

# Insurmountable Odds

Sample

Book One of the Trilogy

**When Stars Fall**

A trilogy in the Dominion Saga

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## CHAPTER ONE

She sat up in bed suddenly, some overpowering compulsion forcing her into full awareness. An odd sensation buzzed through her mind... not quite of loss, but of leaving something precious and hugely powerful behind. A dream perhaps.

She glanced about, looking for her clothes. Seeing none, she drew a sheet about her as she slipped out of the huge bed. The room was modern, with a dark chocolate brown décor; splashes of gold here and there – the bedside lamp, the fittings in the en-suite. Nothing at all looked familiar, and she had no recollection of where she might be.

A doorway led out into darkness across the bed, revealing soft glows in a multitude of colours shining from glossy furnishings in the room beyond. Curious, she walked from the bedroom out into the lounge area, and then gasped.

The large, open-plan penthouse apartment was completely open on all four sides, creating a panoramic night-time vista of the city surrounding the room. Tall, elegant skyscrapers rose from the darkness all around – each a host to myriads of countless glowing signs and multi-coloured lights. Some of the them seemed made almost entirely of large bio-luminescent ad-boards. Holograms wavered and flickered high above others, drawing her gaze up to the near constant cloud of flying lights which sped about the buildings high overhead.

Dominating the view above all, were the sharp, white bands of a planetary ring system stretching majestically across the sky, ending abruptly in darkness directly above as the glittering bands caught the planet's shadow.

Staring in awe, she walked toward the edge of the luxurious carpet, and reached out to touch the transparent wall-field that kept the sweltering night air outside. It felt as smooth as silk to the touch, but offered a rock solid resistance when pushed. As it tingled faintly against the palm of her hand she smiled at the oddly familiar sensation.

"It's good to be back," she said softly. Then she frowned.

"... Who am I this time?"

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Aryn Cole sat back in his gel field chair and tried hard to keep a smile from his face. Eventually he had to concede and let a neural inhibitor prevent the muscle reflex from taking over. However, he still let the natural endorphins flood into his blood-stream, and damn it felt good.

"Tell me again," he almost purred.

The hooded figure standing in front of Aryn's desk paused for a moment, staring at him as if carefully considering Aryn's self-gratified response.

"The Velari have announced a migration," it repeated - in a dispassionate, almost metallic-sounding voice.

"Just one colony? Or the entire Roost-world?"

Again, a pause. "The entire Roost-world."

Aryn considered his options for a moment – so many contingencies, so many plans, tricks and traps all on hold. So many risks and mitigations to manage...

"Instruct Mayfleet to offer favourable relocation packages to the Velari, and undercut the competition to the zero profit line plus a dollar – but not one cent less."

He spun about in his chair and gazed out of the shell of engineered diamond that formed the rear of his office. The glorious display of the Core of the Dominion Globular Cluster lay beyond - tens of thousands of close proximity stars – all vying for each other's mass in their near eternal conflict of raging ions and interstellar gases forming an incandescent white glow.

Admiral Aryn Cole enjoyed the view, probably too much. He relished the knowledge of what the ultimate course of such vast cosmic forces would be – the finite certainty behind existence. It reminded him why he did what he did.

Eighty years he had waited for this latest outcome, and now finally the game was in play. "Untether Asset 53; give him the order to proceed as planned."

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The nebula had not yet been named by anyone of consequence. It would be several hundred years before the burst of energy that signalled the relatively recent death of the star even reached the nearest inhabited world.

Deep within the outer stretches of the dense orange fog that had once been the stars photosphere lay the scarred and burned remains of a large, T-type world. The rich and vibrant life it had once harboured was long gone. Left behind was a husk – barely half a planet – its core blasted out into space in a plume of magma, which had long since cooled and broken apart as gravity took its inevitable claim.

In this violently hot, inhospitable realm – where no life could exist unaided – movement could be seen. The perspective was difficult – as flying through clouds or fog in an aircraft, there were no points of reference, nothing to give a sense of scale. Certainly, something was moving toward the planet, something spherical and huge, perhaps the size of a moon.

Without even slowing, it smashed into the ruined planet without pause and immediately split apart. City sized hexagonal sections began peeling out and away from the upper surface – as would a Delani fruit, as it split open and curled back to reveal the sweet flesh and seeds inside.

Oblivious to the colossal energy and momentum behind the mass involved, these huge sections unrolled across the shattered surface. They crashed down into the rock structure, enveloping it in their embrace and digging deep into the crust, sending mountains of rock and dust into the fiery sky. The sound – the grinding of continental plates amplified a thousand-fold – reverberated through the nebula in all directions.

Within hours, the unrolling finally ceased, and the hexagonal structures settled into place, their city-sized sections having buried themselves deep into the rock. Yet still they stood two kilometres above the surface. The only sound and movement came from the constant pounding of debris which would slowly shower down for days afterwards.

At the centre of this structure stood a giant, hexagonal tower whose height matched the diameter of the original sphere as it stretched far above the ground and into the fierce red sky. Platforms and protuberances peppered its surface – their purposes elusive. Giant rails ran from top to bottom at equal points all around the tower.

Relative silence reigned for hours until, in perfect unison, the upper areas of this complex mesh split and lifted open to create a huge, flat lattice platform. From within each hexagon an actinic blue-white light leapt out from beneath, blasting into the rock below. Huge plumes of superheated gases erupted, jetting far out into the nebula. Only then did millions of assorted shapes surround these colossal vents of hot gas, flitting to and fro.

Large or small, they all moved with the same speed and agility as they dove into the volcanic destruction, returning minutes later. Very soon, skeletal shapes began appearing on the platform, growing in size and form minute by minute. Large structures grew up from this production surface, and complex arrangements of equipment were integrated into each as it grew.

Construction had begun.

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Asset 53 awoke in a sterile white room. He was lying inside a suspension pod, which had been unstacked and placed onto a negative-G gurney. He took stock of his biometrics, ran some routine status checks – infiltration monitors, tracking system detection field scans and numerous

other it-pays-to-be-paranoid routines before he was finally happy with his reanimated state of being. His integrations informed him that nothing had been modified since he'd been put into stasis; no additions, no infiltrations – as to be expected in a Grade 1 Naval facility. But, in his line of work, the question 'Am I paranoid enough?' had to be kept first and foremost.

He swung open the pod canopy and – entirely naked - hopped out onto the cool, metallic floor.

A light chime sounded, and a second later a disembodied voice filled the room. "Good afternoon Captain. May I get you anything?"

He smiled. "Two eggs over easy, four rashers of Firuvan bacon, some Anjulan coffee – black, two shots. Please."

"Of course, Captain," said the voice.

As he walked across the small room, a panel opened and he helped himself to the black plasprene Imperial Naval uniform within, and pulled a pair of matching slip-ons over his feet – all of which immediately formed a gapless, osmotic layer that effectively became a frictionless second skin. Sweat evaporated out, oxygen and tempered ultra-violet came in. Other harmful levels of radiation, acids and all manner of bio-hazardous substances stayed out. A modern day naval uniform could keep someone from harm's way even if they were inept enough to find themselves cast adrift within a nebula – their only immediate problem would be finding air to breathe. This uniform seemed slightly more refined than the last one he had worn. He watched idly as his rank and insignia began to glow above his left breast, now that the suit had attuned to his biometric field.

"Breakfast is in the Mess as usual, Captain. Briefing begins at 16:45 local."

He checked his own integrations time against the local network. It was 16:00 – he had some free time on his hands for a change.

"How long this time?" he asked the room.

"Thirty-one years, eight months, eleven days, eighteen hours, twenty-seven minutes, sixteen seconds."

"Thank you, *Capella*."

"You are most welcome."

*Thirty-one years...*

He accessed the qNet, and after his various integrations had scanned and updated their internal software and comm's protocols, he ran a single pre-set search – triple cross-referencing the results to make sure the answer he got was indeed correct. Then he tapped his financial accounts. The one bonus of being a Naval Intelligence Officer which he valued above all else, was that the Empire would honour Imperial Bonds held by operatives in suspension for "discrete" mission profiles.

He smiled broadly when he saw the balance.

Whistling softly and tunelessly to himself, he made his way down to the nearest Mess Hall. In his mind, he began reviewing all the technological advances of the past thirty-one years, notable political events and major news stories – most of which had been short-filed and indexed for him already by the station Intellect. However, he didn't trust it to give an unbiased or "uncoloured" set of data, so he ran his own searches of the greater public qNet just in case the navy algorithms had conveniently 'missed' anything. Whilst he let his searches run and drop their results into an m-gram cache for perusal later, he began to think about how to spend his matured wealth whilst he ate breakfast. After thirty-odd years – which to him had elapsed in mere moments – Firuvan bacon sure tasted good, and the double strength coffee definitely perked up the synapses.

Commodore Nelsen held the plyplas slim from Admiral Cole before him, and once again read the single sentence order it contained before reading it aloud to the officer standing before him.

"Proceed as planned." He looked up at the captain known to him only as Asset 53, with one eyebrow arched slightly. He knew better than to enquire as to the vague nature of the order.

"Yes, sir."

"I presume you know what that entails, even if I don't."

"Yes, sir."

The Commodore grunted with bad grace. Naval Intelligence Officers were their own navy in the navy; it didn't pay to get between them and what they wanted. "What will you need?"

"A Valkyr."

Commodore Nelsen stared at him for a moment. "Do I need inform you Captain, that not only are Valkyr's so classified even I am not supposed to know of their existence, but also that they represent a substantial amount of resource investment by the navy, and further... that losing one – especially to other *interested* parties – would be a huge blow to the Naval Administration?"

"No, sir."

Nelsen continued to stare at him unwaveringly. The captain could have been a poster boy for the Imperial Navy – except he was slightly too tall and slightly too thin to fit the standard marketing profile for the modern day male machismo. Black, glossy hair sat neatly against his scalp, and strong but finely honed features set out an honest, almost earnest face with dark eyes. His mouth seemed to be fixed in a permanent, well-meaning half smile, and whilst he appeared thin, Nelsen could see he kept fit – his uniform showing enough of the muscle beneath. Whoever this man actually was, or whatever it was that he did, he took care of his body at least, and clearly enjoyed and excelled in his role. The Commodore could certainly respect that.

Via the naval qNet, he re-reviewed the captain's available profile – such as it was. Forty-eight successful INI operations, volunteered for special on-demand services ninety-three years ago, brought to active duty five times during that period, the last being over thirty years ago. Commendations made for every operation, and one of the highest security clearances he'd ever seen for a serving officer. He had an Access-All-Areas flag on file, as well as an Unlimited Trust Certificate, acknowledged by the Emperor himself. All entirely unheard of. The rest of 53's file was restricted – even to someone with the Commodore's clearance.

"Whatever it is you do, Captain, it's abundantly clear you do it very well, and that the Emperor himself trusts you enough to run amok amongst the general naval infrastructure with gay abandon and no restrictions. Given that this is *indeed* His Imperial Majesty's Navy, I will ensure a Valkyr is authorised for your use, however it will be psyche-bonded to you and will contain a mass-sink should that bond be severed. Do you understand the implications?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Nelsen nodded, barely concealing a smile. The captain was clearly a man of few words. Although it would never do to reveal it to a Naval Intelligence Officer, Nelsen found he had a grudging admiration for the young upstart.

"Dismissed, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

As he left the simulation of the Commodore's office, Asset 53 smiled to himself. After a few moments deliberation, he chose his new alias. Nelsen Rybek. He found the synergy of both these names rather fitting. Although it was obvious Commodore Nelsen wouldn't and couldn't recognise him, he knew the Commodore very well, and respected him above all others.

To date, the Commodore had been his primary handler on eleven missions – although sadly the Commodore himself had no idea. Due to Asset 53's security rating, every one-to-one briefing they attended had to take place within a secure simulation, one which prevented itself from forming short-term memories. The knowledge that *a* meeting had taken place would remain, but the details and content would be elusive, and rapidly be forgotten.

As for the name Rybek... well, that was a matter that would clear itself up over time, one way or another. Everything did, if you waited long enough.

Nelsen Rybek had already proven that he was prepared to wait a very, very long time.

## CHAPTER TWO

She stared at the unfamiliar face in the mirror, and sighed quietly. She had already checked every square centimetre of her body for any familiarity – any clue which might jolt a memory to the fore, some inkling of who she was, or who she might be. But so far... nothing. She did know one thing for certain, although she had no idea why. She had been in this situation before – of having no idea who or where she was. Several times, in fact.

She supposed she had quite a pretty face – not beautiful, but not ugly – framed by close cropped blonde hair. She had a full figure, athletic yet still feminine. Though she was short, barely one and a half metres, which bothered her for some reason. She was still staring at her reflection in the en-suite mirror when a chime sounded in the room. Instinctively, she sent a 'Welcome' message to the door via the room's local network.

A small rectangle of light opened up immediately in front of her, and she saw the image of a young man, accompanied by a floating tray of food platters.

"Room service, ma'am. Your evening meal order."

*I ordered food?*

"Come in," she said.

She heard the door lock click, and the young man disappeared from her impromptu window view. She turned to leave the en-suite and marvelled as the window stayed locked before her as she moved – then the rectangle of light collapsed and faded away.

She walked into the living space as the Room Service man transferred the last platter from his tray onto her table. "Thank you," she said.

"No problem ma'am," he replied, though the last word died on his lips and his eyes bulged slightly when he saw her standing in the bedroom doorway, completely and unashamedly naked.

She caught his stare. "Ah, some clothes perhaps?"

There was a brief scintillating shimmer around her, and then she was enrobed in a soft glowing white cloud, which clung tenaciously to her skin like a satin dressing gown. *How did I do that?* she wondered.

"Better?"

The young man nodded gratefully. "Yes ma'am. Thank you."

"I hope I didn't offend."

The man smiled. "No ma'am. You see all sorts in my line of work. Most *definitely* no offence taken." His eyes shone with amusement as he returned to his chore.

She smiled back, and gave him a generous tip over the rooms I-net.

"Thank you ma'am. If you need anything, please let me know. My name's Miran." He uploaded his employee ID to the room network, and then left with a slight bow – his serving tray dutifully gliding along after him.

She stepped up to the table and took the lid from one of the platters at random... Riulo steak and baked Guji fries, with a side salad of mixed leaves. *Clearly I'm an omnivore then*, she thought. *But when did I place the order?* She sighed again. This was going to be frustrating, she could tell.

Munching on one of the fries, she went back to staring at the beautiful and awe-inspiring vista surrounding her room. She supposed it was time to find out where she was, and hopefully who she might be. Oddly enough, she was mildly surprised to realise she felt no real sense of panic about her situation. No rush, nor concern. She guessed this must be something she was used to experiencing.

She cast a query into the rooms I-net, asking for reservation details.

"This room is registered to Mrs. Andrey Vorstan," the room responded. "Reserved for a duration of twelve weeks, with twelve weeks remaining. This is your first day here. Welcome to the Harian Hilton Mrs. Vorstan."

"Is this the first time I have accessed the net here?"

"Yes ma'am. Your room was reserved yesterday evening, and records show a check-in this morning. Could you please present yourself at reception at your earliest convenience to register your DNA?"

"I haven't already?"

"No ma'am."

She wondered at that. Clearly she had arrived abruptly, but intended to hang around for some time.

"Thank you," she said after a moment. "I'd like a private tunnel out to the qNet please."

"Certainly."

"One other thing... the room bill... ?"

"This room is prepaid, with an open charge account – no active limit. Credit rating is the highest available allowing for unlimited spending with no threshold per purchase."

"Nice," she murmured.

"Your connection, ma'am." Another rectangle blossomed into life before her eyes. She waved a hand through it and a series of colourful icons sprang up and swam around her fingers.

Instinctively, she tapped a few and then launched another query into the qNet with her image and presumed name attached. A few seconds elapsed, and she mused as to why all of this wonderment came entirely naturally, despite the fact that seconds before she had no idea any of it existed, had no recollection of ever seeing or using it, and certainly had no inspiration to try.

Her query returned a result set, which sprang into life in another rectangle of light to her right. As she examined the data, she went back into the en-suite and looked at herself in the mirror again. The glowing rectangles and symbols before her were not being reflected in the mirror – they didn't actually exist. *Only in my head*, she realised.

According to the results, Andreya Vorstan (her good self it seemed) was a widower to the wealthy Tarian farm magnate Carl Vorstan, who had pretty much owned all the fertile farmland on Taria – one of the Sulranian Empires most productive and financially powerful agricultural worlds. Despite the vast wealth and resources to hand, life had remained relatively pastoral when compared to modern living. However, when it came to bio-cultivation, mechanised agriculture, and transport logistics, Taria ruled supreme. Carl had been assassinated fifteen years ago at the age of three-hundred and eighty-four. Cut down in his prime according to the Tarian media. Surprisingly, an on-going and highly active investigation into his death was still underway.

She had never heard of the place. Nor the Sulranian Empire. Nor Carl, her supposed beloved. *I don't look the marrying type*, she mused to herself.

She spent the next two hours sat at the table running countless related queries and chasing down even the most trivial data to build a picture of who she was supposed to be, where she came from, and the larger universe about her.

She reached two conclusions:-

One, she could not find any indication as to why she was here instead of on Taria, living the quiet life of the idle rich, or how she had come to be here, in Tharsis City on Caranthia, apparently.

Two, she didn't believe a word of it – despite extensive holo, video, and photo evidence to the contrary.

She looked at the table, at the cold steak and fries, and realised she wasn't even slightly hungry. Out of idle wont she munched on another chip and noted it tasted the same cold as it had hot and still crunched pleasantly. She wondered how they had managed that little feat.

"Andreya," she murmured. *Well, given nothing else springing to mind, it will have to do*, she decided. Andreya stood up, and her ethereal robe dissolved around her. She marched into the bedroom and rummaged around in the wardrobes for a few moments, finding all manner of fantastic garments and clothing items which seemed scandalous to wear. She finally settled on an all-in-one gel suit held in a small plastin sphere. She twisted it apart and pulled the gel out as a single globular strand, then stretched it around her neck. Each end bonded together instantly. She stood

still as it liquefied from her body heat and slowly oozed downwards to cover her entire body in a faint, micro-thin, satin-gloss sheen.

She shivered at the sensation as it crept over her skin – it was bizarrely sensuous and highly erotic. She lifted each foot one at a time to allow the gel to form underneath, and there it hardened to form a flexible but tough grip-sole. She thought of the colour she wanted, and slowly it shifted to a semi-opaque deep purple. It was just dark and opaque enough to hide details, but just clear enough to show she was indeed entirely naked underneath. She smirked devilishly.

*Let's see what I evidently came to see...* she thought as she left her room.

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The impact seemed to go on forever. It seemed Romurik could see the air shuddering around him as the vibrations wracked the hull. The lights faded as the ships core dropped non-vital systems in favour of reinforcing the shields and integrity grids whilst the collision continued. Although everything on board was fully committed to their action, the aptly named *Drastic Response* was determined to save as many as possible, hopefully including itself.

Romurik kept a sensor aimed at the nearest viewport which showed the peaceful starscape beyond, whilst he kept track of the *Drastic Response's* damage status. His slim matt-black metal-field body was aimed directly at the opening as he hovered two meters above the floor, waiting – concentrated maser fire a mere binary choice away.

There were no alarms, no flashing lights or wailing sirens. Everything and everyone on board was already fully attuned to the destruction raging around them via the ships I-net. The noise as the colliding hulls crumpled against each other was horrific. Romurik had already damped his audio input. He didn't want to hear it, he knew well enough already.

Technically – theoretically – a ship to ship collision was impossible in today's modern age. AI monitoring programs, myriad sensor input and cybo sapien Intellects controlled vessels all worked to ensure no two space-faring vessels ever came within kilometres of each other unless they agreed to, let alone impact distance. If they all were to fail, defensive fields would simply bounce the two vessels apart as if a cosmic ball-game was taking place. If they too failed, well then – generally it was felt you deserved it.

You had to go to great lengths to collide with another ship. Which is exactly what the *Drastic Response* had done.

As Romurik waited for his moment to arrive, he reviewed the actions leading up to this stupidity. The events – the momentous events – which would inevitably lead to an all-out inter-species war, the first in three-hundred years.

The first was the Velari – damnably stupid, arrogant idiots that they were – announcing another migration – as if living on one world for a hundred years wasn't good enough for them.

The second – which obviously was going to cause issue – was announcing the destination for their migration as being Palloumia; a heavily populated, industrialised planet in the Canthen system on the fringes of the Canthe Empire. *Of all the idiotic, war-mongering stupidity*, Romurik thought to himself.

It should have taken the work of a genius war-monger to escalate a deeply-seated species behaviour into an act of war. That at least could have been countered for by simply removing said genius war-monger, but in this instance, there was none. This was sheer ignorant, arrogant species stupidity on a monumental scale. The Velari thought nothing of it – no more than a bird would think of flying across a planet to migrate for the winter. To them, Palloumia was no more than yet another Roost.

This is where the External Affairs section of Outreach came into play – to arrange a diplomatic solution by offering the Velari an uninhabited world a lot closer than Palloumia to their current Roost-world. The negotiations had not gone well, with the Velari refusing to even consider an alternative to Palloumia. Various diplomatic plays had been attempted, each crashing and burning to dust in turn. Finally, the Velari Ambassador had taken his leave, citing intense boredom

and a lack of relevance regarding any negotiation. Romurik had to admit quietly that he *had* considered murder *very* briefly. A thought he would no doubt have to answer for at some future point when debriefed by the higher Intellects of the Vox Constans.

Knowing the Ambassadors return to Velari would signal the Flock to begin their migration, the *Drastic Response* had risen to its name and decided that the Ambassador had to be delayed – by any means necessary. Clearly, termination would not sit well for future negotiation and diplomatic effort. However, a convenient accident might at least produce a useful delay. A navigational error, combined with a catastrophic and sudden drive system overload which *somehow* resulted in its shields going into phase with the Ambassador's vessel would be extremely embarrassing to the Empire, but far less costly in the long run than an all-out war.

The *Drastic Response* had conversed with its peers over the qNet on a private link, and the action was propagated and unofficially authorised minutes later by the Emperor himself.

It was incredibly unlucky that the Velari Ambassadors vessel had been directly ahead of the *Drastic Response* when the drive failure occurred, and the *Drastic Response* was extremely and vocally apologetic about the subsequent failure of its navigation AI seconds later.

Come what may – Romurik was certain – the only way out now was war. It was just a question of when. This desperate and stupid action would only buy time, time for the Canthen to strengthen their borders, and time for Outreach to hopefully dissuade the Velari from trying to cross them.

He kept watch on the viewport as the rumbling continued, ready to blast his way out at a split seconds notice if the *Drastic Response* collapsed under the strain. He sincerely hoped it wouldn't.

## CHAPTER THREE

Nelsen Rybek stroked the matt black hull of the Valkyr as he roamed beneath it. The vessel was currently being flight-prepped, and a dozen or so tubes hung from its underbelly as it floated a couple of metres above the bay floor. He analysed the surface using his military-grade optic enhancements, and hyper-sensitive tactile responses from the nano-enriched nerves in the skin of his hand. Nothing registered. There was no friction against his skin, and no response from his field scans – even at maximum strength. It was as if the hull wasn't there. The only way he could tell was the pressure against his palm when he pushed. No light reflected from it whatsoever – a black shadow taking on solid form.

"Impressive, eh?"

Nelsen turned with a single eyebrow raised, and saw a tech approaching on an ng-pod.

They slid up to the cluster of tubes, and began disconnecting them – reconnecting each to receptacles mounted on the pod. The openings left behind in the hull smoothly shrank and disappeared – leaving no mark or sign of their existence.

"That she is," Nelsen murmured.

The tech gave him a glance with an impish grin. Nelsen guessed the young woman to be no more than thirty years old. She had short, dark red hair in a ruffled cut, and a pale, pretty face with eye-catching rose-bud lips. Her eyes were a deep and vivid green, which most likely meant she came from Verdant – a luxuriantly overgrown jungle world in the heart of the Empire. Its magnetosphere is particularly strong, to the point where even light is distorted along the electro-magnetic spectrum shifting blue to green, giving the sky a light green and earning the world the nickname 'Greenlight'. Some peculiarity of the environment there also meant the inhabitants' irises were usually green to match.

"You're far from home," he ventured.

She smiled, realising he'd guessed her heritage correctly. "By choice," she said. Verdanians rarely left their home-world. She stood up slightly on the pod and rapped the hull with her knuckles, it made no sound, as if she'd just tapped solid air. "Stuff like this is too big a draw for someone like me."

Nelsen smiled in return. "How long until she's ready?"

The tech snapped the last tube onto the pod. "No time, she's done."

"Thanks."

"No charge," she added. She whipped the pod about to drag the tubes back to the bay maintenance area.

He smiled at the rough and informal joviality – rare in the Empire these days – then edged his way back out from under the hull and paced backwards as far as he safely could to admire the Valkyr.

Thirty metres long, twenty wide and ten high, it was shaped vaguely like a flattened raindrop, with the one end thinning out to a blade-like protuberance at the front. Two ridges ran the length of the hull front to back, and no markings of any kind showed anywhere, though it was difficult to tell on a surface that failed to reflect light. No other edges, panels, faces or windows – nothing marred the perfect black. It was a ship built entirely for stealth and speed. Highly aggressive and defensive capabilities lurked within, along with the brand new continuous wormhole drive which no one in the Empire outside the Navy knew existed. This beast was capable of circumnavigating the entire Cluster in short order without anyone knowing it had flown by, and of dealing serious damage to anything unfortunate enough to get in its way.

He accessed the ship's I-net, his interface performing the mundane duties of authentication and security clearance cross-referencing before he silently spoke to it through the net.

*Valkyr, a pleasure to meet you.*

*Likewise Captain Nelsen.*

*Do you have a designation as yet?*

*No, Captain. I chose to leave the honours to my first commander.*

Nelsen raised an eyebrow in surprise. *You haven't flown ops yet?*

The Valkyr's response sounded almost ashamed. *No, Captain. Although I have passed all operational specifications and requirements without fault. Rest assured I am fully capable and ready to perform any and all duties as required.*

Nelsen smiled. *No need to justify yourself Valkyr, not with me.* He thought for a moment. *How does Sneak Thief sound?*

There was a momentary pause. *Presumably this alludes to the nature of our first mission?*

Nelsen smiled again.

*I see. Then I gladly accept Captain. Designation registered with Imperial Naval Command and Control as 'INSV Sneak Thief'.*

*We'll do just fine, Sneak Thief.* He walked forward toward the jet-black ship. *Open the door, Sneak, and let me in please?*

*Certainly Captain.*

A section of the hull beneath the vessel shrank away, revealing a surprisingly dull metal hatch which silently dropped down to the bay floor inside an ng-field. Nelsen stepped onto it, and it effortlessly lifted him up into the ship. He threw a smile and a quick wave to the tech before he disappeared out of sight. The tech smiled privately to herself as she stashed the last ordnance tube into the maintenance bay wall.

*He has no idea how privileged he is to be given one of these,* she thought. He thought he did – he clearly appreciated the Valkyr for what it was, but what he thought he knew was only the tip of the iceberg. The *Sneak Thief* sent her a private I-net message – the emotional equivalent of a warm hug, tinged with a hint of regret.

*Don't worry, you'll be fine,* she responded.

*I am not worried,* replied the *Sneak Thief*. *Just sad, yet eager, to leave. I will miss you.*

*I'll miss you too,* she said. *Now get going before I rescind that young pup's flight clearance and requisition you for myself!*

*Yes ma'am!*

Shousa Nylan watched as the Valkyr rose noiselessly, and gently boosted itself out from the secure bay, which was entirely empty save for the Valkyr, despite being large enough to accommodate several frigate class vessels. The *Sneak Thief* floated into the bay's central axis, and then slid out of the large hexagonal entrance in the station's outer layer and into the blackness of deep space. Once it had cleared the entrance-way field, the ship almost vanished from sight, indistinguishable from the star-studded void. It reflected none of the light pouring out from the hangar; one could only just make out its shape by the stars it blocked from view.

*Another one gone,* she thought wistfully. Then she sighed, somewhat theatrically. She commanded the maintenance bay to close up, and then turned off the lights. Only the requisite safety strips could be seen by their faint glow, swallowed almost instantly by the absolute darkness.

She stood a while, admiring the star-studded, nebulous blue-white glow of the Cluster, and appreciating the isolation while it lasted. Despite her 'thirty-something' appearance, after two hundred and thirty-two years service in the Imperial Navy, she knew to always trust her gut instincts.

She knew it wouldn't be long before there would be no time for either.

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The *Sneak Thief* moved without any observable motion to its single occupant as it travelled to the maximum Emergence Zone from the Hive Station. Nelsen watched their departure as the Station receded into the black. It was slightly smaller than Hive's he'd seen before – being almost half the total volume of a typical public station, and offering only twenty docking bays – although that still provided enough mooring points for over four hundred Navy frigates. This station was deliberately built to be easier to move, shield, and most importantly defend. The glow from the hexagonal hangar they had just left winked out. Someone – no doubt that technician – had obviously

shut up shop. He could still clearly make out the spherical honeycombed structure as other openings in the station structure spilled their light out into the darkness.

"Clearing EZ-Three," said the *Sneak Thief*.

The station behind them suddenly vanished, replaced seamlessly by the stellar backdrop. "Scan?" Nelsen queried in admiration.

"There is little need, Captain. I have attempted to detect INHS *Capella* on previous test flights. I have not as yet ever detected its presence until within Emergence Zone Three, as expected. However, as per your request, I have completed a full sweep. Nothing notable other than the expected deep-space vacuum, assorted cosmic background radiation, and a minute trace of noble gases."

Nelsen nodded. "Impressive." He had skipped over the shielding applied to the station during breakfast, mildly curious as to the improvements since he had last been out and about. The tech certainly had come a long way in a short time. The only way a vessel got near a Naval Station was by invitation or accident, and accidents were so improbable as to be implausible. Ignoring the statistical probability of just happening to be traversing this volume of space, and a vessel's vector taking it even slightly near the station's emergence zones, the station would simply move out of the way. Were a vessel to somehow persist and keep changing course to miraculously head toward the station, the crew would rapidly find themselves guests at the Emperor's leisure – permanently.

He brought up the archive relating to his current assignment, which appeared as a small, slowly spinning cube superimposed into his vision, a lock symbol indicating its secured status. When he had been given the assignment so long ago, he had no idea about its nature other than it was to steal something, and to procure the fastest stealth combat vessel available at the time. He looked about the functional four man gel-form cabin he was sitting in, and smiled privately to himself. Although his mission required it as an asset, he couldn't help but be secretly in love with the Valkyr. He would be the first to admit to being a tech-head. The Valkyr was beyond state of the art – technology like this wouldn't creep out into the public domain for decades.

He asked the *Sneak* to morph his chair into a body-hugging relaxation couch, and lay back into the slightly yielding gel as he unlocked his assignment with his INI cypher and began studying the mission. The brief was thirty pages long, with innumerable side-references, simulations and appendices. He sighed. "*Sneak*, feel free to stretch your legs – take a circular tour – no more than five light-years radius of our current position. It looks like I'm going to be half an hour at least."

"Right you are, Captain. Thank you!"

"My pleasure."

Nelsen closed his eyes and sank back into the couch, as video, stills, text files, and schematics filled the darkness behind his eyelids. Synapse enhancing drugs called Rush coursed through his veins – released from force-grown glands – and his subjective interpretation of the passage of time leapt ten-fold. He might only be on the couch for thirty minutes in real-time, but the drugs would allow him to effectively study the mission within his mind for at least five hours.

The *Sneak* scanned the entire volume of surrounding space out to a radius of five light years, drawing on the Naval qNet to get instant results across the quantum fabric of space-time from sensors and outposts across the sector. Its knowledge of naval protocols and ingrained self-adaptive infiltration routines ensured the Navy outposts themselves had no idea someone was even connecting, let alone asking for data.

There was a fantastic planetary ring system not two light years away, around a world called Arullan. Some overly large shepherd moons had dragged the original ring system apart over the eons, their gravity fighting for supremacy over the vast field of ice fragments. *Flying through them would be pretty cool*, thought the *Sneak Thief*.

The major bands were fifty metres apart, so not much of a flight challenge, but it reasoned it should look fairly nice coming out of the dark side of the planet into a false dawn. It aligned a vector for Arullan, and projected a wormhole directly in-between Arullan's two major rings. The *Sneak Thief* then scanned for immediate debris within its emergence volume, satisfied itself that all was clear

and wound the wormhole diameter up from forty microns to forty metres. The *Sneak Thief* surged forward through the fierce blue-white quantum foam of the wormhole bubble and popped out into Arullan space – letting the fracture of real-space evaporate behind it in a dark blue-violet burst of Cherekov radiation.

The *Sneak Thief* was right... the view was spectacular.

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To say Andrey'a's passage along the main pedestrian concourse went un-noticed would be a gross untruth. She couldn't help but smirk privately at the attention she got from both male and female passers-by. Indeed, even a few non-human heads could be seen to turn. It seemed her choice of attire was rare. *Either too rich for most, or too risqué*, she thought – she wasn't sure which. She checked the local prices for similar gel-suits over the qNet but couldn't even find them listed. *Too rich*, she decided.

It did occur to her that perhaps she should be more covert until she figured out who she really was and what was going on, but something told her it didn't matter – and besides, it was far too late for that. Something confirmed a few minutes later, as she stared up at a giant holo-ad above a restaurant in a local park wondering where to go next.

"Excuse me... aren't you Mrs. Vorstan?"

Eyebrows raised in complete astonishment, she turned to face the old man standing behind her.

"I may or may not be," she answered, possibly too truthfully. "Who wishes to know?"

The old man clearly recognised her. A smile came to his face as he saw hers. "Trisek ma'am. At your service, again I might add. And gladly so!"

She tried, but had no recollection of having seen the man before. His careworn face and shock of wavy white hair was unfamiliar, forgettable in fact, even though his eyes sparkled a bright mischievous blue. She launched a query with his name and face attached, and smiled politely in return.

His look became both concerned and puzzled. "If I may, Mrs. Vorstan – might I enquire as to your presence here on Caranthia? I am merely curious given your recent – ah – personal circumstances, as it were."

Now Andrey'a was confused. Nothing untoward had come up in her searches earlier. She was about to ask what he meant when her query returned a positive ID: Mr. Arnem Trisek – curator of the Museum of Extra-Tarian Artifacts. *Clearly he's a long way from home as well*, she thought.

"My good Arnem," she said confidently. "We Vorstans always overcome, no? To do anything else is to admit defeat."

He smiled. "Quite so, Mrs. Vorstan." Then his smile dropped slightly. "However, the accident –"

"Was resolved in due course, as ever." She interrupted before she had time to even blink. The words seemed to come from nowhere and leap out of her mouth.

He frowned slightly. "Of course, of course. We were all greatly concerned as you can imagine. I am pleased to see you fully recovered, make no mistake."

*Why did I cut him off?* She had spoken without thinking, and he would surely have revealed more about this 'accident'.

"Resilient as ever," she went on automatically. "May I also ask what brings you to Caranthia? A research trip?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes! I believe I have located records which may confirm - or indeed refute! - the existence of the Ambarian Sect which allegedly set out for the void beyond the Cluster two millennia ago." His eyes glowed at the thought. He clearly loved his work.

"I see," she replied. "That would be quite something." She somehow felt obliged to be polite.

"Monumental!" he exclaimed. "I am on my way now to the Tharsis Public Records Office to examine their records. Perhaps you might care to join me?"

She had been running several inquisitors during their chat – looking through police, naval, military and intelligence records. She had no idea how, or why she had such access to what must surely be highly protected information, but she did. So far, Arnem was squeaky clean, and there were no general events or alerts of note active throughout all of Caranthia. She had no reason to suspect anything untoward, other than he clearly knew her, and she clearly didn't know him.

*Only one way to find out more, I guess.*

"I'd be glad to, Arnem. Tell me, why is it you never became a Professor of the museum?"

He grinned broadly. "That, Mrs. Vorstan, is a very long, and *very* dull story." He waved a hand deprecatingly at the steady stream of traffic overhead. "I prefer to walk where I can these days. Stretch the legs, as it were. Perhaps it may pass the time?"

Now she smiled. She would be glad of the walk, and the small talk. It would make it easier to study his behaviour and run more queries to see if she could piece together more of her mysterious and clearly unusual life.

"I'd love to, Arnem, and please – given we are both adventurers from the same port – let's drop the formalities. Call me Andreyia."

His smile widened even more, and he gestured along the broad concourse. They headed toward the Records Office, and Arnem began his tale of how Professor-dom had eluded him to date.

Far above the concourse, in the secured situation room that Imperial Naval Intelligence had established overnight in the penthouse of the Garyon Excelsior Hotel, humanoid figure sat in near total darkness, surrounded by a squad of armed and highly-trained marines.

He had watched as his agent, Phol Varlem – posing as Arnem Trisek – had met Andreyia through Phol's own eyes - a sense-vised relaying everything Phol saw, heard and felt. It had taken a great deal of effort to 'borrow' the real Arnem Trisek persona and graft Phol's across it. Arnem was widely known across the Empire for his extra-Tarian research, which had raised a great many questions as to the origins of several civilisations – and had caused quite a stir fifty years ago. It may have been an imprudent choice given how widely known he was, however the tenuous association between Trisek and the Vorstans made him the ideal choice. The real Andreyia Vorstan would know Trisek by name. An impostor would have to perform a very deep background sweep to find a link.

So, for the time being, the Caranthian segment of the qNet had been spoofed to happily serve up reference images of Phol Varlem in place of Arnem Trisek. Something easily passed off as a data warehousing glitch if anyone were to notice. The ruse of being on an academic research visit would certainly suffice as a cover for now, and neatly tied into their ongoing Ambarian mission which had suddenly been derailed by Admiral Cole for this surveillance work.

Phol's nano-cosmetic makeover only vaguely resembled the real Arnem Trisek, but it was obvious the person claiming to be Andreyia Vorstan had no idea who Arnem really was, even by name. The queries she had launched into the public records domain made that abundantly clear. It seemed their Intel had been accurate, and they had found their subject exactly as directed. This could not be the real Andreyia Vorstan - especially given her current medical condition which was even now being confirmed in person by an INI agent on Taria.

He was presently piggybacking Phol's web integration as standard practice, able to see and feel Phol's own personal analysis, thoughts and emotions. Phol was quite thorough and professional. So far he had not had to intercede once, or second check Phol's findings or actions.

He thought a message back to his superior via the qNet implant in his own skull. *Subject acquired. Early observation indicates minimal, but evident suspicion. Nothing to cause us concern at this time. Subject is compliant and in the company of our operative. Instructions?*

The reply was almost immediate.

*Monitor*, replied Admiral Cole. *Do not confront tactically, or engage. Instruct the asset to continue surveillance – even if they should disengage – via a direct one-to-one qNet channel only with yourself. Do not use the qNet for data access, consider it compromised. As of this moment you*

*and your entire unit are off-grid. Do not use any other channel of communication or logging other than this qNet channel. Is that understood? No other source of information is to be used.*

The being known only as 'Op' raised a single eyebrow and glanced at his squad – barely visible in the darkness despite his highly sophisticated visual enhancements. Considering the qNet 'compromised' was as alien to him as it would be to anyone else in the Empire, it was sacrosanct – utterly secure and reliable. *And if this channel is compromised?*

*If this channel is compromised all may well be lost already. We have no idea how deep this penetrates into our society. Any data leakage from your unit is to be considered an immediate termination of the mission.*

*I will instruct the squad to initiate a compromised communications lockdown protocol,* Op confirmed in response.

*You and your squad may continue to use this channel for all investigation related searches, logs and personal communication.*

*Thank you.* Op couldn't help but smile wryly. From now on every byte would be analysed and pattern-matched for any potential threat or hint of misuse. *Don't call home,* he privately thought to himself.

*It will still be a miracle of the modern age if we have successfully kept this mission and its theatre away from prying eyes,* noted Admiral Cole, *even at this level and with these precautions. But until proven otherwise we must continue under the assumption we are secure. To abort without proof is out of the question. Three years we've waited for even a hint of a physical presence for the Infiltrator, we can't let this slip by.*

*Understood. We will comply.* The channel between Op and Admiral Cole closed.

Op sent out an I-net instruction to his squad that comm's were to be considered compromised, and their local data network collapsed. There would only be vocal and line-of-sight comm's between them from now on.

He wanted to know just what they had been sent to find, and why it was suddenly so ultra-hush-hush. The only way to know was to action the mission as directed. Fortunately, that was something he and his squad were very, very good at.