

The faint murmur of an ng-pod skimming past the window roused her, drawing a low, happy murmur from her lips as she rolled over in bed. She couldn't help but revel in the warm, cosy glow that seemed to fill her mind. She wanted to stay there – half asleep – luxuriating in the tranquillity it promised, and delivered.

She lay that way for another five minutes, before some overpowering compulsion forced her to open her eyes and reluctantly leave this peaceful tranquil behind. There was an odd sensation as she sat up, not quite of loss - but of leaving something hugely powerful and precious behind, a dream perhaps.

She cast about her looking for clothes, but could see none so drew the bed-sheet about her as she slid out of the huge bed. The room was modern, dark chocolate brown decor; gold splashes here and there - the bedside lamp, the fittings in the en-suite. A doorway led out into darkness across the bed, soft glows briefly shone from glossy surfaces on furnishings that she could barely make out in the darkness of the room beyond. Mildly curious, she rose and went through the doorway into the other room, and gasped.

The large open plan penthouse apartment was completely open on all four sides, allowing the night vista of a vast glowing city to completely surround her. Tall elegant buildings rose from the darkness all about - host to myriads of countless bright lights; in white, amber, red and gold. Some of the skyscrapers seemed almost entirely made of vast bio-luminescent ad-boards.

Holograms wavered and flickered high above others, drawing her eye up to the almost constant cloud of flying lights which sped about the buildings high overhead, as they flitted like fireflies with no discernible or intelligible pattern. Even higher above - across the entire night sky - the sharp glittering white bands of a planetary ring system split the heavens in two as it arced across - ending abruptly in the darkness cast by the planets shadow directly above.

She walked forward to the edge of the carpeted living space, and reached out to touch the transparent wall-field which acted as a barrier between the apartment and the sweltering night air outside. It felt soft to the touch, but provided a rock solid resistance when pushed - it tingled faintly against the palm of her hand and she smiled.

"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 desperately hard to keep the smile from his face, eventually he had to concede and let a neural inhibitor prevent the muscle reflex from taking over - he still let the natural endorphins flood into his blood stream though, and damn it felt good.

"Tell me again," he purred.

The hooded figure standing in front of Aryn's desk was silent for a moment, as if considering Aryn's attitude before repeating what it had just told him.

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

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

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

Aryn considered 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, undercut the competition to the zero profit line plus a dollar - but not one cent less."

He span about in his chair and gazed out of the rear of his office, a shell of solid diamond revealed the vast panorama of the Core of the Dominion Globular Cluster - and deep within it –

hidden from all but the most determined observation - the mystery of the Star Net. Tens of thousands of close proximity stars were all vying for each other's mass in an eons old and near eternal conflict of raging ions and interstellar gases. At the centre of the Core - deep beyond the Star Net - an incandescent white glow surrounded the massive yet invisible Black Hole at the heart of the galaxy. Concealed behind its vast accretion sphere - burning fiercely as atoms compressed and vibrated against each other in their long, but relentless journey down into the event horizon.

Admiral Aryn Cole very much liked his view, and enjoyed the knowledge of what the ultimate course of such vast cosmic forces would be - the finite certainty behind existence. It reminded him of why he did what he did. Seven centuries he had waited, 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 hadn't yet been named by anyone of consequence. It would be several hundred years before the cataclysmic burst of energy which signalled the death of the star it had once been reached the edges of the Sulranian Empire.

Deep within the outer stretches of the nebula, enshrouded by a dense orange fog of super-hot plasma which had once been the photosphere of the star, lay the scarred and burned remains of a large T-type world. Once it had harboured life, rich and vibrant - but it was long gone, charred and blasted to ash as the world it had called home had been almost vaporised by the very thing which had given it life. Left behind was a husk, barely half a planet - its core ejected into the nebula in a plume of superheated magma, a scooped out shell left for future observers to ponder and pick over, surrounded by a huge cloud of debris and rock as a haunting reminder that it had once been a living, breathing world.

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. Something was moving toward the planet, something seemingly vast and spherical - almost the size of a moon. Aiming directly for the surface of this shattered world.

Without slowing, it hit the surface and the object seemed to split apart. Vast hexagonal arrays began peeling away from the rearmost face of the object, almost resembling a Delani seed pod - whose sides would split open and curl back in the spring to reveal the sweet flesh and seeds within to tempt passing birds.

With no respect for their continent wide sizes, seemingly oblivious to the sheer energy and momentum behind the mass being moved, these vast leaves smoothly unrolled across the shattered surface. They crashed down into the rock structure, enveloping it in their embrace and wrapping around the husk, sending vast amounts of rock and dust out away from the planet. The sound was incredible. A flesh jarring vibration as of the grinding of continental plates - amplified by a factor of ten - reverberated through the hot fog of the nebula in all directions.

Within the hour, the unrolling movement ceased and the leaves settled in place, each made of city sized hollow hexagons digging deep into the freshly shattered rock, yet still standing kilometres high above the surface. The only sound and movement now came from the constant pounding of debris which showered down under the half-g gravity for hours afterwards. Dust thickened the fog of the nebula, making vision even more impossible.

At the centre of this vast array, stood a giant conical tower whose height matched the original diameter of the sphere - stretching far, far above into the fierce red sky. Platforms and protuberances sprang out from all over its surface - their purposes elusive. Giant rails could be seen running from top to bottom at equal points around the tower.

Relative silence reigned for hours then - in perfect unison - the upper leaves of the entire hexagonal web mesh split and lifted open to create a huge flat latticed surface. An actinic blue-white light leapt out from beneath - blasting into the still exposed rock surface below. Huge plumes of superheated gases erupted through the lattice, jetting far out into the sky above. Only then did billions of assorted shapes leap up around these colossal vents of hot gases, flitting to and fro. Large or small, it made no difference, they all moved with the same speed and agility as they dived into the volcanic destruction below and then returned minutes later. Very soon, skeletal shapes began appearing on the lattice, growing in size and form minute by minute.

Construction had begun.

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Asset 53 awoke in a sterile white room. He lay inside a Suspension pod which had been unstacked and lay 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 nano-enrichments 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 jumped out onto the cool metallic floor.

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

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

"Of course Captain." said the voice.

He walked across the small room, a panel opened and he helped himself to the black plasprene Imperial Naval Captains uniform within, and pulled a pair of black slip-ons over his feet - all of which immediately bonded to his skin, forming a gapless osmotic layer which effectively became a frictionless second skin. Sweat evaporated out, oxygen and tempered ultra-violet came in. All other harmful levels of radiation, acids and all manner of bio-hazardous substances stayed out. A modern day naval uniform would keep you out of harm's way even if you were inept enough to find yourself cast adrift inside a nebula, all you'd have to worry about is breathing. This one 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 at 16:45 local."

He checked the time now - 16:00 - some free time - that made a change. But, as part of his now well established and in-ground routine, he hadn't as yet checked the date.

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

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

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

*Thirty-one years...* he accessed the qNet, and after his enrichments 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 the most was that the Empire would honour Imperial Bonds held by operatives in Suspension for "discrete" mission profiles.

He smile broadly, the bonds had matured.

He whistled softly and tunelessly to himself as he wandered down to the nearest Mess Hall, and began reviewing all the Naval 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 AI which had been monitoring the Recovery Room he had woken up in. But, he didn't trust that to give an unbiased or "uncoloured" set of data, so he ran his own searches of the public u-net over the greater qNet just in case the Navy 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 in his own perception of time had subjectively elapsed within minutes), Firuvan bacon sure tasted good - and the double strength coffee definitely perked up the synapses.

Commodore Nelsen held the plastic slip from INI before him, and read the single line order it contained to himself once again before reading it aloud to the officer before him.

"Proceed as planned." He looked up at Asset 53, an eyebrow arched slightly. He knew better than to enquire as to the obscure nature of the order.

"Yes sir."

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

"Yes sir."

Nelsen 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 remind 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 vast 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 stared at him unwaveringly. The Captain could have been a poster boy for the 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 and almost earnest face - with dark eyes, and a wide but enigmatic mouth which seemed to be fixed in a permanent well-meaning half smile. Whilst he appeared thin, Nelsen could see he kept fit - his uniform showed enough of the muscle beneath. Whoever this man actually was, or whatever it was that he did - he respected 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 Captains 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. He looked down at the notation on the plastic before him - Discard all evidence of contact with extreme prudence. That meant he - the Commodore - had to have a psyche block established after the Captain left to remove the memory of this meeting from his mind.

"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 restriction. Given that this is indeed his Imperial Majesty's Navy, I'll 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, and barely concealed a smile - the Captain was clearly a man of few words. Although it would never do to reveal it to the NIO, Nelsen found he had a grudging admiration for the young upstart.

"Dismissed Captain."

"Thank you sir."

As he left the Commodore's office, Asset 53 smiled to himself - and after a few moments deliberation chose his new name at last. Nelsen Rybek. He found the synergy of both names rather fitting. Although it was obvious Commodore Nelsen wouldn't and couldn't recognise him, he himself knew the Commodore very well, and respected him above all others. To date he had been his primary handler on eleven missions - although sadly the Commodore himself had no idea. As for 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 had proven that he was prepared to wait a very, very long time.

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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 what she was - several times in fact.

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

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

"Room service, your evening meal order."

*I ordered food?* she wondered. "Come in."

She heard the door lock click, and the young man disappeared from her impromptu view. She turned to leave the en-suite and marvelled as the image stayed locked in her view 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 looked up, and his last word broke up as it left his lips, eyes bulging slightly. She was stood in the 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 to her skin tenaciously 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 glowed with personal 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 left his employee ID with the I-net, and then left the room with a slight bow, his tray 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 an omnivore then*, she thought. *But did I place the order?* No memory came back in reply, and she sighed again – this was going to be frustrating, she could tell.

Munching on one of the fries, she went back to the beautiful and awe inspiring vista which surrounded her room. She supposed it was time to find out where she was, and hopefully who she might be. She was mildly surprised to realise she felt no rush, nor concern about her situation. She surmised this must be something she was clearly used to experiencing.

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

"This room is registered to Mrs Andreyra Vorstan, booked for a duration of twelve weeks, which will elapse in twelve week's time. 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 pondered at that for a moment. Clearly she had arrived abruptly, but intended to hang around for some time.

"Thank you," she said. "I'd like a private tunnel out to the u-net please."

"Certainly."

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

"The 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 hand.

Instinctively, she tapped a few and then launched another query into the u-net 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 beforehand she had no idea any of it existed, had no recollection of ever seeing or using it, and certainly had no idea nor inspiration to try.

Her query returned a result set, which sprang into life in another rectangle of light to her right-hand side. 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 back at her in the mirror - they didn't exist. *Only in my head*, she realised.

According to the results, Andreyra 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 Empires most productive and financially powerful agricultural worlds. Despite the vast wealth and resources to hand, life had remained relatively pastoral there when compared to modern living. However, when it came to bio-cultivation, mechanised agriculture and transport logistics, Taria ruled. 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 Empire. Nor Carl, her supposed beloved. *I don't look the marrying type*, she mused to herself - with no idea why.

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

She reached two resolutions.

One, she could not find any indication of why she was here instead of Taria living the quiet life of the idle rich, nor how she had come to be here - in Tharsis City on Caranthia, apparently.

Two, she didn't believe a word of her supposed life - despite extensive holo, video and photo evidence to the contrary.

She looked at the table, and the cold steak and fries, and realised she wasn't even slightly hungry. 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 got 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 lovely garments and clothing items which seemed scandalous to wear, and 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 connected and 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. Just dark and opaque enough to hide details, but just enough to show she was indeed naked underneath. She smirked devilishly.

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

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The impact seemed to go on forever. Romurik could see the air shuddering around him it seemed, as the vibrations wracked the hull and infrastructure about him. The lights faded as the ships core dropped non-vital systems in favour of reinforcing the shields and integrity systems whilst the impact 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 viewport 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 know, he knew already.

Technically - theoretically – a ship to ship collision was impossible in today's modern age. AI monitoring programs, myriad sensor input, AI captains and sentient 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 failed, defensive fields would simply bounce the two apart as if a

cosmic ball-game was taking place. If they too failed, well then – generally it was felt you deserved it, and shouldn't have been in space in the first place.

You had to really *really* work at it to collide with another ship. Which is exactly what the *Drastic Response* had done, at great length.

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 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 the Migration. Palloumia – a heavily populated, industrialised planet in the Canthen system on the fringes of the Empire. Of all the idiotic, war-mongering stupidity. It would have been the work of a genius war-crafter to escalate a deeply in-ground species behaviour into an act of war, that at least could have been countered for by simply removing the genius war-crafter... but in this instance there was none to be removed. 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 hive-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. It was something he'd had to file for analysis at a later date by a tribunal of the Purer Minds.

Knowing the Ambassadors return to Velari would signal the Flock to begin forming, 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. An AI navigational error, combined with a catastrophic and sudden drive system overload which 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. [9]

The *Drastic Response* had conversed with its peers over the u-net on a private link, and the action was propagated and subsequently 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 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.

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Nelsen Rybek stroked the matt black hull of the Valkyr as he roamed about underneath. It was currently being flight-prepped, and a dozen or so tubes hung from the 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 - but nothing registered, no friction against his skin, no response from his field scans even a 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 - 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, each snapping firmly into place magnetically. The orifice left behind in the black hull above softly and silently shrank and disappeared - leaving no mark or sign of its existence.

"That she is," Nelsen murmured.

The tech gave him a glance with an impish grin, and Nelsen saw the tech was a young woman - no more than thirty. Her eyes were a deep and vivid green, which most likely meant she came from Verdant - a luxuriantly overgrown jungle world just on the edge of the Empire whose upper atmosphere had a dominant methane layer - colouring the sky a light green, which had earned the world the nickname Greenlight. Some peculiarity of the environment there also meant the inhabitants irises were usually a deep green to match.

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

She smiled, realising he'd guessed her heritage correctly. "By choice," she said. Verdantians 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 replied - and 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 flattening out into a blade-like protuberance at the front. Two ridges ran from the front to the rear above and below the hull - no markings of any kind showed anywhere on the hull. No 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 inside, along with the brand new continuous wormhole drive that no-one in the Empire outside the select few in 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 the 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 parameters and requirements without fault. Rest assured I am fully capable and ready to perform any and all duties as required within my parameters.*

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

*We'll do just fine Sneak Thief. He walked forward, open the door. Sneak, let me in please? Certainly Captain.*

A section of the black hull underneath shrank away, revealing a surprisingly dull metal hatch which silently dropped down to the bay floor on an ng-field. Nelsen stepped on, 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. She 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 equivalent of a warm hug, tinged with regret - its way of portraying a sad parting.

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

*I am not worried,* replied the Sneak. *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 despite being large enough to accommodate several frigate class vessels was entirely empty bar for the Valkyr. It floated into the bay's central axis, and then slid out of the vast hexagonal entrance in the station's outer layer, and into the blackness of deep space outside. Once it had cleared the entrance-way field, the ship almost vanished from sight, indiscernible from the black of space. It reflected none of the vast amount of light pouring out of the bay - one could only make out its shape by the stars it blocked from view.

*Another one gone,* she thought wistfully. Then she sighed - somewhat melodramatically it had to be said. She commanded the maintenance bay to close up, then turned off the bay lights - throwing the bay into almost pitch blackness. Only the requisite safety glow strips around danger areas threw out any light - to be swallowed almost instantly in the vast darkness within the bay.

She stood a while, admiring the view and appreciating the isolation while it lasted. No doubt it wouldn't be long before there would be no time for either.

-

The *Sneak Thief* moved effortlessly - and without any observable motion to its single occupant - as it travelled to the maximum Emergence Zone distance from the Hive Station which was now behind it. 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 easier to move, shield, and most importantly defend. The glow of the hexagonal bay they had just left winked out.

Someone - no doubt that technician - had obviously shut up shop. He could clearly make out the spherical honeycombed structure as other bays spilled their light out into the darkness.

"Clearing EZ-3," said the Thief.

The station behind them suddenly vanished. "Scan?" Nelsen queried in admiration.

"There is little need Captain, I have attempted to detect *Capella* on previous test flights, I have not as yet ever detected its presence until within the Emergence Zone's. However, as per your request, I have completed a full sweep. Nothing notable apart from deep-space vacuum, with 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. The only way you got to see a Naval Station was by invitation or accident. Accidents were so improbable as to be implausible - if you just happened to be traversing this volume of space, and your vector would take even near the stations emergence zones, the station would simply move out of your way. If you somehow persisted and kept changing course to miraculously keep travelling toward it - you would find yourself a guest at the Emperor's leisure - permanently. Not that anyone ever had - the sheer cosmic improbability that any stray vessel would accidentally find itself in INI space so far had ensured the complete discretion of all INI Operational bases.

He brought up the archive relating to his current assignment - which appeared as a small, slowly spinning cube superimposed over his vision before him, 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 to procure a certain pre-requisite before engaging the mission, that being to obtain the fastest stealth combat vessel available at the time. He looked about the formal, 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 IN:I cypher and began studying his mission. The brief was thirty pages long, with innumerable side-references, videos 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 coursed through his veins - released from artificially grown glands, and his subjective interpretation of the passage of time leapt ten-fold. He might only be on the couch for half an hour of real-time, but he'd be studying the mission in his head for at least five.

The Sneak scanned the entire volume of space it was currently in 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 light years away. 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 diffuse planetary ring system not two light years away, 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 Thief. The major bands were fifty metres apart, so not much of a 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, scanned for immediate debris within its emergence volume, satisfied itself that all was clear and then ramped up the wormhole diameter 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 wormhole evaporate behind it in a dark blue-violet burst of Cherekov radiation. The Sneak was right, the view was spectacular.

To say Andrey'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 alien heads could be seen to turn. It seemed her choice of attire was rare. *Either too rich for most here, or too risqué*, she thought – she wasn't sure which. She checked the local prices for gel-suits over the u-net 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 really figured out who she was and what was going on, but something told her it didn't matter - and besides, it was far too late for that. Something which was confirmed a few minutes later as she stared up at a giant holo-ad above a restaurant in a local park.

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

Eyebrows raised in true surprise, 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. She launched a query with his name and face attached, and smiled politely in return.

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

Now Andrey was puzzled - 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.*

"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 -"

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

He couldn't help but frown 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? He would surely have volunteered information about this "accident"!*

"Resilient as ever," she went on smoothly. "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 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 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 may care to join me?"

She had been running several inquisitors during their chat - looking for police records, military records, 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 no events or alerts of note were in service in Tharsis City. 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. I prefer to walk where I can these days - to stretch the legs. 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 afar - let's drop the formalities. Call me Andreyia."

His smile broadened - if possible - then he gestured along the concourse and they began walking toward the Records Office, Arnem began his tale of how Professor-dom had come to elude him to date.

Far, far above the concourse - in the secured situation room that Imperial Naval Intelligence had fabricated overnight without anyone knowing in the penthouse of the Garyon Excelsior Hotel - a 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 - and Andreyia had met through Phol's own eyes. 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 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 for the time being the Caranthian u-net had been spoofed to happily serve up reference images of Phol Varlem in place of Arnem Trisek - easily described as a data warehousing glitch if it were to be noted. The ruse would certainly suffice for the duration of this mission.

He was presently piggybacking Phol's own personal analysis and viewpoint via Phol's web integration as standard practice. Phol was quite thorough and professional. So far he had not had to intercede 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 concern at this time. Subject is compliant and in the company of our operative. Instructions?*

The reply was almost immediate.

*Monitor. Do not engage. Instruct the asset to continue surveillance - even after they disengage - via a direct one-to-one qNet channel with yourself. 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 man raised a single eyebrow, and glanced at his squad - barely visible in the darkness despite his highly sophisticated visual enhancements. *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 a high risk of terminating the mission.*

*I will instruct the squad to initiate a compromised communications lockdown protocol.*

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

*Thank you.* The man couldn't help but smile wryly. Every byte would be analysed and pattern matched for a potential threat or hint of misuse. *Don't call home,* he privately thought to himself.

*It will be a miracle of the modern age if we have successfully kept this mission and its theatre away from prying eyes even at this level and with these precautions,* noted his superior. *But until proven otherwise we must continue with the assumption we are intact. To abort without proof is out of the question.*

*Understood. We will comply.*

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

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

The *Sneak Thief* weaved gracefully around and between the large chunks of ice and accreted rock which made up the ring system of Arullan at something approaching one hundred meters per second, running it's navigation software, high resolution mapping systems and pattern matching routines through a mildly gruelling diagnostics program just to see if any kinks had crept in since it's last diagnostics run a week ago. No anomalies so far. As a by-product, the Sneak had woven an intricate and highly detailed 3D map of the ring-system debris fields out to ten kilometres in every direction as it slipped effortlessly through an optimal plotted route around the debris, catalogued at least sixteen hundred thousand four hundred and fifteen fragments, and identified a large source of Tirillium which the Pax Mining Conglomerate would be very interested to hear about. The Sneak optimised the data, and then reluctantly encrypted it and streamed it deep into its core never to be seen again. They were a top-secret unit, on a top-secret assignment, and officially had never been here. No one would ever know about the Sneak's analysis, mapping, categorisations or findings - indeed, they'd be quite amazed at the level of detail and almost atomic level of accuracy. Questions would be asked if this data ever saw the light of day.

"Sneak?"

"Captain! Welcome back."

Nelsen rose from the couch with a mild grunt, rubbing his eyes to try and wipe away the blur from the semi-sleep he had been in whilst reviewing the mission. He was none too happy.

"Set a course for the Velari hive-world please. Best possible speed."

The Sneak had to pause. "I don't mean to question Captain, but are you sure? That would be rather... *quick* after all..."

"I'm sure. We need to be there yesterday."

"Well, I can't quite manage time travel - but I can make it as close to now as feasibly possible with my current drive system."

Nelsen smiled. "Ready when you are Sneak."

"We are already underway Captain. ETA with S'ren in thirty-three minutes. Might I enquire as to the details of the mission if deemed appropriate?"

Nelsen considered for a moment. Not on whether to divulge - he trusted the Sneak implicitly - Naval Intelligence protocols would not allow any AI to compromise a mission, it was a requirement which they had to accept prior to being granted a commission, the same as anyone else. It was more the irritatingly trivial nature of the mission which made him hesitate. He still couldn't quite believe he'd been de-mothballed for this.

"Well, we're to steal something, sure enough," he said. "Although officially the mission mandate is to '... acquire by any means necessary...'" He lapsed into silence – frowning slightly.

"Captain?" nudged The Sneak, gently.

"Hmm? Oh, here - I've unlocked the archive. Knock yourself out."

"I would rather not, but thank you anyway." The Sneak analysed the files, uncomfortably aware that it only took 2.7341 seconds to read, digest, collate, research and compute mission profile permutations to the most probable seventeen variants - varying from 100% success to complete failure, whilst Nelsen had spent four subjective hours studying the same data. The Sneak didn't want to appear superior, so decided to drag it out for another ten seconds. Most of the plausible profiles were complete failures, it had to be said.

"You finished yet?" demanded Nelsen.

If it could have, The Sneak would have blushed.

"Yes Captain. This mission would indeed to appear... trivial in nature, and also statistically doomed to fail."

"I agree."

"This artifact does appear to have a certain prominence in historical circles, however I am at a loss as to its value to the Empire. Unless we are assisting with an Outreach diplomacy acquisition, but then the species responsible for the artifact is extinct, and no interest has ever been filed in IN archives. Also I find the potential for causing a diplomatic incident with the Velari to be a wanton risk given the apparent worth of the acquisition itself. Also, why would INI want to locate such an artifact with a full scale migration in progress?"

Nelsen blinked. "What?"

"The Velari are migrating - the entire hive population. Did you not know?"

Nelsen wobbled on his feet for a moment, suddenly unsteady. "They are what... ?" he whispered.

Seeing the Captain unsteady on his feet, the Sneak shunted a diagnostic routine out to check the Inertial Dampers for any service issues. "They announced it shortly before I was granted my flight readiness qualification. Indeed, not much before my being assigned to your good self."

Nelsen sat down on the gel-couch abruptly. His eyes were wide. "Oh my..."

"Captain?" The Sneak had to admit it felt puzzled by the Captains reaction. It could compute no fathomable cause, and diagnostics reported the ID's were 100% operational. The maintenance AI core was quite abrupt in its report, clearly put out by being questioned when it felt it could be trusted to warn The Sneak well in advance of any problems. The Sneak noted to have words with it later, for now it was consumed in wanting to know what was causing the Captain such distress. Sometimes dealing with humanoid neural networks was quite the chore.

"I know what we are really after, it's not what we were sent to get. We're after something which doesn't exist, which some archaic aeons old rumour allegedly hints at the unlikely possibility that the Velari encountered it during one of their migrations in times past."

The Sneak was polite, but inside writhing with impatient desire to know what *it* was... "And that would be... Captain?"

Nelsen told him. For the first time ever, the Sneak was tempted to utter an expletive.

"You have got to be kidding me," it managed.

Andreya found Arnem's company welcome - if a little dry. He chatted amiably about his research as they almost strolled along the pedestrianised walkways which filled the gaps between an oddball mix of towering skyscrapers and single or two storey buildings. He touched on his work at the museums both at home on Taria and here, the idiosyncrasies of living on Caranthia.

He demonstrated a self-deprecating humour and a sharp but well-meaning cynicism regarding the locals and some of their ways. She was amazed - and horrified - to learn that her

current attire was deemed to be the utmost civil impropriety. When Arnem had gently informed her after yet another gawking stare finally made her frown, she had commanded the gel suit to go opaque instantly. She drew less attention from then on, and the glances seemed more openly appreciative and warmer than before.

*Backward yokels*, she thought. Then wondered why she had such a cutting opinion of them.

" - of course" - Arnem rambled on happily - "none of this would have become apparent if not for the ineptness of my research grad who completely mixed up the filing system in use for extra-tarian artifacts. It took months to correct it. However, it was almost an ordained event. In seeking out some lesser piece of work regarding the Mask of Pethbe on which I was most reluctantly engaged, instead I put my hand straight onto the slim containing the last remaining archive on imports to Caranthia. I'd never have encountered it otherwise. Remarkable, really, when you think about it."

Andreya nodded dutifully, and smiled. She was running through file archives, photo, video and audio references cross linked to almost every keyword Arnem said as he spoke. Absorbing the rapid flow of data like a bit-sponge. Listening to Arnem was pleasant, yet dull. However the cross referencing from Arnem's casual name dropping of people, places and governmental departments was fascinating. She'd learned more about Taria's inner society and workings in the past twenty minutes - just from Arnem's unwitting preamble - than she could have from hours of intelligent and diligent searching herself.

Taria was evidently a heavily broken machine; since her supposed husband's death, corruption had spread through the higher echelons of the semi-feudal society like a cancer. It was rotting from the inside out. Emigration was at its highest ever - with immigration at its lowest. Random queries on the immigrants showed that less than savoury candidates were being granted visas where before they would have been outright refused. Factions were forming within Taria's government which equated to criminal organisations.

It seemed her home world was broken. Perhaps that was why she was here? To seek help? Maybe this 'accident' Arnem had mentioned was related - although she still could not find any record or reference to anything unusual in her searches.

"Ah, here we are!"

She nearly flinched - dragged out of her reverie by Arnem's sudden exclamation. She mentally brushed all the files and video windows away from her vision so she could see unhindered.

The Records Office towered above them, a scraper which consumed an entire city block and loomed vertiginously almost two kilometres above them.

"Impressive for a public office," she murmured. Arnem smiled.

"This is mostly commercial; the Records Office itself is mostly underground. The Lobby is this way, after you..." he gestured toward the slowly rotating lobby doors.

Once inside, Arnem excused himself and went away to one of the prolific reception areas to make his arrangements. Andreya idled around the vast lobby lounge as she waited, ignoring the plethora of holo-ads which sprang up from every wall, pillar and table she neared. Then Arnem hurried over, eyes bright.

"We can proceed down to the central archive. I presumed... that is, I wondered if you'd care to join me? The discovery would be reasonably momentous after all..."

It was clear from his tone that Arnem was not just eager to share his findings, but was also markedly glad of her company - possibly any company she thought wryly. She hesitated for a moment, not really sure of herself, what she needed to do - or indeed where she should go to do it.

"It could be extremely important for the future," he volunteered.

She found the remark odd, but so far she had learned a great deal just being in his company - perhaps he was right. It could be extremely important for her *own* future. She smiled disarmingly at him. "I'd be delighted to witness your discovery Arnem." She couldn't help notice the look of unattainable hope pass over his face for a moment, and she sighed privately to herself. This was going to reach an uncomfortable point sometime soon, she could tell.

*No evident suspicion as yet. Our asset is manipulating her emotive state to some degree. Even a negative perception will result in an emotional bond forming - pity can be just as useful as love in some cases.*

*Just ensure that your asset does not jeopardise the attachment. Surveillance is paramount at this time. A close physical presence is our only avenue for intelligence given the risk of using more sophisticated means.*

*Understood.*

-

Despite the diplomatic efforts of Outreach, the carefully worded threats to discount the Velari Petition, despite the military threat posed by the fleet being launched from Canthen to blockade the Velari from their home-world - despite the Emperor's personal appeal to locate another suitable migratory world, the Velari migration to Canthen space began.

Hundreds of thousands of Velari carriers, cruisers, passenger liners, battleships and dreadnoughts left S'ren orbit, and began their slow acceleration up to FTL - vectored directly for an insertion around Palloumia. An entire world stuffed into every available vessel capable of carrying passengers, and many converted from ones that were barely fit for purpose.

Despite an Imperial request to avoid involvement wherever possible, many vessels had been supplied by Imperial and non-imperial companies from within the Empire - at favourable rates given the competition. No business could afford to miss such an opportunity, and such were the numbers involved in the migration - no spare vessels could be found within a hundred light years. Normal interplanetary trade and commerce in the volume had been decimated as even the smallest passenger transports found themselves in Velari space under strict orders from their operating agencies to accommodate the migration - no matter what.

Tourism in the volume ground to a halt, and only a mandate from the Pax Trade Alliance - sanctioned by the Emperor - kept resources and cargo flowing at the barest minimum due to the sheer force of will of the various Trade Associations within the Pax itself.

The Empire now found itself in an untenable position. Two petitioning species - both well into negotiations to join the Empire, one refusing all diplomatic effort to avoid a full scale interstellar war, and the other threatening to wipe out an entire species if it entered Canthen space without permission. Both requesting assistance from the Empire on account of their cordial relations and on-going diplomatic efforts. On top of this, a vast number of vessels and citizens of the Empire were ferrying the Velari into what would soon become a guaranteed war zone. The Empire would have to defend its citizens in the vessels ferrying the Velari, and this would no doubt require declaring war on the Canthen.

According to some of the more whimsical media sources of the day, the Emperor was reported to have wryly observed, "just another day on the throne."

Aryn was pacing around his desk impatiently. His advisor stood silent and passive as usual, unperturbed by his superior's agitation.

Finally, Aryn grunted gracelessly and stopped, turning to face the cloaked and hooded figure before his desk.

"Okay, I give in. I need help."

"Of course, how may I assist?" The figure raised a gloved hand, and drew back its hood to reveal a humanoid but faceless head, which seemed almost entirely made of semi-translucent quicksilver. Tiny golden flashes of light flickered through it constantly - like a shoal of golden fish in a murky pond. The head was featureless - no eyes, nose or mouth. Its voice just seemed to 'appear' in the air around it.

Aryn regarded it for a moment to see if it was being glib, but as ever it was impossible to tell its mood - even its voice carried no emotive inflexion.

"The Velari, their reason for migrating, and as importantly their choice of roost. We have no information, no avenue to procure any, and none is forthcoming from Outreach."

A dark look passed across his face and he walked across his office to the huge viewing dome to gaze out at the Core blazing away in the distance.

"As the sector Chief of Naval Intelligence, that's not something I'm accustomed to, nor prepared to tolerate. How can we obtain more Intel without exposing the fact we are trying to obtain more Intel?"

The cloaked figure seemed to think for a moment before replying. "We have numerous assets in the theatre, many in fact piloting the very vessels ferrying the Velari to their chosen destination."

"Obviously, but none have access to the Velari personnel which have the information we need. Velari are highly hierarchical and do not divulge information down the chain - only orders. As you should know."

The silver figure nodded. "I do. The challenge then is to obtain access to these personnel and extract the information without them either knowing or being allowed to communicate the event to their leaders."

"You have something in mind?"

"Destroy one of our transports - more precisely, make it appear it has been destroyed."

Aryn mulled this over for a few moments. "Workable - I can arrange something along those lines. Sacrificing vessels appears to be a common practice these days."

"I admit the *Drastic Response* did prompt the suggestion."

"How do we persuade the captured Velari to co-operate? They are stubborn to the point of imbecility. We don't really want to risk another diplomatic incident by even hinting at standard interrogation."

It turned its head to share Aryn's view of the core.

"You may safely leave that to me."

"I not sure why - drive coil be degrading. High energy plasma burning way through coil housing."

The captain of the *Betsy's Pride* glared out of the view port in the engine bay for a moment. Then ruffle his sandy hair. He was about average height – just under two meters, but of incredibly solid build. Not bulky – but very well defined – which contradicted his elfin and almost delicate face. He turned the glare back onto Venton - his Learomorph Chief Engineer.

"Can you fix it?"

Venton shook his purple scaled head, huge bulging eyes darting about nervously as nictating membranes flicked over them.

"Can you contain it?"

Venton shrugged. "Course, should put in for a maintenance, yai?"

Brynn grimaced. "That means a hefty discount on our charter. Doubling the cost of the repair itself no doubt."

Venton shrugged again.

"Patch it up, but make it *stick* Venton, it has to last until we get to Palloumia."

"Yai Captain."

Brynn nodded. "Now for the joy of telling the Velari Consulate." He sighed softly, and then turned to leave.

"Consul G'rangim - it's a minor running issue, my engineer has it under control. You won't notice so much as a bump before you disembark."

The Velari Consul turned to its colleagues and chattered away for a few moments, then turned back to Brynn.

"See that it doesn't." It croaked back at him. Then they all turned and shuffled off back into their cabin.

*So much for chit-chat*, Brynn thought.

As he walked back to the bridge - which was technically unnecessary these days thanks to implants and the qNet - he stopped by a viewport and gazed out at the pulsing nebulous glow of photons being scattered and split by the FTL field.

There was a shudder throughout the entire ship, enough to feel beneath the feet. The fact it seemed powerful enough to get past the Inertial Dampers was a cause for concern.

Brynn checked the elapsed time since he'd left the Consul. Then a screaming shriek reverberated through the superstructure, followed by a colossal jolt. Outside, the glow of the FTL field disappeared to be replaced by a cloud of fire.

The *Betsy's Pride* dropped out of FTL in the classic fireball of exploding energy caused by a c+ drive failure. The cloud of fire rapidly blew itself out into space, revealing the twisting and fragmenting hull of the *Betsy's Pride* behind - burning fiercely on its own internal atmosphere for a few seconds before it spent itself and evaporated abruptly into a rapidly expanding and fading cloud of smoke and gas. A writhing mass of metal glowed white hot, quickly cooling in the absolute zero of deep space. Sections began to snap and collapse under the stress of the gyrating mass as the rapid cooling made metals and plastics suddenly brittle and fragile. Huge fragments of debris flew off in all directions - cargo, passenger cabins, drive and shield systems - all scattering out into space, some suffering secondary explosions as they departed. Within twenty seconds, there was nothing left to see other than a vague cloud of expanding gas, interspersed with exotic metal and plastic shards.

No-one had chance to escape.

"Do you think they fell for it?"

Brynn was on the bridge with his crew. Kerugar – his partner, and Executive Officer - was standing by his side as they reviewed the covert operation they'd just completed. She was Reptarian, slightly shorter than Brynn himself and slightly built – which belied her immense natural physical strength. Her skin was completely scaled in mottled green and yellow, and she was entirely hairless. Reptars were one of the few civilised races to remain unashamed of their natural state, refusing to don clothes or garments unless ceremonial occasion demanded it.

Brynn grimaced. "Only time will tell. I hope so - that was extremely expensive. Do you have any idea how many departments and ships were involved to pull that off?"

Kerguar shook her head, scales glinting under the overhead lighting.

"A lot," he replied.

"I'd like to know just *how* this was pulled off," she asked - sounding highly irritated. Brynn smiled disarmingly and was about to reply when a voice came from the doorway into the bridge.

"Captain Tealin?"

Brynn turned at the hail to see a uniformed naval lieutenant saluting him from the corridor outside. Brynn returned the salute smartly – despite the informal nature of his ship and crew, this was still a ship of the line in the Imperial Navy.

"Did everything go according to plan?" Brynn asked.

"Yes sir. FTL comm's were blocked the instant of the explosion, all IO data from the *Betsy's Pride* was suppressed from that point on. Provided no unknown qNet spinners were on board - and all of your crew can be trusted, we have no cause to believe the operation has been compromised."

Brynn raised an eyebrow at the Lieutenants comment regarding his crew.

Fortunately the Lieutenant was sharp enough to spot signs of trouble. "No offence meant Captain - I fully respect your crew and ship. It is merely an operational consideration. INI are completely satisfied at this time."

"Glad to hear it."

"We are escorting the Velari off your ship - with some considerable difficulty I might observe."

Brynn smiled. "What happens to them next?"

The lieutenant raised an eyebrow in turn. "I'm afraid I am not at liberty to divulge Captain. You would have to speak with my superior, Captain E'streth."

Brynn waved a hand dismissively and smiled. He was mildly curious as to why INI had gone to such lengths to secure some Velari, but not enough to get dragged into their world. He didn't mind doing the odd covert operation for them, such as posing as a passenger transport - although calling the *Betsy* a passenger transport was a little rich – although the Velari Consul had seemed very happy to accept a highly weaponised ship for their journey. But, he had no intention of letting his ship and his crew get seconded into Intelligence work.

The Lieutenant looked distracted for a moment. "Sir, Captain E'streth has asked if you wish to be debriefed..." he sounded puzzled - it was highly irregular for someone to be able to consider a debrief to be 'voluntary'.

"No, thank you Lieutenant - and my thanks to the Captain of course. I don't think it'll be necessary on this occasion. Good luck with questioning the Velari, you're going to need it!"

"You might not need debriefing..." muttered Kerugar under her breath.

"Thank you Captain," replied the Lieutenant. He snapped his heels together with a brief nod to Brynn, then smiled and nodded at Kerugar. "Ma'am," he said, and then left to go back to his ship.

As he left, Kerugar turned a steely stare at Brynn. His eyes went wide disingenuously.

"What?" he protested innocently.

"How did you stage that?"

"I'm not sure I can divulge, it's all a bit hush-hush at the -"

"Brynn."

Brynn sighed theatrically.

*Venton started venting plasma out of the primary coil into the shield space around the Betsy's hull. It would provide convincing evidence of the fictitious leak - if the Velari found anything to analyse of course. Also it would provide a nice theatrical effect when the 'explosion' occurred. He still wasn't too sure what the Captain had meant with the vague sign language they'd used during their brief chat, but he trusted him completely. Venton was certain the captain just needed him to do his part. He then turned his attention to the Inertial Dampers, a few micro-second bursts of gain and loss of inertia across the entire ship should convince anyone that something was wrong.*

*Timing was critical - not to stage the event, but to allow the Velari enough time to become convinced something was wrong and use FTL comm's to their superiors, and then for their*

*superiors to respond with instructions. Cutting them off mid-response would be an extra bonus. The staged confrontation with Vention in engineering was video-relayed, proving the Velari had deployed some form of surveillance equipment aboard the Betsy when they had boarded.*

*Four light-years away, a ship that appeared to be an exact replica of the Betsy's Pride lay waiting - fully powered up, all cabins lit and life support running - despite the fact that all of its occupants were already quite dead and well beyond the need for life support – being the corpses of poor unfortunates of unknown origin who had a way of filling city morgues in the less desirable Imperial Worlds. Coincidentally enough, this replica vessels drive coil was degrading at an alarming rate, and plasma was leaking into the hull superstructure voids - filling them up with a lethal and highly combustible gas.*

*One kilometre away - uncomfortably close by space-faring standards - the INSS Delaror waited patiently for the signal to proceed.*

*Brynn felt the first vibration as Venton played with the ID's, and the FTL comm's monitor he was running flickered into his vision. The Velari Higher Command were replying to the Consul in real-time. Perfect.*

*He gave Venton a quick image idiom of a banana skin on the floor over the I-net, then waited. The next vibration matched the loss of the FTL field, and then he pinged the Delaror over the qNet. There was a fierce burst of white-violet outside the ship, and then space returned to its normal diamond studded black.*

*At his signal, the Delaror had opened a wormhole before the replica Betsy and then pushed the wormhole forward directly through the ship. The original Betsy slid out of the fierce violet-white orb as the wormhole moved - surrounded by a raging inferno of combusting drive plasma.*

*The duplicate emerged into real space precisely where the original had left, and was then consumed by its own internal inferno. The wormhole collapsed - quickly evaporating away into multi-band EM radiation - but not before a brief lick of flame erupted from the fissure in space as it snapped shut. The entire exchange took no more than half a second, and the Delaror rapidly reversed its g-drive to bring it to a halt just before the Betsy's Pride.*

*The swap in-out manoeuvre was ambitious, audacious and incredibly dangerous. But had been timed to perfection. The Betsy was now four light-years away from where she had appeared to have been destroyed – with none the wiser. No-one would be able to find enough organic matter to discover its passengers had been long, long dead before the explosion.*

"That's quite something," remarked Kerugar.

"I'm moderately pleased if I do say so myself," said Brynn happily.

"Wormholes?"

Brynn frowned. Bubble burst. "Yes."

"How long have the IN had ship-mounted wormhole generators?"

Brynn looked a little cagey. "A while. You can see the implications..."

"Oh yes... yes I can. Opening a breach in space from any point to any point with a singularity that could instantly convert any unshielded matter to a burst of EMR is not something to bandy about to the general public."

"Quite. IN:R&D have field tested the generator in many scenarios - the results were all - largely - quite destructive. It's only just been commissioned for use within a restricted subset of the fleet."

"So how come we're shielded?" Kerugar levelled another of her direct, cutting stares through Brynn's head - he could have sworn he felt her gaze drag along the inside of the back of his skull.

"Umm... I thought it might be useful last refit?"

"For what? In case you IN boys cooked up a hot swap situation like this?"

"Well you have to admit it turned out pretty handy..."

"Where is it? Does Venton know? Stupid question - of course he knows, it's his ship - nothing could get installed without him finding out."

Brynn raised a placating hand; he knew where this was headed - but too late.

"Which begs the question - why does the XO not know there's a working example of the hitherto theoretical Continuous Wormhole Drive on board? Because she's not *Navy*?"

The stare was surely delivering several gigawatts of heat by now; Brynn could feel every one of them. He sighed. "Orders. Need to know," he supplied lamely.

She shook her head and looked away. "I thought we'd got past this," she said softly.

"Kerugar -" but his plea trailed off as she turned and left the bridge for their cabin. That's me sleeping in the surgery again, Brynn thought sadly.

"I need know," protested Venton - highly affronted. Kerugar had accosted him directly instead of relying on the ship's I-net. She wanted to see his physical reaction and not just his thoughts.

"So do I Venton, don't you think? As XO -"

"You not cleared Navy. Captain said only cleared know."

Kerugar's stare didn't have quite the same impact on a species that do not blink.

"Fine," she snapped, and stormed out of engineering.

Brynn knocked on their cabin door a few hours later, but got no response. He checked the room's local network, and then the ship's own I-net, but there was nothing from Kerugar. No messages or notices. The cabin itself was locked off by an encryption he couldn't be bothered to try and break. Head hung dejectedly he wandered off to the surgery to bunk down for a few hours before their next assignment.

*Volunteers could be so touchy at times*, he thought. *Especially when you're living with them*. He wondered if this would be enough to break their relationship - his role in the Navy had come close to doing it before and this was a doozy. But orders were orders - and this wasn't your typical secret information, it represented a major technological advantage for the Empire in troubled times. *Surely she can see that?* he asked himself silently. As usual, he failed to give himself an answer.