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**Dedication**

As always, I sincerely appreciate my partner, Gail Wedgeworth for putting up with me through endless requests for editing advice and for her opinion on my various quandaries while writing *Sovereign’s Journey.* She is unsurpassed as a story teller, and my books benefit greatly from her genius. Tom Terrell, you know I appreciate your help with editing and for your talent in coming up with all things artistic, related to the EdenQuest Trilogy. I would like to thank Cory Emberson, who spent countless hours editing my manuscripts. Line editing is not easy, and I appreciate it. Also, I want to thank Doctor Brian Jones for his medical advice, with regards to helping my character, Doctor Jaden Shumway come to life. Finally, I would also like to thank Rachel Robertson, a talented actress, and a beautiful young woman who has graciously agreed to be the face of Commander Rachael Shumway, my novel’s heroine.

**Forward**

Danielle Wedgeworth gives us a scary look into a bleak future that awaits mankind if we stay on our current trajectory. *Sovereign’s Journey* will shake readers to the core by exploring the depths of despair that we could devolve into if progressive statism reaches its logical conclusion, and by embracing the hope that exists if we follow our better angels.

Science fiction does many things. It helps us to dream big dreams. It allows us to imagine a better world or new worlds. It can also immerse us in story as a mechanism to examine complex issues from five thousand feet up. With a healthy suspension of disbelief we can sit back and let the lessons wash over us in a cascade of images that are enlightening and entertaining. *Sovereign’s Journey* is one such thrill ride that combines all of these elements into gripping page turner.

Chris Salcedo

Talk Show Host on the Blaze

Author of *Liberty Rises*

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Preface

*UNSS BRUSSELS* - AUXILIARY ENGINEERING

THURSDAY, 28 MARCH 2083

“It’s not right, just not right.” Lieutenant Rachael Shumway worked through the figures from the glittering and colorful display in engineering. “You are not going to get any thanks for pointing this one out,” she muttered to herself and shook her head and looked around her work area. To say that Lieutenant Shumway’s duty station was drab would have been an understatement, but she didn’t care as long as that duty station was located aboard a colonial starship. Real estate in *UNSS Brussels’* spine was at a premium, especially in the engineering section located at the center of *Brussels’* massive Alcubierre ring which made travel in hyperspace possible. Auxiliary engineering was a five-by-ten-meter space just forward of the hyperspace core. Her work station, like the other six auxiliary monitoring stations in the compartment was clean and efficient, but lacked any of the comfort found in the command module on the other end of the ship. As a navigation officer, she knew she would spend most of her career in more pleasant surroundings, so she didn’t mind the orangepiping currently topping the collar of her uniform. She knew it would be temporary. Ship’s navigators never looked forward to their rotation as engineering officers, but Rachael didn’t care all that much. While it wasn’t as intellectually stimulating as plotting and maintaining a course in hyperspace, the engineering behind creating a hyperspace bubble was what made her job possible in the first place. To be honest, she thought the process was fascinating. She only wished she hadn’t been assigned to monitoring drive core readings. Auxiliary engineering was packed with equipment duplicating all of *Brussels’* primary systems, so junior engineering officers just had to make do with whatever work space could be squeezed in among the hardware. Her station tonight faced the forward bulkhead and away from the transparent deck-to-ceiling bulkhead between the engineering space and the hyperspace core. She loved the organic patterns created by the swirling plasma contained within the core, but she hardly had time for such musings right now. Looking up from her console for the third time in the last twenty minutes, Rachael fidgeted, tapping her finger tips together nervously. When she’d first noticed micro fractures in the plasma housing, she’d written it off as a scanning anomaly because the containment readings were well within specs, but she could just feel that something was wrong. She was deep into the second shift and monitoring drive core plasma readings when the issue arose. The task had been beyond boring, but now, digging into the troubling puzzle made the time pass. Pushing back from the console, she looked at the overhead bulkhead and closed her eyes to think through why her scans revealed micro fissures, without any resulting degradation in drive performance or any detectible plasma leakage. *Brussels* had just completed her post-refit shakedown and passed with flying colors, yet she’d rerun the scan four times and even asked Tor, *Brussels*’ AI, to validate the results. There were definitely micro fissures developing.

Sighing, she looked back down to the panel in front of her. Staring at the communications icon located there, she thought she should try one more time to get Commander Bailey to understand that the harmonics were wrong, and that she’d confirmed that micro fissures were developing.

“Damn it,” she whispered to herself. “If I call back up there again, he’ll just dismiss me with another one of his witty little retorts.”On the other hand, she thought, if I don’t let the moron know, he will find a way to blame me for any problems that happen as a result for not telling him with sufficient urgency. She glanced back at the readout and made up her mind. She would try once more, by appending the scan results and Tor’s confirmation, and this time she would copy Captain Andrews. Commander Bailey would be furious, but at least she would be covered. It wasn’t like he wasn’t already going to trash her in her performance review anyway, she thought. She sneered at how much of the fleet, like life in general, was nothing more than scrambling through a maze of bureaucracy meant to keep one down rather than reward personal achievement.

“LT, come look at this.”

Looking over her shoulder, Rachael spun in her chair, climbed onto her feet, and crossed the compartment to look out at the plasma swirling within the core. “What do you have, Chung?”

“It might not be anything, Ma’am. I was just thinking the plasma is moving a lot faster within the chamber than normal.” The young petty officer turned to look back at his watch officer. “Is that normal? I’ve never seen it do that before.”

“No, its not, Chung. Please log your concern. I’m going to try again to get the bridge interested.”

Petty Officer Chung snorted with derision “Good luck, Ma’am.”

Crossing back to her station, Rachael dropped into her seat and spun back around to face her panel and the communications icon that had been taunting her for the last half hour. Taking a deep breath, she tapped the icon. “Bridge this is aux engineering. I need to speak with Commander Bailey. I believe it is urgent.”

“Are you sure about that, Shumway? He and the skipper are having some sort of debate. He sounded pretty pissed the last time you tagged him.”

“Just put me through, Lieutenant Jessup. I’m doing my job. Maybe he should consider doing his.”

“Pinging him now. Good luck. I suspect you are going to need it.”

Tapping the icon a second time, Rachael accessed her findings, including Tor’s confirmation and transmitted the data to her department leader and *Brussels’* commanding officer.

“Ms. Shumway, I believe I instructed you to log your concerns and to stop pestering me with minor maintenance issues.”

“Sir, I validated that the drive core is experiencing molecular disintegration. I ran it several times and…”

“Lieutenant Shumway! I get that you probably think that you are some kind of prodigy, and that you are too good to be in engineering, but frankly, I’m just not interested in your theories! I am done with this, and you will not call back up here for any reason. Do you read me?”

“Sir, with all due respect, the harmonic flow is way off! If you would care to come down here, I could show…”

“I am not in the habit of debating with junior officers, Shumway. One more word and I will relieve you of duties until I can find some hole to stick you in. I looked at the containment scans when you reported it. Any degradation is very minor and well within tolerances, so log your concerns and quit pestering me. Stop trying so hard to make a name for yourself. Is that clear?”

Wincing, she closed her eyes. “Yes, Sir. Abundantly clear.”

“I would have thought I was abundantly clear the last two times. Bridge out.”

Rachael bit down on the anger she felt, always felt, when she got kicked in the teeth for being efficient. The system demanded you excel, but if you did, you got jammed up for being excellent and made enemies. Standing up, she walked over to stand next to Chung as he stared helplessly at the undulating plasma. The petty officer smiled with understanding in his eyes. “You tried, Ma’am.”

“Thanks, Chung. I don’t like this at all. I may not be a real engineer, but I do know when a sine wave doesn’t look right. This pattern cannot sustain itself.”

“No, Ma’am, I agree. I want you to know that I just added our findings as a note in the log, and I reached out for the senior chief.”

“Thanks, Chung. I really appreciate that.” Folding her arms, Shumway debated whether to keep bucking the system. She knew there were consequences for speaking up as the captain pointed out to her. She took a deep breath and decided that she should go bring the senior chief up to speed herself. It wasn’t like she wasn’t already committed. “You know what, Chung? That was a really good idea. I think I’m going to main engineering right now to walk Chief Daton through what we’ve found.” She smiled at her petty officer. “Can you hold the fort for a few minutes?”

“Aye, aye, Ma’am. I can keep an eye on things, no problem, Lieutenant.”

Rachael headed for the hatch as she spoke over her shoulder. “Back in fifteen.”

With quick strides, Rachael was through the hatch and across the access way, stepping into the waiting starboard maglift located just outside of auxiliary engineering. The circular maglift was three meters across with diffuse lighting in the walls. A hand rail extended around the lift, but it wasn’t necessary as *Brussels’* inertial compensators eliminated any sense of movement. She reached toward the icon panel to tap in her destination. Shumway muttered, “Damn idiot.”

“Deck five, main engineering, Lieutenant Shumway?” *Brussels’* AI interjected.

“Yes, Tor. Thank you.” Shumway frowned standing straight again and adjusting her uniform; you were never alone. Every nuance of emotion and reaction was recorded, and she knew it.

Nervous about what to say to *Brussels’* senior engineering NCO, she sighed. Main engineering was only forty meters aft of her duty station. She realized she would be there any second, so she would just have to play it by ear with Chief Daton. The maglift hatch icon turned green and then immediately turned back to red, refusing to allow the hatch to open. Even through the closed hatch Rachael felt the impact of a pressure wave and stumbled in the lift then heard the explosion. Shrieking metal tore at her consciousness as a bone-jarring concussion slammed her against the back wall of the lift with incredible force. Her eyes wide with terror, Rachael felt the *Brussels* shudder again, as an even more powerful blast wave took her consciousness from her.

Her head throbbing, she realized that she must have been knocked out. Blinking rapidly to force her eyes to function properly, Rachael realized that she was in free fall, floating among little spherical blood droplets, glistening in the emergency lighting of the maglift car. Struggling to understand what was happening, she thought time seemed to crawl by as she began to explore her body for the source of the blood. A moment later, she remembered why she was in the maglift in the first place. It also occurred to her that if the artificial gravity was offline the ship was in deep trouble. Then her heart suddenly jumped into her throat as her fingers found the five-centimeter gash on her forehead. Like the ship, she was hurt, and she knew she needed to find out how bad the damage was and where she was needed. Out there in the ship almost 25,000 people, most of them colonist, some of them crew, were in a fight for their lives. She knew the surviving crew would follow protocol just as they were taught, but she wanted – no, she needed to help. While there were many lives to consider, Rachael honestly thought of just one person for the moment, her pair bond, Jaden, one of *Brussels’* assistant surgeons. She could not trust the rules alone to save him. She took a deep breath, grateful at least for the life support. “Tor…” Even speaking made her head pound harder, if that was possible. “I need to get to engineering. Please open the hatch.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway, main engineering is open to space.”

“Put me through to PO Chung in aux engineering.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway, intraship communications is off-line. Also, deck five including axillary engineering is open to space. Petty Officer Chung is…”

Closing her eyes, she fought back tears. “I get it, Tor. Get me the bridge, then.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant, the bridge is open to space. I have sustained severe hull damage above deck eleven, but structural containment is secure at this time.”

“Where can I get to from here? I need you to get this lift away from the damaged area.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway, the maglift tubes are impassible forward of your current position.”

“So, you’re telling me I am surrounded by compartments open to vacuum, and this lift can’t move to safety.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway. Your statement is accurate.”

“Shit!” Unbidden, tears began filling the space around her, floating as crystalline bubbles among the droplets of crimson. Helpless, Rachael didn’t move for what felt like an eternity, as desperately she blinked to access her internal data storage. She didn’t want to die alone. Accessing her digital memory, she sighed as she looked at images of her with her mate. Looking into his eyes, she couldn’t believe her life would end this way.

Heartbroken, she reached out with her mind, grasping for any possibility of repair, when it occurred to her that she had air. “Tor, if the lift tubes are damaged, how do I have life support?”

“HVAC systems are intact, Lieutenant Shumway.”

“Ok, Tor, that’s the first good news you’ve had for me. If I recall, the HVAC ducts are co-located with the lift tubes. Is that right?”

“You are correct, Lieutenant Shumway.”

“Where is the nearest HVAC maintenance access point, and can this lift reach that location?”

“The closest HVAC maintenance access is located one deck up on deck four, fifteen meters forward of your position. Access for this lift to HVAC maintenance is confirmed.”

“Good, get me there and open the hatch. I’ll crawl into the HVAC ducts and make my way forward.”

“Understood, Lieutenant Shumway, be advised, that I cannot create a seal between the maglift and the maintenance panel. Atmosphere in the maglift will be lost once the hatch opens. You will only have sixty seconds of life support. You must access the maintenance hatch, climb inside, and secure the hatch within that timeframe.”

Nodding to no one in particular, Rachael reached over to grasp the lift’s handrail. Working carefully, she pulled herself along the handrail until she reached the lift’s hatch. “Tor, let me know prior to opening the hatch, so I can get ready.”

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant Shumway, be advised that you must enter an access code to open the panel. The access code is: G3170D.”

She sighed. “Just what I needed, a code to remember with only a minute of air.”

“You are in position, Lieutenant Shumway, I am spinning the lift to face the panel now. Please advise when you are ready to proceed.”

Taking several deep breaths, Rachael grimaced with determination. “Open the hatch, Tor.”

As the hatch opened, the lift’s atmosphere whistled past, leaking between the maglift and the lift tube walls. Tapping in the code, the access panel blinked red. *Incorrect Code.* “Damn it!” She tried again, G3710D. *Incorrect Code.* Panicking she tried again, G3170D.The panel slid aside with atmosphere now rushing past her from the HVAC duct. Realizing she’d lost count of how many seconds she had, she pulled herself into the duct. Panicking again, she realized she didn’t see the controls for the access panel. Desperately spinning herself around in the duct, she finally saw it and stabbed at the close panel icon. The hatch instantly slid shut, enveloping Rachael in darkness.

“This sucks. Tor?” Working to regain control of her emotions, she stared wide-eyed into darkness. “Tor?” She realized she no longer had communications access to *Brussels’* AI, and began half-swimming, half-crawling forward. After several minutes, it occurred to her that she had no idea how far she had to go to reach safety. She began to worry about getting lost when her left hand brushed against an opening to her left. She almost passed the opening when she realized her orientation was probably off. There would be no reason to have any ducts headed to port. The opening must be the duct feeding the decks below. She wanted to cry, but knew it would be pointless and pushed herself back to the opening. Reaching the juncture she swam toward what she hoped were the lower decks. Moving steadily, and her anxiety climbing, she then realized the sound of her breath, suspended in nothingness, wasn’t the only thing she was hearing. A definite hiss was coming from up ahead of her. Crawling faster, she realized the hissing sound wasn’t the only thing troubling her. Rachael was all but certain that she could see jagged pinpricks of light ahead in front of her face. It dawned on her that the duct was leaking, and it was only a matter of time before it breached completely. She noticed a panel similar to the one she had entered through. Deck Five glowed softly in the gloom. She sighed thinking that she had at least made her way back down to the deck from which she started. Still, she had another deck to go. Panicking again, she moved faster. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest as she moved. Hearing what sounded like tearing metal behind her, adrenaline surged as she desperately crawled forward. Time seemed to slow to a stand-still when finally she saw the next panel, deck six gently illuminating the gloom, welcoming her to where she needed to be. Tapping the open panelicon, the hatch opened smoothly, bathing her in the red emergency lighting flickering on the opposite bulkhead. Sighing with relief, Rachael pulled herself through the opening and closed the panel behind her.

Rachael gasped. “Tor, what is the status of *Brussels’* spine and my quarters?”

“I am glad to hear that you were successful, Lieutenant Shumway. The spine and colony modules are secure, but access forward of those positions is restricted due to hull breaches in the command module.”

Rachael’s eyes went wide. Already sick with fear, her mind raced to find a way to reach trapped crewmembers. “I assume the hyperbubble collapsed with the explosion?”

“You are correct, Lieutenant Shumway. *UNSS Brussels* is currently off course, and our relative velocity is only zero-point-five c.”

Holding on with one hand, Rachael tapped in the code to open the hatch to the services deck, better known to spacers as the maze. The services desk was approximately ten meters wide and ran the length of *Brussels’* spine. Packed with environmental and bio processing components, and with extensive runs of conduit, only the most experienced crewperson would willingly try to find their way without AI assistance. The hatch slid open and Rachael pulled herself through the opening and began swimming forward. “Tor, I need to get to whoever is coordinating the recovery.”

“Lieutenant Shumway, other than security personnel and colonial support teams, you are the only officer with a command rating.”

“That can’t be right, I am junior officer.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway. *Brussels’* senior department heads were lost during…”

“What do you mean lost? They could not all have been on the bridge.”

“You are correct, Lieutenant Shumway. Commander Reynolds was conducting her weekly briefing in the command staff conference room. The command staff conference room is open to space. I am sorry to report that no one above deck three survived the impact. You are now the most senior technically qualified officer with a command rating.”

“How can that be? I get that we lost core containment, but I don’t understand what happened to the bridge. Why is the damage to the command module so extensive?”

“The core breach was catastrophic, Lieutenant Shumway. Debris from the drive ring impacted the command module in multiple locations.”

Her eyes wide, Rachael sucked in air sharply. Suddenly nauseated, she grabbed a nearby structural member to steady herself. “The Alcubierre ring… Is it repairable?”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant Shumway. *Brussels* is no longer hyper capable, and navigational control is off-line.”

“Tor, this cannot be happening. Where is Doctor Shumway?”

“Lieutenant Commander Shumway is in the command module, on deck eight. He is working to set up shielding to regain access to sickbay.”

Suddenly deflated Rachael realized she would never see Earth again.

Chapter 1

So She Had a Bad Day

ARLINGTON, TEXAS, USA

DICTORATE RESIDENTIAL HOUSING

WEDNESDAY, 15 MARCH, 2084

Lieutenant Racheal Shumway, hero of The *UNSS Brussels*, sat at her desk next to the floor-to-ceiling exterior wall of tinted glass in her living area, high atop one of the many residential towers located in the DFW metro district. She stared hopelessly out the window. It was something she did a lot these days. Rachael stared with lifeless eyes at the curious stadiums below. The antique stadiums were one of the few structures that remained from the time before Unification Day in 2024. The height of her building and the fact that it sat across the street from one of the old stadiums, along with its surrounding green space allowed her an unrestricted view all the way to DFW Field, which was approximately seven kilometers to the north. She did not move and there was little sound save for the strange ticking from an antique clock. She felt frozen in place. The ticking of the clock kept pace with her pulse and leant an ominous air to the room. She remembered the sound of the old clock from the day her grandfather died; she had not known the man well, family was not emphasized in these modern days, but only remembered the day she, her mother, and sister had gone to his home. He was a strange man that muttered his discontent about the state of the world and wept a lot. That ticking sound was wrong, just like the readings on the Brussels had been wrong. She wanted to move from her chair but seemed unable to do so, and so she just sat there in her living space.

As with most accommodations built as a part of humanity’s surge into space and colonization midway through the century, the living area was approximately five meters by seven meters. The space, like many common dwellings, was arranged in an “L” shape. Her living area was located at the top of the “L”, near the front portal. A small adjoining dining area occupied the exterior wall, opposite the front portal, where the horizontal part of the “L” joined with the vertical. A compact meal preparation station tucked into nook along the long wall housed the dwelling’s food printer. Finally, a tiny washroom was located near the front portal, next to food preparation, with the sleeping accommodations and the unit’s primary bathroom situated next to the dining area, occupying the vertical portion of the “L”. It was the norm, everything was normal, but for the ticking clock.

Trying to ignore the sound, Rachael stared incredulously at the headline displayed across the screen in front of her and felt sick – trapped by a situation beyond her control. The news feed before her read:

*Wednesday, May 21, 2084* – *Lieutenant Rachael Shumway, hero or villain?*

Rachael rejected what was displayed on her d-pad. It would seem inconceivable that the Directorate would hold her responsible for the destruction of *UNSS Brussels’* drive core, but that is exactly what seemed to be happening. If anyone would have listened to any of her repeated warnings regarding micro fractures in the plasma housing, the overload that resulted in the *Brussels* pin wheeling end over end within the hyper envelope would never have happened. Just because she was assigned to engineering for cross-training didn’t mean she didn’t know her job. She looked at a furtive version of her own image gazing back at her from the news feed, her eyes darting off camera, and an artificially created insincere expression dominated the fictional doppelganger’s face. Her eyes flicked from the screen for a moment to the antique picture of her grandfather, a stern looking man. She frowned at his grim face; she did not remember owning a picture of him. All of this left her deeply disturbed. A single tear crept unbidden down her cheek as she watched her image attempt to duck a determined journalist under the headline:

*Incompetence Dooms Kepler Mission – Mission Specialist Rachael Shumway Indicted.*

This couldn’t be possible. Her interviews and vids were positive when she’d first brought the *Brussels* home. Initially, the media seemed to embrace her efforts. She was, after all, able to get a message drone away, requesting rescue after coaxing the crippled ship on an almost impossible journey back into the transit lanes. The task was no small feat, after the ship experienced an uncontrolled exit from hyperspace following the explosion that killed so many of *Brussels’* crew. At first people were amazed that anyone survived a core breach that destroyed much of *UNSS Brussels’* command module after it physically collided with debris from the drive core, caught in the rapidly collapsing hyper envelope. The bridge and forward sections of the ship were obliterated on impact as the ship spun end over end following the explosion. She was the one who made it possible for *Brussels’* distress call to be picked up before they ran out of life support. Frustrated, she would not accept them blaming her for losing the ship after saving over twenty-five thousand colonists and crew. She should be lauded as a hero for finding a way to get the *Brussels* back to Earth at all. She should not have to deal with having her life destroyed by the Directorate. She shrugged one shoulder annoyed by the ticking clock. The old man, her grandfather had one in his home the day he died. She turned her head, briefly searching for the thing with her eyes, but it seemed the sound just floated around her.

Feeling despondent, she stared at the holographic image of her and Jaden on the day of their pair bonding, displayed on her desk next to that strange photograph of the old man. She wondered if she would ever feel joy like that again. They looked so perfect together. Jaden was almost two meters tall, and she was slightly shorter. He was well built but not too bulky, and she was thin but not without curves like so many female spacers. They both had brown hair, only his hair was slightly lighter. Finally, he had blue eyes as was common in so many synthetics, while hers were brown. She still adored the way his eyes seemed to shimmer in the image.

Of course, if she were honest with herself, she got grief on the day the picture was taken, too. She snorted in derision, recalling how appalled her sister and mother were that she wanted to bond with a synthetic. Her mother simply couldn’t accept the idea that his biological components could still be spliced with hers to create grandchildren. Well, her mother was nothing if not consistent. Older generations and religious nuts didn’t like mixed unions between biological and synthetic people and logic had absolutely nothing to do with it. She frowned at the picture of grandfather. She had been taught to despise the old ways and old people. It disturbed her that his picture was on her desk. It disturbed her even more that she remembered that he used to sit and talk with her on rare visits. He had many strange ideas. She shook her head.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she smiled weakly at the image. Nothing in life was more important to her than her pair-bond. Sighing, she returned her focus back to the screen. The reaction by her superiors simply could not be this negative. As she irrationally refreshed the screen with the hope the story would update with some sort of retraction. As she did this, the negative images of her on the screen replicated, and the ticking of that damn clock grew louder and louder. She shook her head and looked around as she realized what she heard was the pounding of boots in the access way outside her dwelling. Half turning toward the portal to her apartment, she noticed in slow motion clarity that the touch pad on the wall next to the entry indicated her portal lock was being overridden. The clock, that clock was pounding away in her head. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as the circular indicator on the screen turned from green to red as the locking mechanism was efficiently defeated. Within moments the door slid open to reveal four armored UNSD agents storming through her front portal.

Rachael jumped instantly to her feet. It felt like she was moving in slow motion as the lead agent smashed into her the moment she was on her feet, his shoulder impacting her midsection, driving her backward over her chair, jostling the desk. She landed on the floor and the picture of her grandfather lay there near her. She stared into his eyes. Question with boldness all things, the old man had whispered to her so long ago. She remembered now the old man whispering it into her ear and heard Grandfather saying it over and over in her head, Question with boldness*.* She knew resistance was futile, but the assault drove any air forcefully from her lungs. Her body writhed, desperate to take a breath as the much larger agent straddled her, pinning her arms to the carpet. Her back arched, as she strained to get air into her lungs.

A couple of agonizing seconds passed, and she felt the bite of restraints binding her wrists together before her lungs began to function again. As air finally entered her lungs, burning all the way down, she screamed. “I’m not resisting, you imbecile! Back off on the heavy-handed shit!” Her eyes darting around the apartment, she realized other agents were already scanning her d-pad and searching the dwelling.

The agent sneered coldly at his quarry. “Lieutenant Rachael Michelle Shumway, you are under arrest for the malicious destruction of state property, the deaths of Captain Sidney Andrews, *Brussels*’ senior staff, and for endangering your shipmates. Your advocate has been appointed and notified of your arrest. You will be deposed within forty-eight hours and you may offer evidence to exonerate yourself at that time. You are required by law to cooperate with the state’s investigation against you. If you fail to do so or you provide false statements you will be charged with…” The agent did not finish his sentence as the sound of fléchette darts being fired registered, and the agent’s head exploded, showering her with gore.

Startled, Rachael wanted to scream but couldn’t. She managed to roll sharply to her right as the man on top of her collapsed. Her head coming up, she was shocked to see her pair bond, Jaden, wearing only the bottoms to his scrubs, methodically gunning down the agent scanning her d-pad and then the woman rifling through her drawers. His unnaturally quick movements and the surgical precision he displayed momentarily stunned her into inaction. She was confused because he shouldn’t even be home. It was almost as if he simply appeared when she was attacked. Obviously, he had emerged from their bedroom, but she was shocked to see him with a fléchette pistol in his hand. She didn’t understand how he would have a side arm, much less be willing to use it. In the back of her mind, she knew that while it wasn’t impossible, his medical download made it unlikely that he would take the actions he was clearly taking.

She started to scream when she realized there was still another agent in the dwelling, hearing him as he emerged from her meal prep station. Following the sound behind her, she whipped around to see the barrel of his assault fléchette already coming to bear on its target. Her pair bond also saw the threat and rolled to his left, but the agent was too fast. She heard the high-pitched sound of a stream of fléchette darts zipping past her.

Horrified and her eyes wide with terror, witnessing the darts impacting her mate, spinning him around, tearing gaping holes in him, his body shuddering with successive impacts of the high velocity darts. Suddenly dizzy, she thought she would vomit seeing the only person she cared about being torn to pieces right in front of her. She wanted to run to him, but as hard as she tried getting to her feet felt like she were lifting three times her weight, as he moved in exaggerated slow motion. Everything slowed, and she could not move and only the ticking of the clock filled her head until she screamed.

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Nauseated, and covered in sweat, Rachael sat up shaking and took in a deep cleansing breath. “Damn nightmares!” She took in another breath and then another as she forced her mind to calm down. She sat still and felt tears on her face as she muttered, “Question with boldness.” She did not mean to say it as much as she had to get the phrase out of her head. Blinking, she rubbed her face and got out of bed. Standing in the dark, she shook her head in dismay and glanced back at the bed wishing her pair bond were here now. His working nights was great for the credits, but all things being equal, she would rather have him in bed. “Damn it.”

A disembodied voice intruded on her thoughts. “Do you require lights, Rachael?”

“No. What time is it?”

“It is 04:00, Rachael. Also, you have another request from Info Comm. The message concerns you reconsidering their interview request to follow up on your initial statement. Shall I display the message?”

“No!” Rachael rolled her eyes in frustration.

“Now that you are awake, Rachael, will you be starting your day?”

“How the hell do I know? Quit asking me questions.”

“Of course, Rachael.”

Her heart calming, she moved toward the bathroom a few feet away. Walking up to the sink, she waved her hand past the sensor, gave the water a moment to come up to a reasonable temperature, and cupped her hands under the flow of water. She gently splashed her face with water and sighed, looking at her reflection in the mirror. “Well, this is getting old.” Rachael thought she should just go ahead and get up since the chances of getting back to sleep were thin at best. On the other hand, she was tired and being rested couldn’t hurt.

“What the hell. I might as well try, I guess.” She moved back over to the bed, straightened the sweat-soaked sheets a little and climbed back in, this time on Jaden’s side of the bed. It might not be logical, but she hoped that Jaden’s scent on the pillow might calm her nerves enough to allow her some sleep. Staring up at the ceiling, she pondered for what seemed like the hundredth time what her nightmare meant. She’d been home for three weeks, and although the nightmares had changed from tight spaces and dying in hard vacuum to being sorted by enforcers, not sleeping well was beginning to become an issue.

The Directorate wasn’t pleased that the *Brussels’* seven trillion credit, drive core was destroyed or that the entire bridge crew, along with the over one thousand officers and crew, were killed, but the investigation would clear her once they reviewed the logs. No doubt they would try to say that being trained as a flight officer instead an engineer that she made a mistake, but she hadn’t made any mistakes, and she could prove it. She had reported the maintenance issue to her section leader, Commander Bailey, and to Captain Andrews, and the fact that she managed to get the ship and the colonists back to Earth should have made her a hero.

Agitated and suddenly too hot, she threw back her blanket. It was probably going to be one of those nights, she thought. Rolling onto her side, she took in a couple of slow deep breaths, but her mind didn’t miss a beat.

The documentation was irrefutable, and still, doubt plagued her heart. Something about the way her superiors responded to her questions about her next assignment just didn’t feel right. She told herself that she was imagining it, and she desperately needed to sleep, but her mind was resisting. She even tried diligently to not think of anything at all. If she could only get to sleep, she thought. She could think about it again in the morning.

Finally after long minutes, she was just beginning to feel sleepy again when it occurred to her what was bothering her subconscious. It was the impatience on Assistant Director Bashir’s face. She was supposed to be conducting an interview to understand Rachael’s perspective regarding the events leading up to the drive core overload. Rachael had gone into the interview with comprehensive documentation loaded to her halodrive. AD Bashir accepted the data transfer readily enough when it was offered to her, but she didn’t even bother to display any of it on her halo.

Thinking back on the meeting, Rachael recalled that the woman seemed to be irritated with having to talk to her. It was clear that she couldn’t have cared less about her repeated reports regarding the micro fractures in the plasma housing or her repeated calls to the bridge just prior to the overload to report that although not exceeding parameters, the core temperature readings were fluctuating wildly. She mentioned that she had AI confirmation, and that Commander Bailey had just told her to log it. It was inconceivable that anyone with even the slightest engineering experience, much less someone who was investigating a major incident wouldn’t know how ridiculous Bailey’s reply to her was, yet Bashir sighed and blinked at her as if the whole interview was a waste of time.

Initially, Rachael thought that Bashir was just tired or perhaps was just uncomfortable having to investigate such a high profile incident, but lying in bed now, she understood that the woman wasn’t tired or nervous. She was bored because their conversation didn’t matter.

She sighed, frustration overwhelming her. Rolling onto her other side, she stared at the emptiness of her bed, wishing she had something other than the disaster that her life had become to ponder. “Damn it!” she screamed to no one. Her mind continually impaled itself on the fact that the Directorate held absolute power when it came to matters involving colonization or for that matter, anything associated with operations off world. Space was the Directorate’s playground. She knew that world government officials might technically have oversight of Directorate activity, but she also knew that humanity’s dramatic growth due to the rapid expansion into the universe resulted in almost complete Directorate autonomy.

Rachael realized that her predicament wasn’t really even about her, but it absolutely made perfect sense given what had happened to her since the *Brussels* settled into orbit over the Roosevelt Lunar Yard’s refit facility. “Tish, display news items, Renew Core Project.”

“Of course, Rachael, please specify date range.”

“Damn it… um, display results corresponding to a time frame beginning two weeks prior to the first mention of the return of the *UNSS Brussels* and ending two weeks after the return of the *Brussels*.”

“Please clarify, Rachael. You request includes three thousand and twenty-seven records.”

“Seriously, over three thousand stories in a four week period?

“Yes, Rachael, seriously.”

Frustrated with the dwelling’s obstinate AI, she sighed loudly and flopped onto her back once again.

“What are the most common themes from these stories?”

“The most common themes relate to cost overruns associated with the Renew Core Project exceeding anticipated parameters and the cost of refitting *UNSS Brussels*. A Directorate level investigation is now underway. The Collective opinion rating for Directorate effectiveness has fallen below thirty-one percent.”

“Display news items relating Renew Core Project and the *UNSS Brussels* return.”

“Of course, Rachael, please specify date range.”

“Give me a break, Tish. Repeat the same time frame as the previous request. I’m looking for correlations between these stories.

“Understood, Rachael. You request includes seven-hundred and twelve records. The common theme is oversight failure resulting in unnecessary loss of life and capital expenditures.”

Rachael closed her eyes and sighed. Her new theory was all too possible for her comfort. The Directorate can’t afford any further bad press associated with mismanagement she thought. After the fraud was revealed surrounding the government’s handling of the massively over-budget Renew Core Project, the public obviously became highly critical of any news relating to a second fiasco hitting the news cycle so soon after the Renew Core disaster. The result, Rachael realized, was that the Directorate needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the good of the collective. Dejectedly, she realized now that she was to be that scapegoat.

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The maglift doors hissed open and Jaden nodded a smile at a woman and her child as they paused a moment to allow him to exit the lift, so that they could take his place. As he exited the maglift, the woman returned his smile with a slightly raised eyebrow and just a hint of a smirk. As an artificially sentient life and a surgeon, enhanced eyesight was only one of his many gifts. He noted the dilation of her pupils, but her reaction to him wasn’t unusual. Women, synthetic or otherwise, often responded in a similar fashion. Her reaction was in fact part of an ordinary day. He decided he didn’t really mind the twinkle in her gaze in any case. He was used to glances from women, especially humans. What he did not understand was why a human who was in state service, and who could essentially look almost anyway they wished, would so greatly value esthetic beauty in another person. Sure the common classes didn’t typically avail themselves of physical modification, but anyone assigned to this building would have access to enhancement.

He seemed to get reactions from women frequently, but it was yet one more facet of humans that was simply inexplicable.

Pondering the thought a bit further, he decided that he was really fortunate that humans desperately needed more people than could biologically be produced. He knew he was truly lucky that political expediency in preceding decades had resulted in advanced AI’s being granted sentient status giving him civil rights. He had rights and a life today because synthetic votes were needed then to achieve government objectives. He recalled thinking the move was risky politically until Rachael explained that elections were basically predetermined by the elites, so any risk was unlikely.

Jaden turned left past the floor’s comfortably appointed sitting area with its ferns and flowering plants, and proceeded down the spacious accessway towards his apartment. After a twelve-hour shift, he decided that he really appreciated the peaceful environment he and Rachael enjoyed as a result of being assigned living quarters in one of their building’s spires. With only six units on this level, there was little noise from their neighbors or, this far up, from the external environment. Jaden detected the circular indicator on the touch pad next to his entry portal flash a slightly darker shade of green, releasing the magnetic lock, allowing the door to slide aside as he and Rachael’s AI, Tish, sensed his approach.

The moment the dwelling’s front door slid open, the slightly smoky aroma and sizzle of cooking bacon registered. Stepping through the portal, Jaden sighed, glad to be home. He tossed his jacket on the hook by the portal, and chuckled as he headed toward the meal prep station. “You know that eating meat every morning is not healthy or responsible, Rach. I would think that if nothing else, you would get tired of it.”

“What is the point of having nanites in my bloodstream if not to neutralize the stupid crap I do to myself?” Rachael stepped out of the nook housing the meal-prep station, and he took her into his arms.

Shaking his head, he looked down into her smoky brown eyes, the skepticism of a medical professional overcome with his complete adoration of the woman before him. “You do realize there is a limit to what even your nanites can repair?

“Yeah, whatever, Jaden. I like bacon, and I like all the other crap I eat that you think is so bad for me. I keep telling you that humans are far from perfect. Besides, I have faith that somehow it will work out if it’s supposed to. If nothing else, I have you to take care of my medical needs.”

Eyebrows raised, he sighed. “Ok, ok… Well, I may as well join you, I guess. My biological components may as well become as corrupted as yours are. At least my non-biological components will burn whatever I offer them as fuel.”

Rachael flashed him an understated smile and nodded slightly. He felt her fingers interlace with his, and she turned to draw him behind her to their little dining area. Pushing him into the chair across from hers, she turned and headed back to the prep station. He knew that he’d never win an argument regarding what she ate because she already had his number, and she knew it. He adored everything about her, from her single-minded dedication to her work and irreverent wit to the texture of her smooth, olive skin and the luxurious color of her warm, brown hair. Although human and therefore imperfect, he still thought that she was the most beautiful creature he’d ever known.

Jaden took a sip of cool water and turned slightly to his left to gaze out the window while he waited for Rachael’s return. Scanning the horizon and the Dallas skyline in the distance, he decided that he had to find a way to get them both off world. His pair bond should be celebrated for saving the crew and colonist from the *UNSS Brussels*, but clearly it wasn’t working out that way. Determined to find a way, he logged on to the Directorate’s neural web and initiated a passive background search for options while dedicating his primary functions toward his pair bond. “Did you sleep ok last night?”

Rachael snorted derisively. “About like normal. Are you looking for anything specific out there?”

“No… just enjoying the view”

She smiled. “The view is the best thing about these quarters, isn’t it?”

Jaden turned back to his mate as she moved to sit across from him, and he nodded in agreement. “How much sleep did you get last night, Rach?”

She looked up into his eyes. “Four hours or so, I guess.” She paused and stared at her eggs and bacon. “I can’t help it that I am having stress dreams, Jaden.”

“Of course not, Rachael. Were you reliving being trapped in the maglift again?”

“No. it was enforcers this time.” She nodded toward their bedroom portal. “You came out firing a fléchette pistol.” Rachael looked down and closed her eyes. “They shredded you before my eyes, Jaden.”

“Really? I am sorry, Rach. I wonder what put that in your subconscious. I have excellent dexterity, but I am not exactly suited for combat. It is curious how the human subconscious processes stress through dreams. Are you worried about something like that?”

“I don’t know, Babe. I would like to say no, but I still can’t believe any of this is happening. Anyway, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Look, Rachael, I may only be thirteen years old and a synthetic, but I still process emotions, even if they are based on subroutines copied from human imprints. I just wish you would let me give you something for it.”

She too looked off toward the Dallas skyline, and then back to her pair bond. “We’ve had that discussion, Jaden. I need to stay really clear, I think.” She toyed with a strip of bacon before popping it into her mouth in one bite. “I figured it out last night. The Directorate is going to come after me. They need someone to take the heat for what happened. I realized that AD Bashir was just going through the motions. She couldn’t have cared less about any of the facts.”

Jaden watched her eat for a moment, frustrated that he could not shield her from the events causing havoc in their lives. He sometimes hated how stubborn she could be. “Actually, I came to the same conclusion.” Casually taking a bite of his own breakfast he reached out to give her arm a comforting squeeze and casually took a stress reading from her. “There is far too much scrutiny on recent failures for the Directorate’s comfort, I guess. People seem not to want to let it go.”

His mate smiled warmly at him for all of two or three seconds before the smile morphed into skepticism. “Are you scanning me, Jaden? I keep telling you I’m fine. I’ll get through this.”

He released her arm, a sheepish expression displaying on his face. “So you say. At this point, I do not think this will go away. Today I had at three patients mention government corruption as being the cause of what happened to our expedition. They, of course, didn’t realize that I had been aboard *UNSS Brussels*.”

Rachael shook her head to acknowledge his comment and snorted. “You know what? For the two-and-a-half years it took us to get back after the drive core went, I never guessed even once that we would get anything less than a heroes’ welcome. For the sake of humanity, Jaden, it’s obvious that my actions couldn’t have caused what happened.” She shook her head in dismay. “Do you remember the first few days after we got the fire out? You were doing all you could to print new tissue for the wounded and working almost around the clock. We didn’t think we’d live through another cycle, much less manually make the calculations to get us headed for the transit lanes.”

“Rachael, don’t. You should be afforded hero status. That you are not is clearly outside your control. You were quite compelling in your Info-Comm interview about what happened. People will believe you. You know I think of you as a…”

Rachael threw her glass, shattering it against the window and grimaced, her eyes shut tight. “It pisses me off, Jaden. It isn’t fair. I did what I was supposed to do. More than I was supposed to do. I’ve always believed that I was meant to do something special with my life. I honestly thought that getting those stupid colonists back in one piece might have been a big part of my contribution.”

Jaden stood and moved over to the woman he loved and pulled her to him, enveloping her in his arms. “I know, Rachael. I know. You have the data on your halodrive, and you have the crew to back you up. We just need to get our side of the story into the media cycle. We will make the Directorate recognize what you did was heroic. I won’t let you get inverted over this.”

With tears in her eyes, she looked up at her mate and smiled weakly. “I love you. I just need to get a damn grip on things. I’m sorry for being so pathetic.”

His emotional attachment swelling, he smiled grimly. “Come on, Rach. Anyone would be emotional over this. Even an AI would be worried they would end up getting sorted, but that will not happen to you, to us. We will find a way to get around this. After all, you figured out how to get us back to Earth. This will be piece of cake.”

“Yeah, right. You say that, but interstellar space travel sounds pretty straight forward compared to dealing with regulators. Anyway, this isn’t going to get us anywhere. Let’s finish eating. You should get a couple of hours of rest.

Jaden agreed with a brief nod. “Right, I’ll shut down for a little bit, and we can find something pleasant to do.” Finishing off his meal he gave her a knowing look and smiled. “Rachael, I’m serious. I don’t know how, but we will find a way to make everything turn out ok. You received a posting as the assistant space flight officer aboard a colony ship at an incredibly young age. You have unprecedented skills, and because you do, we got home alive against all odds. What else is there to say? You did the best anyone could have done. You just need to keep a good attitude.”

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Walking out into the sunshine of a spring day in Texas, Rachael assessed her and Jaden’s new surroundings since being assigned quarters planetside again. She decided that the area looked much like cities built anywhere on the planet. They all had people crammed in on top of each other. The facades might differ in hue or the architecture might look different from one building to the next, but they all consisted of plaza-level retail shops, with industrial centers in the floors above that, and residential located in the upper levels. In larger cities, that often meant living in spires that rose several hundred meters over the surface.

Looking up at the pale green plexi that made up the exterior walls of her building, she was pleased that her dwelling faced Arlington’s historic Texas Sports Authority Complex and the spacious park that surrounded it.

Shaking herself mentally, she thought that she should try to enjoy the weather. It really was pleasant outside, even if the reason for her little trip wasn’t. Taking in the smells of grilling meat from the food kiosk located near the front of her building, she scanned the street around her. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she could not help but feel as if she were being observed. People dressed in utilitarian clothing were everywhere but almost no one looked up, or even seemed to notice her. She had to remind herself how ubiquitous life was dirtside. She understood the reason: scaling back on consumer goods helped make more resources available for the colonization effort, but she hated the way dirt dwellers all looked like drones. Rolling her eyes, she swallowed, chiding herself for being emotional.

Blinking twice in rapid succession, she brought up the message on her comm that had her out and about in the first place, to double-check her destination’s address. She blinked to delete the newest message, an offer of assistance from a psy-analyst and proceeded to her message center.

*Good day, Lieutenant Shumway. My name is Terra Chong. I have been appointed as your advocate for matters related to the Kepler Mission. I have an opening tomorrow at 14:00 hours to conduct an initial interview. Please confirm that you can meet at this time. The nearest facility for full-rez conferencing is located on the plaza level in the quad located just north of your residence. The address is 610 N. Collins. Please plan to arrive a little early to validate.*

Rereading the message, she shivered a little, thinking that her needing an advocate was far too close to her repeated nightmares. Taking a deep breath, she shook off her ominous thoughts before they took her down a darker path than necessary.

Determined to make the best of it, Rachael changed her focus, looking for something pleasant to distract her mind for a moment. She could smell the flowering honeysuckle, and the light breeze on her face was really nice. Standing in front of her building, she stared down the street at the multitude of busy pedestrians moving past her on the pedway. No doubt they were rushing to or from work in one of the densely packed commercial or industrial centers that always inhabited the lower floors of her building. She decided that her apartment assignment could have been much worse. She would have preferred to have been closer to the spaceport, but like any spaceport, if you didn’t know someone, the chances of being assigned to newer quarters near DFW Field were slim to none. Still, at least she had a nice green space across the street from the residential units that surrounded the Sports Authority, and she was walking distance from any exhibitions that might be held at one of the stadium complexes. Smirking, she wondered if watching a football game would be entertaining or boring beyond belief. The locals seemed to be devoted to their team, she thought, regardless of their archaic name. “Dallas Cowboys,” she mumbled. “Like anybody could identify with that as a team name.”

Shaking her head, Rachael sighed and set off to the north, in the direction of the football stadium and her appointment. As she made her way up the crowded pedway, among Arlington’s denizens, Rachael reflected that when she was assigned as the mission specialist about the *UNSS Brussels,* her life had not exactly unfolded as she would have preferred.

From the moment she reported in with Commander Bailey, she could tell that it was going to be a tough assignment. Officers like Bailey got their posts through patronage, not because of their skill set. The practice was disgusting, but it was just the way the universe spun.

It wasn’t that she hadn’t worked for other careerists who only cared about how things appeared to their superiors, but Bailey was, she thought, without question the stupidest human being she had ever met, regardless of his engineering background. Not only was he bereft of any imagination or insight into anything but the patently obvious, the idiot actually believed himself to be brilliant.

Clearly, he confused his ability to suck up to leadership with actual engineering skill. Rachael shook her head in disgust and almost collided with a young man walking ahead of her as the scene of her now-dead section leader chewing her out on her first day aboard replayed in her mind. He made note of her high scores and had asked her how she achieved her ratings. He seemed to be concerned who she might know to achieve her rating. She replied that she studied and logged a lot of net-time. Rachael referenced that she believed that things generally worked out if one worked hard enough. Apparently, he took that comment to mean that she was religious. From that moment, he completely dismissed her as having anything to contribute.

Sensing the man in front of her moving off to her left, she looked up to see that she was almost to the primary entrance of the quad she needed.

The glass and steel structure was at least fifteen floors, just like her building, with spires soaring above that. Over the portal, large metal numbers and letters of the structures address glowed softy, giving the address, 610 N. Collins*,* a slight blue aura. Taking a deep breath, she too moved off to her left, following the man through the entrance to the plaza level of the building before her. Rachael passed through portal security with no issues, she blinked twice rapidly and paused for a moment to scan the holographically displayed indicators. Selecting the tag directing her to her destination, the full-rez conferencing center, Rachael steeled herself and moved in the direction indicated by the pale holographic indicator displayed before her. She approached the lift when again the feeling of being watched overpowered her. An amorphous feeling of dread permeated her senses. She realized she was likely reacting to the lack of sleep but stopped abruptly and turned sharply, scanning faces of those around her.

Most looked away, not wanting to engage her or simply rolled their eyes in annoyance at her odd behavior. Most looked away, but not all. Across the room stood a man in a crisp suit. The man almost seemed to smirk at her. Her head tilted ever-so-slightly as she considered the man. At approximately two meters tall, he was a light skinned, black man with closely cropped hair, brown eyes and a thin mustache. He was clearly in superior physical condition, but just imperfect enough that he was more likely than not, a human being.

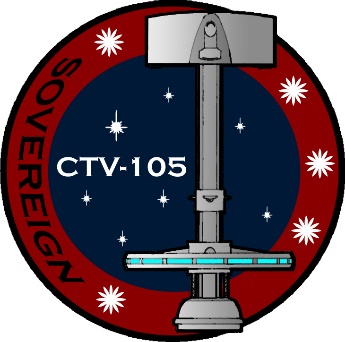
Rachael realized she was standing out, but at this point there was nothing to be done for it. She stared pointedly at the man, not flinching or shrinking under his gaze. Narrowing her eyes slightly, her left eyebrow rose in challenge to the crisply dressed man’s brazen contemplation of her. The man smiled slightly and nodded to her, giving her a sardonic wave as his hand moved to tap his jaw just below his right ear to activate his comm. Mouthing something, he then headed for the portal and the pedway beyond.

“Shit,” she whispered. “I’m in trouble.” Rachael closed her eyes for a moment before moving again to follow the holographic indicators that now glowed persistently to indicate the way to her destination.

As she approached the rez-center, she decided that whatever was coming her way, she would just have to deal with it as best she could. She didn’t think of herself as being religious, but she did think there was something beyond the current existence. In her opinion the mathematics involved with deep-space navigation hinted at the existence of extra-dimensional realities. Hell, in truth, even hyperspace was an extra-dimensional reality. No one with a strong enough stomach to watch an image of hyperspace could argue that it was normal space. To say that the oozing color and undulating patterns of energy were nauseating was a massive understatement.

Standing at the entry portal to the rez-center, she reflected on her situation. She paused to offer a quick thought to any entity in this dimension or any other, who might happen to care. I did my job, and I saved thousands of lives. Looking up slightly, she sighed. “I sure hope there is some sort of equity in this mess somewhere.”

Passing her hand over the rez-center entry scanner opened the portal, and she stepped through, once again feeling as if she were being observed. She shivered, thinking that everyone was tracked all of the time. Why would the Directorate go to the trouble to actually assign someone to follow her?  
  
To purchase this book, [Click Here](http://daniellewedgeworth.com/index.php/sovereign-s-journey/2-1-general/11-purchase-sovereign-s-journey)



**Author’s message to anyone who dares to hope for a better life.**

I hope you enjoyed *Sovereign’s Journey*. It is my belief that God blessed all of human kind with the desire to be free. It is my belief that there is far more that binds us together than separates us. The problem, as I see it, is that it is human nature for people to only view life from their own point of view. We are all afflicted with our biases. How wonderful would our world be if we could all honestly seek the highest ideals available to mankind, while embracing the individual freedom to do so in our own way? Regardless of the question, I believe individual freedom can often be found at the root of most solutions.

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* <https://phoenixlonestarpress.wordpress.com/>

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**Preview of EdenQuest Trilogy, Book II**

*Liberty’s Crucible - Chapter 1*

Recriminations

*UNSS SOVEREIGN* – COLONIST – MODULE C

EDEN III – HIGH ORBIT

WEDNESDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 2084

Angrier than he had been in recent memory, Elder Karl Janaek finished pulling his shoulder-length hair into a ponytail. He stepped off the maglift onto deck S-3, module C ahead of the three additional men that had been requested to clean up the aftermath of the Prog escape. Their cold stares on the maglift ride spoke volumes. Looking down the already crowded accessway, he headed for cargo hold S-317. He felt the spent the fléchette darts under his boots as he walked. Just looking at the drab light grey hue of the plasteel bulkheads highlighted with module C’s olive green, marred with black scuffmarks irritated him. The three-meter wide access-way was littered with mostly-empty containers that had contained protein base. The containers had clearly been ransacked by *Sovereign*’s desperate former owners. Canisters and packing materials were scattered everywhere.

Gazing upon the mess, he thought that it just didn’t make sense. The Progs were desperate to get away, but the cases were mostly empty. Even a hundred people could only carry so much, not to mention getting it up the ladders to the pod-bay. Even under the best of circumstances, getting their supplies stowed for an emergency should have taken more time than they had. That also didn’t even begin to explain the availability of weapons.

Clearly, one of his own people had not only informed the Progs of his intention to sacrifice them for the good of the flock, but that person had clearly gone out of their way to assist them in getting off of the ship. Reaching the knot of men that made up his security team, he noticed blood splatter sprayed across the canisters, and that the deck was embossed with countless boot-prints, tracking blood down the accessway. Stopping before the light-skinned black man with closely cropped hair who had called him down here, Elder Janaek stared with barely contained fury down at Colonist Bray’s fléchette-riddled body. Bringing his eyes up to meet Mason Delk’s level gaze and nodded to Terrance Young who flanked Delk. Janek paused, struggling to contain the rage that burned within his core. He noticed that the medics attending to the fallen man were clearly of a similar mind. “I just came from Tammy Bray’s quarters. She asked me what to tell her daughter about where her father was.”

Delk, a former colonel in State Security Directorate, sighed helplessly and shrugged. “I understand, Elder. I’ve had a few of those conversations myself in the last couple of hours.” Beside Delk, Terrance Young stared down at a bother of the faith, and Janaek read clearly the bitter hate on Terrance’s face, and it pleased Janaek that Terrance Young understood the gravity of the situation – not everyone was going soft on the Progs.

Janaek snorted and glanced back down to the corpse. “This man was clearly executed after being severely wounded. I would say they were clearly not in the mood for half measures. I am surprised Powell allowed Shumway to recover her medical-bot.”

Delk snorted. “That surprised me too, Elder, but he was actually with them. I could have stopped them if Lavarov hadn’t sacrificed himself to cover the escape.”

“How bad are our casualties, and what damage have we sustained to the ship?”

“It could have been worse, Elder. We’ve had nine killed and another thirteen wounded.” Nodding at the body at their feet, Delk sighed. “I have asked the pastors of those who have fallen to make sure the families of those killed or wounded are looked after. You follow up on that Terrance.” Terrance Young looked up and nodded grimly.

“Mason,” Janaek growled under his breath, the smug expression he’d worn earlier in the day now vanished. “I was under the impression that escape was impossible. You assured me that there was nothing they could do.”

Janaek decided that although Delk appeared impassive, the intensity in the man’s eyes and the two-inch gash on the man’s forehead indicated otherwise. “Escape was impossible, unless they had help. Clearly, we have an internal security problem.”

“Do you think? Janaek snarled. “That is a massive understatement, to say the least.” Stroking his chin, the Elder considered his options and the series of unanswered questions chasing each other through the corridors of his mind. He simply did not have the manpower or the cycles to spare for this problem, yet it had to be dealt with. “What I want to know is how they got past the grav-field and a magnetically locked hatch without us knowing about it, not to mention how they managed delaying our sensor readings, thereby misleading the bridge into misunderstanding our position relative to Eden III.”

Elder Janaek met Delk’s glare with one of his own. “That is an exceedingly good question, Elder. Exactly how is it that could be accomplished?”

Staring into Mason Delk’s eyes, Janaek comprehended just how the man had become such an effective state security operative for the Directorate. Regardless of him being the husband of a fellow Conclave member, Delk’s emotionless gaze reminded him more of a snake or a shark than of a human being. He knew his friend could be unassuming when required, but anything average and harmless about the man could vanish in a heartbeat.

Stroking his thin mustache, Delk looked up toward the accessway’s AI interface. “Lal, explain *Sovereign*’s positional discrepancy after dropping out of hyperspace? You delayed accurate sensor readings to the bridge during final approach.”

“You are correct, Colonel Delk,” Lal softly intoned, “I have been researching that anomaly since it was brought to my attention. I have no explanation other than that a software package was introduced from the bridge to override reporting status on 23:07:48 hours on Tuesday, 26 September 2084. I cannot locate the software at this time. Probability is seventy-four percent that this file was self-deleting.”

His jaw set, his teeth barred, Elder Janaek scowled at the security officer. “The Shumway woman found a way to do this.”

The medic nearest him cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Elder. We are all finished here. May we take the body now?”

Janaek looked to Mason and then waved a hand for them to take the body. Terrance gave a nod to Delk and Janaek, and then he followed the medics as they took the body away. Looking back to Mason, he frowned. “It had to be Shumway.”

“I agree, Elder, but she didn’t have bridge access. I checked immediately. Other than yourself, only Captain Michaels and Pastor Briggs had the ability to introduce the malware.”

Janaek glared at Delk, burning holes into him. “There has to be something else, Mason. I obviously didn’t help them, and I can’t believe that either Nathan or the Captain would…”

“Lal, please ping Pastor Briggs and ask him to join us here,” Delk said.

The disembodied voice responded almost instantly. “Pastor Briggs is not aboard, Colonist Delk. He departed with the prisoners.”

“Son of a bitch!” Delk pointed at Janaek. “What the hell, Karl? I thought you said you had him with us. You even said that you wanted him in the legislature when we set it up. He was the one that alerted us to Commander Shumway defying us in the first place!”

Lal’s pronouncement and the fact that he’d been played felt like being punched in the face. It was jarring. Looking back, it was obvious now. Shumway had swayed Nathan in some way. In his arrogance, he’d allowed himself to believe that it was his charisma that had won Pastor Briggs over, but he now grasped that he’d lost that battle before it had even begun. Looking back on it, he now realized that she was able to reach him.

“He was a software specialist and an engineer. Between the two of them, they managed the impossible. Frowning at Delk, he tilted his head minutely to indicate Delk’s security team, and then subtly shook his head in disapproval. He empathized with his friend’s frustration, and he genuinely liked Mason Delk, but friend or not, he could not permit the man to address a Conclave member in such a derisive tone, even if he was correct. “Come with me, Mason, I want to see the pod bay.”

“Of course, Elder.”

Turning on his heel, Karl Janaek strode with purpose back toward the maglift. He didn’t even consider looking to see if Delk was following. As the husband of a Conclave member, he shared a personal relationship with Mason Delk, providing the man with some latitude. Janaek could see the man was angry, frustrated, and fresh from battle, but he was also a consummate professional. Mason Delk would simply be incapable of insubordination. Stepping into the maglift, Janaek turned to face the hatch.

Delk entered the lift a moment later and exhaled some of his pent-up stress. “No disrespect intended, Elder Janaek. I’m afraid that it’s been a long…”

“Think nothing of it, Mason. We’ve known each other for many years, but appearances must be observed, yes?”

“Of course. I just can’t believe that young woman got ahead of me on something.”

Janaek snorted. “We both could have done better, but the lesson here is not to underestimate her or Captain Powell again. Clearly, they are very capable officers.” Satisfied with the reply, he waved the thought away with a flip of his hand. “What I am interested in learning is exactly how they managed the logistics, and in particular, I want to understand how Lal was compromised.”

“Agreed. It’s obvious they took rations out of the cases, but timing isn’t the only curiosity. Protein base alone will hardly sustain them in the wild. They would need water, weapons, and obviously, portable replicators to print out their food. In other words…”

Janaek gritted his teeth as the maglift opened onto deck S-1, module C’s accessway. There were three hatches opposite the maglift. Only the centermost hatch, leading into the emergency flight control ops center, was accessible. The other two options had red icons displaying the words: *Vacuum Beyond This Point*, glowing softly in front of sealed hatches. A guard in body armor stood in front of each portal. Their expressions angered Janaek, as the confidence that should be reflected on their faces was conspicuously absent.

“In other words, they had to have been planning and staging this escape for some time.”

Delk nodded. “Exactly, Nathan Briggs has much to answer for, and I plan to ask him some very pointed questions on the subject when you find him.”

Janaek led the way into the emergency flight ops compartment, immediately noticing the missing space suits. “I must say that Powell and his people are resourceful. I would never have even considered them attempting an EVA while underway.”

“Desperate people have been known to take any number of risks, Mason. As you say, it would not be wise to underestimate them a second time.”

Janaek nodded. “Agreed.” He turned to look at the other man. “Mason, I am appointing you as a special agent of the Conclave. I want you to pick a small squad and go after them. I want them back alive. We have Pope Madri and Imam Al-Jasser outmaneuvered for the moment, but they are well aware of how that state of affairs came to be, and they will not be easily mollified now.” Sighing, he looked into the other man’s eyes. “In fact, Mason, your wife has even begun reconsidering her position in all of this. You must find them quickly because you are needed here to keep you wife in line with what must be done.”

“I understand, Elder. I am sure she will be fine. The fighting and Powell getting off the ship just has her rattled. You do realize that you making me a special agent of the Conclave will not sit well with the others.”

Elder Janaek rolled his eyes. “They have no room for comment. His Holiness has his guard and Imam Al-Jasser has a detail as well, and I would think your wife could hardly object to her own husband being appointed to the position.”

“Well, if you have no further questions, I have a shuttle to prep and much to do.”

“Good luck, Agent Delk. You bring them to me, and I will look into who else may have been involved with Pastor Briggs. I hardly think he could have accomplished all of this on his own.

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*UNSS SOVEREIGN* – CONTAINER 73140

EDEN III SYSTEM - HIGH ORBIT

WEDNESDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 2084

Leaning against the basin located at the back of the small shipping container that had been his covert home for the initial portion of the Faithful’s journey into freedom, Elder Mohamed Al-Jasser splashed water on his face. He considered his reflection in the mirror as he awaited the arrival of his colleague, Pope Madri to their somewhat irregular meeting. He decided that at least he didn’t look as tired as he felt. His steel grey eyes showed little of the fatigue nagging at him. At just under two meters tall, his rugged frame and chiseled jaw still reflected the determination etched in his eyes.

Before him stood a man committed to fix his mistake in supporting Karl Janaek’s proposal to temporarily elevate Captain Michaels to the Conclave. He just couldn’t believe that Karl would actually take advantage of the calamity that was Fadi’s death during the battle for the ship. He closed his eyes, saying a quick prayer for his friend and brother Conclave member. Fadi really was the best of them. That he was a casualty was nothing short of tragic. Still disgusted that he allowed himself to be manipulated by Janaek’s ploy, he sighed. Opening his eyes again, he stared at his reflection and into his soul. He would not allow mass murder to be committed in his name, regardless of the consequences.

Hearing the magnetic lock release on the concealed portal at the front of the three-by-twelve meter container, he patted his face dry and exited the tiny wash area to greet his colleague and close friend. Pope Madri hung his jacket on a hook by one of the eight lockers located just past the bunk beds that occupied the front third of the space. His body man nodded to his counterpart whose job it was to watch over Elder Mohamed Al-Jasser, and moved up a position to silently wait by the portal. Mohamed’s friend approached to stand next to the large round table located at the back of the container. Grasping his friend’s hand, he pulled him into a tight hug.

“I understand they got away. I am hoping you can tell me how many we lost in the fighting,” Mohamed asked.

Anguish played across Pope Madri’s face. “Nine were killed and another thirteen wounded. I am afraid that losing Dr. Shumway cost us two of those lost. Our doctors had some trouble adjusting to *Sovereign’s* medical interface.”

Grief stabbed at his heart. “Nelson, please forgive me. I should have listened to you. You were right. I just couldn’t believe Karl would be so callous.”

“We are all human, Mohamed. All we can hope for now is to do what we can to fix our error and try to achieve reconciliation.”

A diminutive and sad smile formed on Mohamed’s face. “Of course you are right, my friend. It just grieves me that we are beginning like this.”

Pope Nelson Madri pulled out a chair from the table and sank heavily into it. “A sad but very real aspect of humankind, Mohamed. It is just the nature of humanity.”

“Humph,” Elder Mohamed snorted, disdain overtaking his usual optimistic outlook. “How long have we all been friends -- and close friends, at that? You know as well as I do that Elder Janaek and Lady Lipowicz intentionally took advantage of the Elder Khan falling in battle to overturn our longstanding decisions on our founding. Their being willing to commit mass murder is just the worst of their transgressions. Their actions are…” Elder Mohamed exhaled loudly, “…they’re sinful.

The grim expression on Pope Madri’s face morphed into something more sympathetic. “I don’t believe that Karl or Lady Lipowicz are evil,” Madri said. “They’re just afraid. We have worked far too long and so much is at risk, they became lost. Their motivations are as simple as not wanting to take any risks with the lives of our flocks.”

“Please, Holy Father, you know I love them both, but what they are doing is nothing short of blasphemy. There is no way God will bless this new world we are building if we do it with treachery, lies, and murder.”

Madri sighed. “We are in agreement about that, Nelson. I merely wish to point out that while we must stop Elder Janaek, and we must find ways to thwart their plans, it is just as imperative that we keep our own moral house in order also.”

Mohamed sighed and nodded. “Ok, of course you are correct, my friend. I guess that brings us to the purpose of our little chat today. What do you suggest? I am sure you are aware that Karl is making every excuse to drag his feet with regard to bringing any more of our people out of cryo, especially those from Hindu flocks.”

“Yes, I am aware.” Madri shook his head as he considered recent events. “It is obvious that Captain Powell and Commander Shumway escaping have greatly disrupted Elder Janaek’s plans. As a result of the escape, the plan to murder them all is now widely known among the flock, and the rumor of *Sovereign’s* former leadership being spaced is not sitting well with many flock members. More importantly, that Pastor Nathan Briggs is of Elder Janaek’s flock and has not only assisted them, but has in fact accompanied them makes him a direct threat to Karl being able to remain as a member of the Conclave. Pastor Briggs is quite well thought of among Protestants. That he has risked his life for our former oppressors is quite telling, don’t you think?”

Elder Al-Jasser leaned back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. “Yes. Assuming, of course, that he can stay alive long enough to make a difference. I am aware that Karl has just appointed Mason Delk as a special agent to the Conclave and sent him after them. They left almost forty-five minutes ago.”

Pope Madri leaned forward on his elbows and steepled his fingers, obviously considering what he would say next.

“The question in front of us at the moment,” Mohammed said, “is what specific actions can we undertake to regain the upper hand?”

His friend looked up and smiled grimly. “Obviously, our options are limited, but I see a couple of areas in which we can act. First, I plan to have a discussion with Rabbi Daniels. His eschewing direct involvement in Conclave matters is why Lady Lipowicz was elected by the Jewish flocks in the first place. While it is hardly my place to intercede in Jewish affairs, Rabbi Daniels must at least be aware of actions being taken in the name of the Jewish people. Besides, I get the feeling that Lady Lipowicz is not as solidly in Karl’s camp as he might prefer. Second…”

Mohammed raised a finger, and Pope Madri paused, his head tilting slightly. “Nelson, you know as well as I do that even Rabbi Daniels cannot replace her directly. Once uplifted, it would require a vote of his flocks. As with the Hindu flocks, we must wait for more of our people to be awakened.”

Pope Madri nodded. “You are correct, of course. What I intend to do is ask him to reach out to Aleena. If she is wavering, perhaps he may be able to convince her of her error. We only need one vote to regain control of the situation. Aleena is a good woman. I know she only wishes to ensure our safety. Now that *Sovereign*’s command team is planetside, they have no way to reach anyone. We have time to reason with them, to convince them that they too are free from oppression. What happened to Commander Shumway is a perfect example of Directorate corruption.”

Mohammed snorted. “It’s ironic that you mention the commander, as it was our agent that put her into a position where she was shunned in the first place.”

“Yes, and no. We did take advantage of her dilemma, but we hardly caused it. You know as well as I do that the Directorate fully intended to shift the blame for their malfeasance onto her shoulders, regardless of our interference. In fact, I would argue that our intercession will in fact benefit her greatly if we are successful.”

“I can see your point, Nelson, but I don’t know that she would agree with your assessment. In any case, I interrupted you. You had another point?”

Ah, yes. My second tactic is more obvious. We must continue to find ways to assist Captain Powell and Commander Shumway. Time works in our favor. As I mentioned before, Elder Janaek and his allies will find it more and more difficult to continue justifying their delay in bringing more of the flock out of cryo. There is much more work to do than can easily be accomplished, even with the number of our people who have already been revived. The workload on our advance teams alone will make delay impossible. Of course, when enough of the Hindu flocks have been revived, by our law, a vote to replace Elder Khan will have to be held.”

“Agreed. Of course, as I noted earlier, Elder Janaek knows this as well as we do. He is already doing everything he can to justify keeping people in cryo.”