends don’t show up in the next few days, I will decide,” Andrew said.

The decision was taken out of Andrew’s hands the following morning. A streak in the east grew, and the shape of one of the alien ships became apparent. It circled the human encampment before settling down on the open expanse to the east.

Ghurids poured out of the behemoth. Soon, they erected a pavilion and set up a small camp for their masters. Once established, the aliens contacted their human neighbors. Once again, the issue of communication came to the forefront. Mark and Andrew sought out their new neighbors, eager to open a dialogue.

“Where to start?” Andrew pondered.

He picked up a rock and placed it on the table. Pointing at it, he said, “Rock.”

The Pavonians in front of him did not react; instead, they stared at him with the same impassive look they always appeared to have. Once

again, Andrew attempted the language lesson, repeating the word “rock.” But to no avail. After a few minutes, one of the Pavonians stood up and left the encampment, returning a few minutes later with a Ghurid in tow. He said something to the Ghurid, who then took the seat in front of Andrew. Andrew looked over at Mark, then shrugged. He picked up the rock and repeated the previous exercise. This time, he got a response.

“Rock,” Andrew said.

The Ghurid looked directly at him and replied, “Sulak.”

“Sulak,” Andrew repeated. The language lesson had finally begun.

None of the aliens showed any interest in learning English. All effort was devoted to teaching the humans Pavonian. Unexpectedly, Mark proved to have the crew's greatest latent language ability and soon began attempting to communicate with them. Mark began to lose his initial fear of the Ghurids. Even their appearance began to appear normal to him. Pantomime, play-acting, and repetition helped move this along. Soon, simple nouns and a few verbs started to be teased out. With no primer or means of comparison, this was excruciatingly difficult, but breakthroughs were being made. During this time, the Pavonians themselves had largely disappeared. This mundane task of teaching humans to communicate would be left to the Ghurids. They were patient teachers, and soon Mark was conversing with them superficially. Over the next two months, Mark managed to grasp some of the verb tenses and continued to expand his vocabulary, taking copious notes for the others. Pavonian was a relatively simple language to learn once the basics were mastered. By the fourth month, Mark, Diego, and Andrew were becoming fluent. One of the Ghurids must have informed their masters of the progress. Unexpectedly, Senah and Qalaat returned.

Andrew and the others kept referring to them as ‘Pavonian,’ which was ridiculous. Pavo was an Earth constellation that had no connection to these aliens. But when pressed to give their people a name, they always got the same answer. As best as they could translate it, it always came back as ‘the people.’ That was clunky in conversation, so from now on it would be Pavonian.

Given the low level of communication, the interaction between the two camps was limited. Early on, it became clear that the Pavonians had little use for human women. The Pavonian males were polite to them, but always gravitated back to Andrew, Mark, and Diego. On the other hand, Pavonian females had little use for human males and generally treated them with indifference. However, they hated the human woman and made that fact abundantly clear. Shortly after contact began, the Pavonian females returned to their main camp and were rarely seen near the human settlement. Progress was slow, but week by week, the language barrier was gradually being overcome to the point where actual conversations could be held.

At first, human technology frightened the Pavonians. The first time they saw an image appear on a computer monitor, Andrew was convinced they would attack it. Senah stood up and checked the back of the monitor, moving back and forth between its front and back, confident that tiny people must be living inside this box. So far, Andrew had been cautious and only allowed Senah to step inside the *Callisto*. They thought it best not to let any of them onto the *Intrepid* for now. Senah's curiosity was insatiable; he repeatedly asked, "What is this? What does it do? How does it do it? It was impossible to adequately explain to them how any of this technology worked with no point of reference. To the Pavonians, it was a little less than magic.

Over time, Senah and Qalaat seemed to lose most of their interest in human technology, but they had an overwhelming interest in the men. One morning, Senah and Mark sat in the pavilion, covering various topics, when, without warning, Senah radically changed the subject.

"Mark," he said, "I want to see your body."

"My body?" he asked. "I can show you some videos of human anatomy if you like," Mark responded.

"No," Senah replied, "I want to see *your* body."

At first, Mark felt inclined to refuse; however, at last, he stood up and removed his clothing until he stood in front of Senah, completely naked.

"So similar," Senah said, "Yet so different."

He touched Mark's shoulder lightly, steadily sniffing the air as the Pavonians always seemed to do.

"Raise your arms," he asked.

Reluctantly, Mark raised his arms, linking his hands behind his head. Senah reached forward, touching Mark's armpit.

"That tickles," Mark replied, quickly lowering his arms.

Senah put his hand up to his nose, smelling the fingers he had touched Mark with. He breathed deeply with his eyes closed. The sound of the pavilion's door opening broke the scene.

"Oh my," Linda said, blushing as she looked at Mark's naked body.

"Just a minute, Linda," he replied, quickly putting his clothes back on.

Senah looked at Linda, let out a hissing sound, and suddenly turned and left the pavilion.

"Did he just hiss at me?" she asked.

"It sounded that way," Mark replied as he buttoned up his shirt. "So much of what they do is still a mystery to me."

"If you don't mind my asking, what were the two of you doing?"

"He wanted to see my body," Mark replied. "I'm not sure why, when I could have shown him any number of videos on the human anatomy. It was creepy. He touched me on my shoulder, then touched my armpit of all things; afterwards, sniffing his fingers. I bathed this morning, so I don't think I could stink too badly. We've figured out they have a much greater sense of smell than we do, so who knows what he got out of it."

Linda grinned at him, then let out a tinkling laugh.

"Well, I certainly enjoyed the show, Mark. I've always wondered what was under those shirts and pants, and now I know."

Mark blushed in embarrassment, quickly changing the subject. Together, they walked out of the pavilion to join the others.

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Senah walked back to the behemoth, still holding his hand up to his nose.

“It *is* the pakraa,” he kept repeating, “Only stronger and more varied.” The scent of Mark’s essence, the testosterone and androsterone that his body naturally exuded, still clung to Senah’s fingers. He closed his eyes again, allowing Mark’s image to fill his mind as he returned to his encampment.

Chapter 5

It may have been high summer on Γ-Pav 4, but that didn't make it very warm to Mark. However, the temperature had soared to a relatively balmy 59°F. All the crew had become somewhat accustomed to this planet's cold climate, so 59 degrees felt warm to him on this lovely afternoon. *I want to take a run*, he thought. He stepped into the *Callisto*, opened the storage closet, which held much of their clothing and equipment, pulled a plastic package from the shelf, and soon had a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt before him. Stripping off his uniform, he slipped on the shorts, pulled the t-shirt over his head, laced his running shoes, and stepped out to go to the beach.

The beach's soft sand made a perfect running path on this otherwise rocky planet. He ran down the coast, jumping over the clumps of graptolites that had been washed up by the tide, enjoying the feeling of pleasure that running gave him. It is often described as a 'runner's high' as endorphins flooded his body. For a time, he stopped to perform some pushups, including the more demanding ones done while standing on your hands. After about forty minutes of running and exercising, he returned to the *Callisto* to shower and change. On the way back, he stopped by the conference pavilion long enough to retrieve his iPad, which had been left there after his latest session with Senah.

"There it is," he said, reaching over to pick up the tablet. Turning to leave, he almost ran directly into him.

"Forgive me, Senah," Mark said, "I didn't hear you come in."

Senah stared at Mark but didn't reply. He stepped forward and stood directly in front of him, sniffing the air with his eyes closed.

Under the best conditions, the three human males were distracting to Senah and the other Pavonians. The scent of testosterone and androsterone, which all human males exude, mimicked the Pavonian female sex hormone, pakraa, far too closely. It was even more stimulating to them. Senah continued to stare at Mark, overwhelmed by his scent, which was heightened by his recent physical exertion.

Suddenly, he lost control. Fixating on Mark, he began flooding the air with his pheromones, the pakraatin.

Mark noticed it. Sniffing the air, he said, “Cinnamon! Something smells like cinnamon.” The pakraatin entered his system and triggered an immediate histamine cascade throughout his body, culminating in a sudden release of hormones by his pituitary gland and a neural storm from the hypothalamus that activated the pleasure centers of his brain. The endorphins and dopamine flooding his body induced a state of euphoria, not unlike Nitrous oxide’s effect on the human body. It descended on him like a fog, blocking out everything else. The neural impulses released by the hypothalamus traveled along nerve bundles in his spinal cord, stimulating the hypogastric ganglion, which is connected to his prostate gland. To put it bluntly, it gave him a hard-on.

Mark stood there in a stupor, unmoving, overwhelmed by what was happening inside him. Senah reached out and grabbed him by his shoulders. Leaning in, he buried his nose in the crook of Mark’s neck, breathing in his scent. With a flick of his tongue, Senah licked at the sheen of sweat that still covered Mark from his run. The taste of the androsterone almost burned Senah’s tongue as his taste buds fired with intense pleasure. He reached forward with his right hand, pulling Mark’s head forward. Pausing for a moment, he kissed him. The taste of Mark’s mouth was strange and alien, but exhilarating to Senah nonetheless. He leaned forward for another kiss, sliding his hand into Mark’s running shorts to grab his erect penis.

The sound of someone entering the conference tent interrupted them. Senah turned quickly to see Angela entering the pavilion. She looked over at Mark and Senah and immediately sensed something was wrong.

“What is that smell?” she said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “What are you doing? What is going on here?” she asked.

Senah did not respond. Instead, he glowered at her, letting out a hissing sound. Angela sniffed the air again, then opened her medical kit. She pulled out a test tube, uncorked it, and waved it rapidly in the air before reattaching its cap.

“Mark, are you all right?” she asked, approaching him. “Mark? Mark?” she kept repeating as she shook him slightly, trying to get a response. She pulled out a flashlight, opened one of Mark’s eyelids, and beamed the light into his eye. His pupil was dilated, and he didn’t react to the light. She pulled out a syringe to take a blood sample, then quickly returned it to the medical kit along with the test tube.

“Let’s get out of here,” she told Mark, leading him out of the pavilion into the fresh air. Once outside, she slapped his cheeks several times to get a response. Slowly, he began to rouse, regaining full consciousness.

“What did you do to him?” she asked, looking at Senah.

He didn’t respond; instead, he suddenly turned, heading back to his encampment. Angela continued to walk Mark around the pavilion entrance, helping to clear his head. At last, he came to enough to look at Angela, completely confused.

“What are you doing here, Angela?” he said. “I was speaking with Senah just a moment ago.”

“How much do you remember?” she asked.

Mark pondered the question before responding.

“Not much. I entered the pavilion to fetch my iPad and ran into Senah.”

“Do you recall anything else?”

Wrinkling his brow in thought, Mark responded, “Only the smell of cinnamon.”

“Well, come with me back to the *Callisto*. I want to give you a thorough examination.”

After some additional poking and prodding, Angela pronounced Mark all right. He headed back to the bath at the *Callisto's* rear to shower. She unpacked the test tube and the blood sample she had collected, running them through the medical analyzer in the *Callisto's* limited infirmary. A few minutes later, the lab computer completed the tests and posted the results on the monitor.

“Oh, my God!” Angela said out loud as she read them. That sneaky son-of-a-bitch!” Stepping into the ship’s command cockpit, she activated the communication relay to the *Intrepid* and waited for

a response. A few moments later, Diego's smiling visage appeared on the screen.

"What's up, Angela?" he asked.

"I need to speak with all of you as soon as possible. Something disturbing has happened. Where's Andrew?"

"Give me a moment, and I'll go find him."

After a couple of minutes, Andrew appeared on the monitor.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"I think all of you men are in danger here. I'll explain more fully, but we need to meet face to face."

"All right, Angela. Diego and I will fly down to the planet on the *Ganymede*. We'll be there within the hour," he said, terminating the link.

Angela printed out the results of her analyses, then turned to find Mark to tell him that Andrew and Diego were on their way down.

I wonder how they'll take this, she mused. I suspect their male ego and vanity are about to take a hit.

"There you are," she said upon spotting Mark. "Andrew and Diego are on their way. We must talk."

The *Ganymede* took about an hour to descend from the *Intrepid*. Andrea and Linda remained on board, and Diego and Andrew came down for the meeting with Angela and Mark. Angela stepped out to watch the stately approach of the *Ganymede*, which settled down gently a few meters from the *Callisto*. Diego and Andrew stepped out, waving as they disembarked.

"What's up, Angela? Why all the drama?" Andrew asked.

"Step into the *Callisto*. I want to be sure we have complete privacy for this. Although I doubt any of the Pavonians has bothered to learn a single word of English, we can't take the risk. Some of the Ghurids have picked up a phrase or two, and they will pass on anything they hear or discover directly to their masters."

After the four of them were seated around the table in the *Callisto's* galley, Angela placed the printout from her medical computer in front of her. She began to explain what she had discovered.

“Over the last six months, I have tried to get my hands on some Pavonian physical samples. To sequence their DNA and figure out what makes them tick. The males have been relatively cooperative, but the females won’t give me the time of day. So, I have picked up a hair or skin flake from some of the females and analyzed them. The Pavonians won’t discuss their habits or anything related to their interactions. From what I have deduced, their olfactory abilities are far greater than ours, and much of their interactions revolve around scent,” she said. “This most likely also includes their ability to taste, as well.”

“Well, that is all fine and good,” replied Andrew, “But what has that got to do with any of us?”

“I’m getting there, so bear with me,” she replied. “On Earth, many species have olfactory abilities similar to our alien friends. Much of their life and activity is governed by scent. I suspect that the Pavonians are very similar. From the samples I have collected, I have begun to isolate some of their hormones. The males produce a hormone that bears no structural similarity to anything human; however, the females produce something very similar to testosterone in us,” pausing for effect, she continued. “That is why the males are always showing such a marked preference to the company of you boys, and seem to be indifferent to us. It also gives me insight into why Pavonian females are so hostile toward human females and indifferent toward human males. They can’t stand the way we smell,” she concluded.

Andrew scratched his head, trying to make sense of what Angela was saying.

“All right, the women think you stink, and males find us acceptable. So what?” he asked.

“You still don’t get it, do you? They don’t just find you acceptable; you turn them on, you fool.”

“Are you telling us they have the hots for us?” asked Diego.

“I believe they do, and now I have some proof to show you.”

Angela picked up her report and began to read some of the findings.

"I found Mark standing in the conference pavilion with Senah in front of him. I'm not certain, but I think Senah was kissing him. He certainly was touching him."

"What!" Mark said, standing up. "How could this happen without me being aware of it?"

"Give me a moment, and I'll explain it all."

"When I walked into the pavilion, I noticed a foul odor. One that offended my senses but didn't appear to bother Mark at all. Differences in male and female biochemistry easily explain this. In any case, I took an air sample for later analysis. Mark, however, was in something close to a catatonic state. His eyes were dilated, and he was unresponsive to my presence, so I took a sample of his blood for testing. He quickly revived after I got him out of the pavilion into the fresh air. But as you have heard, he has no memory of what transpired other than what he described as a scent of cinnamon in the air."

Mark stirred in his chair, acutely uncomfortable with what was being discussed.

"What did your analysis turn up, Angela?" Andrew asked.

"The air sample was filled with an airborne molecule, a hormone that Senah had released. A pheromone, I suspect. Mark's blood work was more revealing. His dopamine levels were off the charts, along with highly elevated levels of endorphins in his blood. It is little wonder he was almost catatonic; he was drugged out of his mind."

"And Senah did this to him?" asked Diego.

"Yes, I believe so. The release of his pheromones had a profound effect on Mark. They acted like something we once called 'date-rape' drugs. Mark, I believe Senah was about to make his move on you when I interrupted the scene."

"Fuck!" was all that Mark could say.

"Precisely," Angela replied, "I don't know what triggered Senah to try this now. After all, we've been around each other for months to no ill effect. Mark was wearing his running outfit, and I suspect his physical exertions triggered the event. Human males exude testosterone and androsterone constantly; however, this would have been multiplied many times by his exercise." Angela looked at Mark

with a smirk. "I guess Senah just couldn't resist the appeal of a sweaty man."

Diego burst out in laughter, and Andrew struggled to suppress a smile. Mark was too astounded by the whole thing to say a word.

"Ok, boys, this isn't funny," Angela said forcefully, "and I suspect that any of the Pavonian males could render any of you helpless in a matter of moments should they release their pheromones. What's more, they now know this. This is a severe problem, and I don't think any of you should be alone with any of them in the future without me, Linda, or Andrea present."

"Do you think they might try again?" Andrew asked.

"Who knows? However, Senah has tasted Mark and may want another go at him. Again, I can't emphasize how careful you all must be."

Andrew sat quietly for a few moments, then looked up.

"We have been here for over six months now. I suspect it's time to head home with all we have discovered. I will meet with Senah in a few days to inform him that we will be leaving soon. So far, I have resisted his efforts to find out where Earth is. Let us keep it that way until we know more about our new friends. What we know now is disturbing enough. They have slavery and have no compunction about using 'lesser' life forms for their ends. I will suggest to him that we meet here again in six months to a year to continue getting to know each other. The Pavonians will be mining gold and silver here for some time, so finding them will not be difficult. Ok, people. Let's get ready to get out of here."

Andrew ordered Mark to return to the *Intrepid* with Diego to keep him safe. He and Angela remained behind to continue planning their departure. After everything else was prepared, they would tell Senah they were departing in a few days. For the first time since encountering the Pavonians, Andrew felt a knot of fear growing in his gut. The sooner they got out of here, the better.

§

Senah was still highly agitated. He couldn't get Mark out of his mind. He closed his eyes, remembering the taste of his sweat, his

mouth, and the touch of his body. *I must have him*, he said to himself. *I don't care what it costs. I will have him!*

"Qalaat, come over here," he called out. "We have something to discuss."

"What concerns you?" he asked.

"I have discovered something more valuable than gold or silver on this planet."

"More valuable than gold. What could that be?" Qalaat replied.

"The humans."

"How can that be?" Qalaat responded with a sneer.

"You have not yet touched one of them. Today, I have. Once you have, you will understand. Look at them. They are comely and desirable. You've sensed it. They have machines and technology we can't even begin to understand. Just imagine how powerful House QuaTrebia would become if we were masters of those with such abilities."

"I suspect that their weaponry matches the almost magical quality of their machines. How could you defeat, much less conquer, such power?" Qalaat asked.

"They are few; we are many! That is how. Andrew admitted that they inhabit only one world, while we inhabit hundreds. Even the most powerful xalax can be brought down by dozens of kurals attacking simultaneously. The Senshâ himself will be here on Talak 4 in just a few days. He will be pleased when we present the results of months of mining. He will be astounded when we present him with one of the human males. He will immediately comprehend their value. Can you imagine what one of the three human males we've met would bring on the slave auction blocks throughout the Empire once the qualities of their species are fully known? Only we know about the humans, and we will control the supply. The whole wealth of the Pavonian Empire will flow into House QuaTrebia's coffers, and we'll eclipse all the great houses in riches and power, and you and I, my dear friend, will rise and become powerful and wealthy because of it. The Senshâ will see this. We must gather our full military might to use against the humans."

"Yet, you don't know where their homeworld is located."

“No, they have not shared that information. Yet, they have revealed more than they intended. Mark said that the star around which their world orbits is a yellow dwarf. We can disregard all others and search for this particular yellow dwarf star. It can’t be more than forty light-years from here, limiting the area we must cover. Still, it will take time and effort. Once we find them, we will overwhelm them at a blow and take what we want. The rest of the Empire will fall under our control, with the humans under our thumb and their abilities at our command. It will be inevitable. Now is the time to plan and take bold action. I have tasted Mark and will do so again. I plan to present one of the other males to the Senshâ as a gift; the third will be yours. All else will follow from this. An opportunity like this comes only once in a lifetime, if at all. We must seize the moment, and everything we might imagine or desire in this life will be ours.”

§

Mark was happy to be back on the *Intrepid* with Diego and as far away from Senah as possible. The fact that an Army Ranger had been overpowered so quickly and easily had left him profoundly unnerved. He would be satisfied if he never saw another Pavonian or looked into their purple eyes again. He and Diego showered and then crawled into bed together. Andrea had offered to cover Diego’s shift in the command center for him.

“I guess I owe Angela a debt of gratitude. She saved me at the last possible moment,” Mark said.

“Do you remember anything else about what happened down there?” Diego asked.

“No, not really. That is the scariest part of it all—knowing that they could disarm and overpower any of us so quickly and completely. It gives me the shivers even now.”

“Well, I can’t blame Senah for trying,” Diego said with a smile. “I couldn’t wait to get into your pants, either. But you are mine, and Senah will have to get through me to get to you again.”

Mark didn’t respond. Instead, he took Diego into his arms, passionately kissing him. They made love, and Mark drifted off to

sleep, secure in Diego's presence, happy and content to be next to him.

§

One of Senah's Ghurids stepped into his dwelling.

"Sire, there are two humans here to speak with you. They are the ones called Andrew and Angela."

Senah hissed at the mention of Angela's name, but soon controlled his emotions.

"Bring them in. I will see them here," he replied.

Senah, my good friend, I have come to say goodbye. Tomorrow, we will depart Talak 4 for home," Andrew said.

"Then let me wish you a safe trip. But before you depart, I would ask a favor of you," Senah replied.

"Of course; what can we do?"

"Today or tomorrow at the latest, the Senshâ himself will arrive here to examine the newest world in our realm. We have told him a great deal about you, our new friends, and he is eager to meet you as well. Could I impose upon you to remain in orbit for a few more hours?" Senah asked.

Andrew turned to Angela.

"I'd rather not. Do you see any reason we might not want to delay?" he asked.

"None that are immediately apparent. They didn't lift a finger to keep us from packing up and returning to the *Intrepid*. I guess it would be all right," she responded.

Turning back to Senah, Andrew spoke.

"We would be delighted to remain long enough to greet your Senshâ. We have the radio frequency that you use to communicate between your behemoths. Call us when you are ready. We will remain in orbit here until then."

Senah profusely thanked them and walked them out the door of his quarters and across the field towards the *Callisto*.

"If I do not see you again, farewell and safe travels," Senah said.

He watched with anticipation as Andrew and Angela boarded the *Callisto*. The shuttlecraft's engines glowed blue as they lifted off from Talak 4.

If everything goes according to plan, my dear Andrew, we'll never be separated again. The thought pleased him, and he smiled.

"Come, Qalaat," he said, "We have much to do to prepare."

One of Senah's behemoths had met the royal party in deep space outside the orbit of Talak 4. It was arranged that the royal behemoth would proceed alone into the system and rendezvous with the human ship. Over a hundred others would wait an hour before proceeding to Talak 4.

It was the twenty-third of August, over a year since they had departed Armstrong station, and the *Intrepid* was ready to commence its voyage home. Andrew sat in the command chair, Mark was at the helm, and Diego manned the science station. At the appointed time, an enormous behemoth, the largest they had yet seen, appeared on their screens, silently gliding into orbit around the planet. Senah's behemoth rose to greet it. The radio crackled with an incoming transmission from Senah's vessel.

"My friends, since we cannot come to you, we request that you send one of your shuttles over to us. Then, you can bring the Senshâ over to your ship for a brief tour. Since protocol dictates that only males are allowed to attend the Senshâ, might I request that you send Mark and Diego? They must be in full dress uniforms."

Andrew looked at Angela and asked, "Do you think it is safe for them to go?"

"I suppose so. I don't think Senah would try anything in such a public setting. I have prepared an antidote for them. If they suspect anything, they can jab themselves, administering a strong adrenaline dose that should counteract their pheromones' effects. It is a risk. The decision is yours."

"If you don't want to do it, just tell me, and I will politely refuse," Andrew said.

Mark looked over at Diego.

“Forewarned is forearmed. They got the jump on me the last time. I’ll be ready for them this time, should they try anything. It should be fine,” Mark said. “Diego?” he added.

“Sure, I’ll come, if only to be your backup. Let’s go and get this dude. The sooner we are done here, the sooner we can head home.”

Andrew signaled Senah that Mark and Diego would be over shortly for the rendezvous with the Senshâ’s behemoth. Andrew watched with trepidation as the *Callisto* detached from the *Intrepid*. If all went well, they would head home in a few hours.

It took about twenty minutes for the *Callisto* to cross the distance between the *Intrepid* and the royal behemoth. They watched with growing amazement at the sheer size of the living ship as it unfolded before their eyes. A membrane drew back, revealing the Pavonian equivalent of a landing bay. The *Callisto* slowly slipped into the space, settling onto the metal floor. Behind them, the membrane closed, allowing the landing bay to be repressurized.

Senah, resplendent in his imperial finest, stepped up to greet them.

“Come with me, gentlemen,” he said, leading them to the royal quarters.

The corridors were lined with military personnel. As they passed, they could hear the murmur of the men as they reacted to their presence. At last, they were brought before the Senshâ himself. Trenah PerValen stood before them, surrounded by his guard. Senah prostrated himself. Mark and Diego bowed politely before speaking.

“On behalf of the President of the United States, the American people, and all the citizens of Earth, we are honored to stand in your presence. It is our distinct pleasure to escort you to our ship,” Mark announced in his finest Pavonian.

Trenah stepped forward, standing directly in front of Mark. He contemplated him briefly, taking in his blond hair and blue eyes. Leaning his head back, he took in a deep breath. Looking over at Senah, he spoke.

“They are exactly as you described them, Captain.”

The Senshâ next moved over to examine Diego.

“So varied,” he said softly, noting Diego’s dark brown hair and brown eyes. “Are all your people so different?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Excellency,” replied Mark, “The people of Earth show a remarkable diversity.”

“Marvelous,” he said in response. Turning to Senah, he motioned towards Mark and Diego, “Show me,” he ordered.

Senah stood before both Mark and Diego, staring at them intently. Suddenly, the scent of cinnamon filled the air.

What fools we were to come here, rolled through Mark’s mind. *It was a trap all along.*

The fog started to descend over him. He looked over at Diego, noticing that he was already under the influence of the pakraatin. Struggling to find the syringe in his pocket, he jabbed himself before he was utterly overwhelmed. It didn’t work. Deep into the fog, he drifted into the euphoria that he had experienced before. The Senshâ stepped up to Diego and inhaled his scent deeply. He ran his hand through his hair, grazing the curve of his jawline. Leaning forward, he extended his tongue, gently licking Diego’s neck, shuddering with pleasure. He turned to Senah.

“For this, your reward will be beyond your wildest imagination. I elevate you to the nobility for this incredible gift and will shower you with honors. If there is a planet filled with such creatures, the wealth flowing into our House will be without measure.”

As the Senshâ addressed Senah, Mark began to revive. The adrenaline was, at last, doing its job. Emerging out of the fog, he listened to the conversation between Senah and his Senshâ.

“Bring in the other behemoths. We must surround and capture the human ship before it can return home. He pointed at Diego, “Take this one, “and put him in my quarters. The other, I give to you gladly.”

Senah bowed. Clapping his hands, he signaled for two Ghurids to take charge of Diego. With all the willpower he could muster, Mark finally overcame the effect of the pakraatin, regaining control of himself. Reaching up to his collar, he activated the communication channel to the *Intrepid*.

“It’s a trap, Andrew. Get out of here! They are coming for you!” he yelled.

He heard Andrew respond, but couldn’t understand him because of the chaos breaking out in the room. The guards reached out for him.

He gut-punched one with his fist, leaving him doubled over in pain, and managed to knock another to the floor with a kick to his head. Grabbing Diego, he attempted to reach the door leading back to the *Callisto*. They barely made it through before being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Filled with despair, he watched as they dragged Diego away from him.

“Diego!” he yelled, “Diego!”

But he never responded; he was already deeply lost in the effect of the pakraatin.

Andrew repeatedly yelled over the comm line, but there was no response. He reached over and activated the emergency defense system. Defensive zones were triggered throughout the ship. The *Intrepid*'s two plasma cannons began to glow with power. All around the ship, behemoths began to emerge from subspace. The proximity alarm sounded.

“Incoming projectiles,” the *Intrepid*'s AI announced. Surrendering control of the defensive system to the computer, Andrew plotted a course to escape the incoming behemoths, attempting to surround them. The computer opened fire, blasting hundreds of energy bolts that vaporized the Pavonians' incoming railgun projectiles; however, there were just too many. One by one, they began to score hits on the *Intrepid*.

Alarms sounded all over the ship.

“Take over communications,” Andrew yelled at Angela.

Taking control of the ship's guidance, Andrew attempted to dodge and escape the incoming vessels.

“Get us out of here!” Angela yelled. “The ship is starting to come apart.”

Plotting a course, Andrew pushed the Kleinschmidt Drive handle forward. The ship shuddered, and the stars disappeared. All around them, warning lights flashed, and the emergency klaxon continuously sounded.

“Shut that off,” Andrew yelled.

The *Intrepid* had suffered extensive damage, but fortunately, the warp engines remained intact.

“Computer,” Andrew called out, “Give me a ship status report.

The AI started listing off the extent of the *Intrepid's* damage. Much of the habitation ring was now uninhabitable, but the rest of the damage was superficial and manageable.

"Angela," find us a place to land. We need to repair the ship before attempting to return to Earth.

"We are only a few days from that red dwarf we visited. The moon has an unbreathable atmosphere, but we won't need environmental suits; only an SCBA will be required. Linda and Andrea opened the sliding door to the command center. Angela greeted them with sobs of joy. Andrew embraced them both, relieved beyond measure that they were safe.

"Where are Mark and Diego?" Linda asked.

All Andrew could do was shake his head. Angela took Linda's hand.

"They are prisoners of the Pavonians. There was nothing we could do.

Linda burst into tears. Andrea attempted to comfort her, but soon found herself crying as well.

The *Intrepid* reached HR9852, landing softly on the gas giant's great moon. There was little chance the Pavonians knew where they were. In any case, it would have been next to impossible to spot them on this weather-tossed moon. Angela and Andrew worked ceaselessly together to repair the *Intrepid*. After two weeks of back-breaking labor, Andrew piloted the *Intrepid* out of the HR9852 solar system, setting it on its soulful path to Earth. It would take them four long months to make it home.

§

Diego awoke, dazed and confused. Slowly, the room began to come into focus around him. A man, the Senshâ, he believed, was sleeping next to him. Two Ghurids stood guard, one on each side of the bed. Diego pulled the bedding back from him, standing on wobbly legs. He was naked. Looking up at the Ghurid guard, he spoke.

"I'm thirsty," he said.

The Ghurid pointed to a vase placed on a nearby table. Diego sniffed the contents. Convinced it was water, he filled one of the cups next to it and drank his fill. As he drank, a voice called out.

“Come back to bed. I’m not done with you yet.”

Filled with despair, Diego looked around the room and reluctantly crawled back into Senshâ’s bed. The scent of cinnamon filled the air, and he was soon lost again in the fog of the pakraatin. So be it; anything was preferable to this hideous reality.

§

Mark sat in a small room for hours, waiting for something to happen. Finally, the door opened, and two Ghurid guards stepped into the room, grabbed him, and hauled him down a series of hallways. At last, they opened a door, pushing him into an ornate room. Senah sat at a desk, holding in his hand the two syringes that Angela had given to Mark and Diego.

“So, this is how you managed to overcome the pakraatin. Isn’t it?” he asked Mark. “Well, it will be of no further service to you,” Senah said with a smile. “Come here, Mark,” he ordered.

Reluctantly, Mark crossed the room to stand next to him.

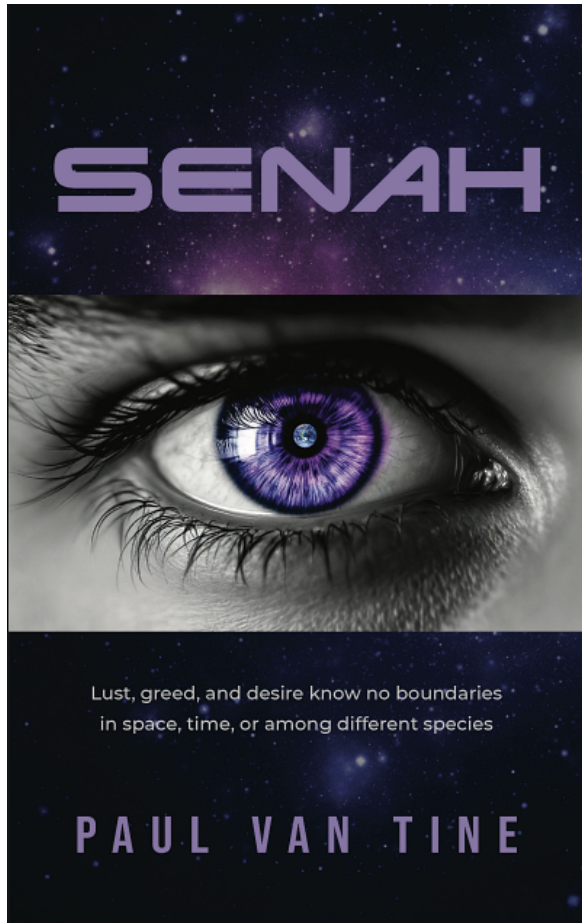
“Where’s Diego?” he asked.

“He is safe. I’m sure the Senshâ is taking good care of him even now. He won’t be harmed. Neither will you. You are both far too valuable for that,” Senah replied.

He stood up, tossing the syringes into a drawer. Walking up to Mark, he placed his hands on his shoulders.

“Since that moment we shared in the pavilion on Talak 4, I vowed that I would make you mine. And now you do belong to me. Don’t worry, Mark. I will treasure you, and you will want for nothing.”

Taking Mark by the hand, he led him into the bedroom. The scent of cinnamon filled the air, and Mark felt his reality slipping from him. *God help me. God help Diego. God help us all if they ever find Earth.* With that, his consciousness was overwhelmed by the dopamine flowing through his veins, and he knew no more.



Lust, greed, and desire know no boundaries in space, time. With the invention of the subspace warp engine, the universe opened to humanity. What would aliens want from us? To Earth's horror, it would be man himself.

Senah

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