

*When the unthinkable happens, what would you do to save yourself? In **Imperiled**, Alexander Hans Schmitt takes readers on a gripping journey with Junior Commander Anaiya Sonra in an unforgettable tale of resilience and discovery.*

Imperiled: A Science Fiction Adventure

By Alexander Hans Schmitt with Vonnie Gene Schmitt

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A woman with her eyes closed, looking upwards, against a starry space background. She is wearing a dark hoodie. The background is a deep space scene with a bright nebula or galaxy on the left and a planet or moon at the bottom.

IMPERILED

A Science Fiction Adventure

ALEXANDER HANS SCHMITT

with Vonnie Gene Schmitt

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and Vonnie Gene Schmitt

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CHAPTER I

Plotting new rift routes and building rift transit fold zones were common occurrences throughout the universe during many thousands of years of expansionism. At the onset of this era, the cargo hauler listed as *Jeweled Starlight* was built by Alphan Industries in the Centrum System of the Origin Division. For most of the *Starlight's* lengthy existence, it transited from rift to rift until its vector eventually intersected with the Terminating Edge of the Known Void. There the *Starlight* remained as the Edge grew beyond those volumes and expanded into the Unlooked Places. While its history is of interest, it was the destruction of the *Starlight* in an unprovoked attack and the cargo that it carried on its final voyage that set in motion a progression of circumstances consequential for the future of humanity.

Tellar Quintan; *The Forgiving: An Exploration of their Origin.*

In a place long forgotten by all but the Forgiving, the Watcher of the Day pondered the fate of worlds. To him, it was routine, but others with limited minds would be incapable of his cool calculations.

The data feeds that often filled the chamber with light, sound, and motion were still. The Watcher realized that the time had come for his deliberations to end. He needed the progress report of the Grasp who waited. He ordered the Grasp to enter, and a shape moved through the bluish light of the portal. It made its way across the bridge that connected to the central span. As the newcomer approached the place where the Watcher waited, its active concealment field masked all but the most abrupt movements. To an outside observer, it would seem as if that field contained a restrained liquid instead of a solid being.

The Watcher waited to speak until the Grasp stood before him. "What information do you have for me?"

"The subject is under our influence. The promise of monetary gain was sufficient to ensure his cooperation." The Grasp's voice was bland and devoid of identifying qualities.

"Is the precipitating incident ready to be put into effect?"

"Yes."

"The response?"

"Imprinted," the Grasp said. "Deviation is within acceptable limits."

"What is the timing?"

The Grasp activated a discreet personal display, examined it, and forwarded the desired information to the Watcher.

It was acceptable. "Your departure is allowed. Inform the next that they may enter."

The Watcher of the Day waited impatiently until another glided through the bluish light. There was much to do, and time was fleeting.

In the Centrum System of the Origin Division, the space habitat Frost Station orbited Centrum XII. The planet glistened in the faint, reddish

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starlight. Scattered across the frozen expanse of its surface were the vast entry and exit points of the core mines. Farther down, far beyond the sight and reach of any but the most developed sensor array, synthetics swarmed under the supervision of the luckless organic criminals condemned to spend a portion, or perhaps the whole, of their remaining lives deep in the mines.

Once, a torrent of raw material had flowed from the core mines. When converted to elemental feedstock, it had provided much of the resources that had sustained the ship-building facilities of Alpharan Industries as well as other production centers. Now, many millennia later, the nearly exhausted mines produced a mere trickle of material.

On Frost Station, the cold was held back, and the occupants of the space habitat led a sheltered existence. The habitat accommodated a system patrol force, the Outer Zone Patrol, and had everything that a watch station required: a center of operations, offices for command staff, residential zones, entertainment districts, docking areas, and places for cargo storage.

Inside Frost's command pod, Junior Commander Anaiya Sonra worked alongside her subordinate, Toove Esp. Suddenly, there was a blaring alarm followed by a message on Anaiya's display.

"Emergency Alert Notification. Fourteen survival craft have been detected in the Uninhabited Zone. All appear undamaged and are accelerating away from an area thick with debris and superheated gases. It is possible that a ship entered from the rift transit fold zone and that it was subsequently destroyed. Data revealing the origin point are limited because the sensor grid in that sectoral volume has been shut down pending a routine system check-and-repair protocol."

Esp was surveying the outgoing plots on a couple of luxury tourist transports that were well outside the zone that was under the station's

control. Anaiya assumed that he was pretending to be busy and that he had read the alert. He turned to Anaiya. “The repair cycle. You issued the notice for it. If it wasn’t received properly by that ship ...” An apologetic look crossed Esp’s face. “Just saying, you might want to get a story in order.”

“I have one. I was following orders. *Zarlais’s orders*. An alert was issued. Stop speculating. Do your job, and I’ll do mine.”

“Ouch. Point taken.”

Anaiya sent a message. “From Emergency Coordinator Sonra, Junior Commander of the Fifth Rank. To Dispatch Coordinator Malik Jeffries. Special priority. Immediate response required.” Nearly three minutes passed before the shimmering simulacrum of Jeffries appeared. “There’s been an Emergency Alert Notification. I need the immediate dispatch of an Outer Zone Patrol vessel to retrieve fourteen survival pods.”

“I can divert the *Nebular Skein*.”

Paz Aldanouri’s ship. “Tell them to keep watch in case whatever destroyed the ship was external and to collect samples of the debris field.”

“Orders for the disposition of survivors, if any?”

“Clear them and lodge them in the clearance holding area of Customs. If interrogation is necessary, I’ll supervise it personally,” Anaiya said.

“I’ll notify Interim Chief Zarlais and issue a general alert for the entire volume of that sector.”

Anaiya thought that might be a mistake. “Not yet. The outer scans show no dangerous conditions in the area, and no potentially hostile ships. A general alert isn’t necessary. At least, not yet. If those conditions change, I’ll deal with the consequences.”

“That’s risky.”

“It’s mine to take,” Anaiya said.

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Paz Aldanouri struggled against the boredom he felt. In the beginning, his current assignment had carried the promise of some action, but so far all he had accomplished was staring at displays until his vision blurred as he scanned for unauthorized ship movements that might indicate the location of forbidden rift transit fold zones. He had detected nothing but ordinary haulers whose automated systems had allowed them to drift beyond normal vector curves. Or haulers that did not know which paths to follow and could not be bothered to check the mandatory transit maps. He welcomed anything that would put the monotony of the fifteen-month Uninhabited Zone cruise behind him.

“Got anything?” he asked his second in command.

“It’s the remnants of a ship, a small one,” Serys Yurom said. “Fragments indicate it was armed, but there’s no sign of serious spatial or temporal distortion, so it wasn’t carrying heavy weapons. Just laze turrets.”

Identifying the ship as a cargo hauler was the obvious conclusion, considering the minimal number of life pods drifting in the void around them. A passenger liner, or another more populated vessel, would have had more survivors.

“It was built from composites that aren’t in the general database,” Yurom said. “When we scanned a piece of the ship’s central span, we found matches to a type that was last fabricated nearly twelve millennia ago. We’re reasonably confident it was built from materials that came from this system.”

“Why was it here?” The thought of an ancient hauler returning to the Origin Division was a strange one to Aldanouri.

“I’d guess it was owned by an independent, given how small it was. A combine wouldn’t maintain anything like that. The costs of running it ...”

“The only place where a ship like that could recover its costs would be out on the Edge running high-value cargoes between small systems.”

Aldanouri frowned. "Consider the fact that it didn't respond to a transit warning or transited despite it."

"A smuggler?"

"Mark it down as a possibility. And continue the scans."

Yurom nodded. "That still leaves the question of what destroyed it."

"Is there anything about the composition of the exotic matter debris that would provide answers?" Aldanouri asked.

"There is nothing there that indicates a containment failure. If there was one, it would have left more outer hull sections. And the fragments don't show any signs of the distortion that usually comes with that."

"So, they were attacked." Aldanouri liked this less and less. "The attacker could still be out there beyond the detection range of the regular system net."

"Or, nearer, if they can conceal their visual signature and energy emissions."

"Raiders?" The idea was absurd, but Aldanouri wanted to cover all the possibilities.

"Not a chance. They don't destroy ships. That is, until they've gotten all they can from them. We did find a focusing crystal that was big enough to direct the main array of a system-class incursion vessel."

"Weapons with power enough to blast a midsized planet into a ruined shell or disintegrate a large, unprotected space habitat with a single hit. And this ship just happened to pop out while monitoring had been disabled. End destination?"

"There's no way to trace it forward, even assuming it was using a pre-guided deceleration curve." Yurom glanced at him. "What do I report?"

"Tell them it was smugglers." That much was obvious. "If someone in the Origin Division is trying to build weaponry like that with or without

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authorization from a Recognized Governing Authority ... Who's managing the investigation?"

"Junior Commander Sonra." Yurom's voice was carefully devoid of emotion. "As part of her regular duties as Emergency Coordinator. It's an odd coincidence that Commander Sonra also issued the order that closed the monitoring net."

For a moment, Aldanouri wondered. Then he dismissed his thought as idle speculation. The simultaneous events were, he was certain, merely a coincidence. "Now, about the status of those beings in the pods ..."

Vazantar Jaeron drew a deep breath. And immediately wished he had not, as the accumulated stench of eight days inside the survival pod overwhelmed him. He could not stop retching. His whole body shook with the violence of it. He gasped for air, wishing with desperate futility for the return of that time when he had had nothing more on his mind than the final delivery payment and the question of whether it would come through. And, if it did, what he would do with it.

Jaeron knew that he must accept that he was done. Without the *Starlight*, without anything but the contents of his personal dize, he had no hope. The down payment for transporting the cargo had not been recorded. It had been paid in untraceable Standard Monetary Exchange Equivalent (SMEE) hard printout wafers. That hoard, along with all his other personal possessions, had been left behind.

He had been wiped in the blink of a bad laze. Nz-Crantz, the Vo who had co-captained and co-owned the *Starlight* with him ... He had remained seated in his conform, muttering the religious nonsense instilled in him since the time of his hatching, and refused to leave the ship. Jaeron had left him to die alone. None of this was new. He had tortured himself with his

regrets, over and over, throughout the eight days inside the pod. He had agonized over questions. Why didn't the vessel that had attacked his ship finish what it had started? Why was he still alive? Perhaps the cargo he was carrying was of even more consequence than he had suspected when he had been offered the enormous payout.

The walls around Jaeron shook and shuddered. Warning lights appeared. The feeling of weightlessness vanished and was replaced by an unpleasant sensation that told Jaeron the pod had been hoisted onto an internal conveyor system. He heard an amplified voice.

"Pressure equalized. The atmosphere is within your tolerances. Unseal your hatch and prepare for the inspection team."

Jaeron gestured toward the release, and the hatch popped open. Bluish-green light washed inside.

"Retract your restraints, stand, and step out. Any failure to comply will be taken as a sign of hostility."

Jaeron obeyed the command. Beside his pod was an orderly row of the other thirteen pods. All were open. All were deserted. He hoped that meant that his crew had survived.

Four power-armored figures stood in front of him. Their armor sparkled with impact deflection and energy dissipation fields. Jaeron was sure that the yawning apertures in each suit held weapons ready for use. One of them stepped forward and addressed him.

"You will be subjected to a general scan for controlled and prohibited items. Your bion-code will be match-scanned against our database. This system's Recognized Governing Authority, as a full Constituent of the Concordium, enforces the Long Arm Statutes. If you have committed crimes in other Constituents of the Concordium, you are liable to arrest, detention, and trial under the procedures adopted for the disposal of such offenses by the Centrum Over-Commission."

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That must mean that he was under suspicion. Jaeron could not blame them, but it puzzled him. The cargo that he had carried was gone. He had watched the crew from the attacking vessel remove it. There was nothing else ... was there?

“Prepare for scan.” After a few moments, the leader nodded. “You are cleared.”

Jaeron allowed what he hoped was an ordinary smile to cross his face, nodded, turned, and walked toward the waiting medical team.

“Provisional clearance granted.” The tone of Esp’s voice revealed his irritation. “Clear the approach before I change my mind.”

A challenging string of sounds from the translation matrix was the only reply.

Anaiya Sonra watched as Esp handled it or attempted to.

“That is irrelevant. If you attempt to enter this volume without first installing a functional translation matrix interlock, your ship will be impounded and held until you obtain, install, and fully test an authorized system.”

The sounds that came back registered as aggressive disagreement. Anaiya decided it was time to intervene. She summoned her best commander voice. “This is Junior Commander Sonra. The Deputy Controller’s statement is correct. Your ship is in violation of several of the safety regulations of the Habitable Zone, not limited to those just discussed. You have a time window in which to depart. Do so before it ends.”

A warbling sound that ended in a screech ensued.

“I’ve marked your ship as a communications risk and entered that data into the divisional skein. If you try this in another Recognized Governing

Authority, or even in an unaffiliated system, you won't get as far as you did here."

Buzzes and squawks were the only response. The translation matrix scrolled a warning across the top of Anaiya's vision: Not Understood. She heard sizzling sounds that resembled drops of liquid evaporating as they struck a hot surface. Finally, the tiny boxy hauler exited its external slip connector and maneuvered toward the outgoing traffic stream. At that exact moment, an in-system shuttle abruptly rose. It would converge with the troublesome hauler's trajectory.

"Protocol Seven," Anaiya ordered. Alarms sounded, emergency collision and guidance fields were suddenly enabled, and gobs of exponentially expanding and fast-coalescing, collision-absorbent gel blasted out of Frost's external dispensers. In seconds, the narrowing space between the two craft clogged with protective tendrils of the substance that expanded to thousands of times their original size and spiraled outward until it looked as if the space station itself were casting a vast web in which to trap its prey.

Once that was done, Anaiya reestablished the direct link. "You might not want a full ban, but you've got one. It's what you get when you veer onto a protected arrival/departure heading that's clearly marked on the guidance path data outputs. I will allow you to depart, but if you attempt to come back, your ship will be subject to immediate seizure and destruction."

The pilot of the craft did not respond, but instead increased acceleration until the craft tore itself free of the already weakening grip of the safety tendrils. It continued to increase its momentum until it was traveling at a speed barely within the limits of ordinary safety protocols.

Esp sighed as he scrutinized the exit of the rapidly moving craft. "They aren't listening. Pulse jammers?"

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“The last thing we need is more scrap for the collection ships. If that ship leaves, it will no longer be our concern.”

“But what if—”

“It isn’t my problem.” Anaiya decided she did not want to discuss this, as much as Esp might desire it. “Report to me about the retrieval of the survival pods.”

“All are safe. The owner was among those retrieved. It was an ancient hauler that was delivering a small consignment to an auto-dock among the Centrum IV orbitals. The owner says that he took the ship’s consignment sealed, on a contract that didn’t allow knowledge of the contents. Also, claims to have performed the required scans, and that they didn’t show anything in violation of Concordium haulage or transit regulations. But a crystal was retrieved from the wreckage, large and refined enough to focus the main power curves of a system-bombardment-class beam cannon.”

Anaiya knew that the Origin Division’s use for such things was long in the past. No one was building ships on that scale. Not within a limit of three or four divisions out along any inhabited route.

“We could have a smuggler. The owner is awaiting your interrogation.” Esp raised a single expressive eyebrow. “Better not delay. You know how Customs gets about these things. Even when there’s not a smuggler involved.”

“Then that is a problem for them, isn’t it.”

CHAPTER II

Order, like chaos, is a matter of perspective.

From the collected memories of Quarlenon Quaves.

On Centrum IV, magenta-tinged purple shadows lay across the cloud tops. The meso-towers that cast these shadows were nearly submerged in the sea of vermillion mist that concealed their bases. Transports, most sized to hold one individual, crowded the sky and cluttered the mag-ways.

Casniir Mallox's transport carried him toward a structure that rose like a mountain bracketed on either side by less imposing ranges. When Mallox reached his destination, his transport swooped low and passed through the cloud bank. Then a side-dock opened, and his transport slipped inside. He carefully extricated himself. His transport had been designed to accommodate beings that were perhaps a full meter less in height and a hundred or so kilograms lighter than he in this gravity. Vehicles that were designed for the comfort of larger beings were out of his price range.

Mallox stepped onto a people-mover that swept him toward the personal tube banks. As he approached his destination, he received a message.

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“Ninth Rank Auditor Casniir Mallox. Your associate, Auditor Dalatarn, is still here.”

Mallox winced. He had been hoping ...

“According to her posted duty phase activity logs, she is clearing the last batch of accounts. Is that a cause for worry?”

“No. Not if Auditor Dalatarn doesn't go near the level where the Trade Office liaison is located.” Mallox cut the connection and wondered why he cared so much. Even if Fiara Naz-Esta Dalatarn discovered that all was not as he claimed, it would not make any difference. An order was an order, even if it came from the Trade Office liaison and not from their direct chain of command. Getting this assignment might be difficult, but it would only be the first step on a long path to ... But all that lay in the future. As he often had before, Mallox banished those discordant thoughts and focused on the now.

After he had finished his appointment, Mallox stepped out of a different set of tube banks. Frigid air lashed across his relatively unprotected face, accompanied by a gust of frozen precipitation that bounced off his tunic's nuisance dispersion field. As it transformed and cloaked Mallox in rapidly thickening mist, some of his recently acquired good mood dissipated. Once again, this block's maintenance crew had left the wind and temperature selection on automatic, despite his specific request to leave the thing on manual. The continuing presence of the near arctic wind and the battering volleys of frozen water that cascaded off his shoulders and back was a deliberate insult.

Mallox amplified his voice so it could be heard over the keening wind that swept up and down the corridor. “Atmosphere simulation. Increase

relative ambient by thirty-five and cancel all induced precipitation. Retain this setting for future use.” Almost immediately, the freezing gusts died, and a glowing heat replaced the chill.

Mallox stomped through the fast-disappearing, still-icy puddles. In the replicated late twilight illumination, he could not see more than a few meters ahead.

“You’re looking cheerful this evening. Is the weather simulation the only reason?” Fiara Naz-Esta Dalatarn squinted up at him. “In retrospect, I think that threatening the maintenance staff with an internal investigation was a bad idea, don’t you?”

“They deserved it.”

“I didn’t say that. I just said it was a mistake to threaten them.”

“I only did that last time because of the ice—the stuff was tens of centimeters thick in places. I had to thaw ice for an hour before my conform would deploy.”

“Back to the main point. What’s the new assignment? I expect that some persuasion was involved. Perhaps a few favors called in?”

“More than a few.” Mallox did not think it would hurt to admit that much.

“Special assignment. The Trade Office needs someone to investigate those rift disruptions.”

“Couldn’t they just divert responsibility to the Over-Commission?”

“That’s where the favors came in.” Mallox gestured at the frost-flecked walls. “Let’s not pretend that certain interests won’t be sorry to see us depart. I argued that it would look better if the Trade Office were seen to be responding, no matter how pointless it was. Besides, resolving an unannounced closure is within the authority of the Trade Office.”

“What exactly was this incident?”

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“That smuggler ... Didn’t you hear about it? If we make a success of it ... permanent reassignment to the Trade Office with the title of General Auditor.”

“You planned this. Everything you’ve done over the last few months has been to achieve one objective: getting us off this planet and doing something useful for a change.”

“I guaranteed that if the assignment went through, we’d be willing to take on a few things on the side. Nothing important.”

“That’s what you said the last time.” Fiara frowned as she activated her dizzie and looked through the dense paragraphs of text that scrolled across her forearm display. “This sounds almost trivial. Smugglers, and a local Q-cast and monitoring issue? Most of it is being handled by local authorities. Not promising.”

“You’ll just have to trust me.”

Fiara frowned slightly. “What’s the first stop on this journey toward mutual self-improvement?”

“Place is called Frost Station. It’s a space habitat that orbits Centrum XII.”

“Oh yes, the place where they send prisoners to die in the mines. We’re probably the first of our type that they’ve seen in a few decades. Who are we contacting?”

“It’s the headquarters of the Over-Commission’s Outer Zone Patrol. The local in charge is Vice-Admiral Plack Zarlais. In temporary command only. An accident destroyed the permanent commander’s current body, and he’s had to undergo a full resurrection from encoded backup only. It’ll be a few years before he can resume command. We’ll talk to Zarlais, look around, bang on a few bulkheads, and see what scurries out into the light.”

“No one there will object to that or try anything that might destroy our permanent bodies?” Fiara asked.

“This is a local administrative post. We can handle that kind of opposition.”

“Update received.” Clovis Jeets, a member of Frost Station’s Customs and Enforcement section, was not particularly pleased to receive the data. She closed the connection and listed the prisoner for immediate adjudication. Just as she accessed the display and scrolled down to the next task, a priority message notification flashed.

“From Acting Station Commander Vice-Admiral Plack Zarlais. Immediate Response.”

Jeets suppressed a desire to swear, but instead hastily surveyed her uniform for any visible fault, straightened to full attention, and accepted the message.

The simulacrum shimmered. “You have received a recommendation regarding an Adjudication Board proceeding.”

“Yes, Provisional Supervisor Zarlais.” Something about Zarlais’s manner seemed off, but as she had only seen him in person a handful of times, and a few more via simulacra, Jeets could not be sure what exactly was wrong.

“Several important aspects are not contained in the report,” Zarlais continued. “There is new, confidential data about Vazantar Jaeron. He is a highly dangerous individual and has several accomplices. One is on this habitat. Do not allow Junior Commander Sonra access to the prisoner Jaeron. Beyond that, no further action on your part is necessary. The Adjudication Board has already been informed and will act accordingly.”

“Orders received.”

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“This is odd,” Esp said. “See it?”

Arrival and departure data flowed across the edge of Anaiya Sonra’s display. What she found there grabbed her full attention. A Corrections transport, listed as the *Shadow River Ferry*, had arrived and departed. The craft had made a brief atmosphere connection, though it had not docked with the connector to the surface below and had not discharged any of its current occupants. Its in-system destination was a rift that linked to one of the most remote Prime Exploitation Zones. It was a place that only transport and mining ships ever visited, and those with increasing rarity, as all but a few remnant locations had been fully depleted millennia ago.

“That’s a big ship. Who did they make a special stop to pick up?” Esp asked. “You think that maybe that smuggler—”

“That’s not our concern,” Anaiya said.

“But I thought you would interrogate him—”

“Not your concern.”

“Got it. Keep quiet, mind the plots.”

“Exactly.” The warning that Anaiya had received from Clovis Jeets as well as this current information made her realize that the life she had built for herself had come to an end. She scrutinized the ships on Frost Station’s registry. The ship she selected possessed a full AI command and control net that would allow her to pilot the ship without a crew. And it met her need for a ship with enough power to deter casual attacks while attracting minimal attention.

Anaiya knew what she had to do.

Safely inside her personal quarters, Anaiya flicked her thumb and felt the last closure of her dress uniform click into place. Then she stowed the final

item into her hover case. Everything necessary was in it, and she had permanently dissolved the remainder of her possessions into fabricant bases. She had spent years of her life in this place. Soon, it would be nothing but a memory. When the door irised closed behind her, she made sure that entry permissions were set to her personal bion-code interlink only. That would not stop those who would follow, but it would delay them.

Anaiya entered an area of the space habitat that was as silent as a long-abandoned funerary complex buried beneath the crust of a forgotten world. Far away, beneath the tapering forward section of a ship, was a single security watch station. The name of the ship was the *Rifter's Express*. Its functions and capabilities were familiar to her, for she had had occasion to use similar starships.

Ordinarily, the security watch station would have held at least two beings, one organic and one fully, or partially, synthetic, and sometimes as many as six. Now it held only one. That was Anaiya's doing, the result of several adjustments in duty phases and schedules that she had been able to make using her, surprisingly, still-current emergency authority.

The watch station's single occupant rose to his feet as Anaiya walked toward him. Her demeanor was calm. Just another standard assignment at the end of another long duty phase.

The ship itself would help her. It must undergo a final review before it could be released from the repair and refitting schedule. That had not yet occurred, and this would lend credence to the story she was about to tell. If not ... well, there were ways of dealing with that problem if it arose.

"Commander," the guard said. "We weren't informed about a visit from command staff. If we had been, we would have ensured that you received a

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proper welcome. In fact, just before you arrived, they changed the regular duty phase so that—”

“This is a surprise inspection. I do not want to delay the departure of this vessel, and I am sure that you do not either.” Anaiya had reached the security enclosure. “I need full access to the *Express* and, if we are to adhere to pre-established schedules, I need it now.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Did I give you permission to question my orders?” Anaiya asked.

“No, Commander, but will you be boarding the ship? Regular maintenance procedure, as you know, is to keep it sealed until the crew are cleared for final—”

“I am aware of that,” Anaiya said. “Are you aware of the consequences of interfering with an active internal investigation?”

“Yes, Commander,” the guard said. “Access approved. I will base it on your emergency access authority, but if you are specifically cleared for inspection duty, the system isn’t revealing it.”

“As designed. Wouldn’t want to draw attention, would we?”

“Procedure requires that I log each visit and ship access attempt, no matter the reason.” The guard glanced past Anaiya to the twin cases that trailed behind her. “Do those hold monitoring equipment? They’ll need to be registered, and a complete list of the contents submitted before I can allow them on board.”

“Standard monitoring gear. You do not need to examine them. I told you, I’m in a hurry. I have no time for unnecessary delay.”

“Orders from Provisional Commander Zarlais insist on an inspection.”

It seemed that the guard was going to be stubborn. Anaiya nodded. “Fine.” She waved him over. “Take a look.”

For a moment, it looked as if the guard would refuse. Then he nodded, the fields vanished, and he stepped down from the raised platform and

approached Anaiya. He extended his hand toward the nearest hover container and frowned when it did not move up in response to his summoning motion.

“Commander, there seems to be something wrong with this one’s—” The guard’s voice descended into an incoherent gargle.

Anaiya reached out and caught his body as it crumpled to the floor. She withdrew her other hand from his elbow, the hand that had been equipped with the skin simulation gauntlet that had carried the charge. The charge was contained so closely within its miniature power cell that all but the most closely attuned security system would mistake it for a mere data tool, rather than recognizing it as the discreetly concealed weapon it was. The energy pulse it had emitted had illuminated the guard’s bone structure with a brief, brilliant glow that seemed to pulse from the eye sockets of his skin armor. Then, the pulse blanked out.

The guard groaned and tried to move his limbs. The result was a twitching motion. He desperately flailed for a few long moments until, finally, he went limp.

Anaiya did not linger. First, she disabled the bay’s monitoring system. Then she retracted the clamps that bound the *Express* in place and used the same emergency access that the guard had just unlocked to seal the bay’s access points. She ordered the still-attached umbilical feeds to retract. Anaiya authorized the crew’s main transport plate, watched as the underside access point opened, and waited as it descended to her in a shaft of glimmering light. Fate awaited her. To Anaiya it felt as if the *Express* herself had issued an invitation, one reserved for her alone. Acceptance was the only way forward. Anaiya stepped on the transport plate. Her journey had begun.

CHAPTER III

Nothing is more terrifying than the monster within. That is, until the monster without begins to resemble it.

Elpick Triysis; *The Star Keeper's Annals*.

The bridge of the *Rifter's Express* seemed nearly as devoid of sound as the surrounding void. Apart from the soft noise made by air circulators, and the slightly louder sounds of Anaiya Sonra's breath, nothing disturbed the stillness. Around her, data displays were crowded with power curves, direction parabolas, and acceleration factors.

The rift transit fold zone where she was heading provided a connection to an area designated as Exploitation Zone Ten. Unfortunately, that route was indirect. The *Shadow River Ferry* would arrive in its targeted system long before the *Express* could reach it to intercept. When Anaiya did arrive, she would have to persuade the *Ferry's* captain to hand Jaeron over to her. She must interrogate him to learn why she had been set up. If it came to violence, the armaments carried by the *Rifter's Express* were more than a match for the *Ferry's* minimal, and purely defensive, weapons. Anaiya decided she would deal with that challenge if and when it came.

“Departure control. This is *Rifter’s Express*, out on a pre-certification inspection loop. An estimated time of arrival is not available. Further updates once I have completed testing.”

“Commander?”

Anaiya’s mouth tightened. The last thing she needed was Esp’s curiosity to get in the way.

“What’s going on?” Esp asked.

“A last-of-phase assignment. A personal request from Zarlais.” Anaiya kept her voice casual. “Some problems came up that need to be explored before they finish certification. While I’m out, I’ll take a closer look at that debris field.”

“Ah. And you swung the assignment to do that.”

“Right.” Anaiya nodded impassively and ended the message. One challenge down. She watched the simulation displays as the space habitat, and Centrum XII, receded behind her. She watched as the flickering cones that indicated the maximum range of the weapons systems of Frost Station faded into invisibility. *Good*. Anaiya scanned the expanse that separated her from the rift transit fold zone where she was headed. Almost immediately, she spotted the only thing that might cause trouble. If ...

Before she could decide what she might do about Aldanouri’s ship, if it became a factor, a message notification appeared. Anaiya thought about ignoring it but saw the sender’s listed identity. If she were to avoid active conflict before she reached the rift, she would have to make this convincing. Very convincing.

“Yes, *Provisional* Commander?”

“Junior Commander Sonra.” Unexpectedly, charm oozed from Zarlais’s voice. “I see you are still receiving messages. How’s that ship handling?”

“Very well. So far,” Anaiya said. “It will all be included in my pre-certification report.”

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“I know what you’re doing. Owning up to it might prevent you from being sent to the core mines. Lying will not save you or your career.”

“I know what you’re up to. I am leaving this system, and soon, the entire volume in this division. Once I do, your false accusations will be irrelevant.”

“Will they? I am ordering you to cease forward acceleration. Hand over the data that reveals the identities of the ones who backed your conspiracy with Jaeron. If you do that, you can get out of this with a minimum of personal inconvenience. Otherwise ...”

“Request denied.”

“That wasn’t a request!” Zarlais bellowed. “It was an order.”

“Perhaps it isn’t one you are entitled to give, *Provisional* Commander.”

“I have no choice. You heard what she said. Senior Lieutenant Aldanouri, respond.”

Things had just gotten more complicated. Without Aldanouri, she might have found a way out of all this without violence. Now, that hope was on the next orbit to impossible. Before this was over, beings were going to die. For those with personality insurance, death would be temporary. Others would permanently cease to exist. Anaiya forced herself to accept this reality. Losses were inevitable; she would not be one of them.

“Agree to surrender now, and we can make a deal. Last chance,” Zarlais said.

“No. Aldanouri’s ship is no match for this one. The *Express* was just overhauled.” Blunt, but Anaiya had no patience for anything else.

“Come, those claims are empty, and we both know it.”

Before this, Anaiya had taken Zarlais for many things, but stupid had not been one. “I suggest looking at the maximum power output of the weapons of both ships before you do anything else.”

“But you are only one being. Even with Artificial Intelligence-assisted attack profiles, you won’t be able to defeat a ship that is fully crewed.”

That thought had also occurred to Anaiya. She pushed it aside. “Do you want to risk two Patrol starships fighting? It won’t look good on your future performance assessments.”

“Enough,” Zarlais said. “Senior Lieutenant Aldanouri, this is a direct order. If Anaiya Sonra does not obey my command within the time parameters I have specified, she will be declared a hostile force, and you will be required to undertake all actions to neutralize that threat.”

“Wait.” Aldanouri’s face appeared. “I am sure we can work something out—”

“This traitor is determined to escape the consequences of her treason against the Over-Commission. She must not be allowed to transit. You, Aldanouri, are going to stop her.”

Aldanouri’s voice resumed. “This is all a misunderstanding of some kind. It can be corrected. If she agrees, I am willing to bring Commander Sonra on board the—”

“Listen closely,” Zarlais nearly snarled. “She is no longer a commander. She is a traitor, a mutineer, a smuggler, a terrorist conspirator. If I suspect that you might be involved in this ... in the slightest part of it, in any capacity, you will share her fate.”

“Commander, you heard Provisional Commander Zarlais,” Aldanouri said. “I have no choice. Surrender, and I promise you will not be harmed.”

“That is an empty pledge. I am innocent. I am leaving this system. You know that your ship isn’t a match for the *Express*, regardless of the opinion of Zarlais. There is nothing more to discuss.”

“That doesn’t change what I must do. I have no choice,” Aldanouri said.

“Neither do I.”

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Displays flickered as Anaiya prepared power loops, firing arcs, acceleration and relative position curves, and automated defensive and offensive patterns. Finally, she was done, and the last display input switched to wait-mode. Her mind, recently crowded with contending plans and strategies, was now as blank as she could make it. She watched and waited for what was to come.

Paz Aldanouri turned away from the display. "What's she doing?"

"Vector and acceleration curve haven't changed. She's heading straight for the departure point. The way acceleration is building, it won't take her long before she attains superluminal," Yurom said.

Even if he attempted to use the same route, the chances of passing at superluminal and looping around to catch the *Express* once it reached peak acceleration were next to nothing. No, they had exactly one chance at this, and it involved disabling the *Express* before it hit the top of the curve. Disabling, or ...

"We need to do this on one pass," Yurom said. "I don't think we'll get a second chance. Unless we bite through and rupture the main chamber, or interrupt the central power feeds, it won't matter."

With an effort, Aldanouri kept himself from responding. He had not realized how close to the edge all this had pushed him. It was not the thought of the broken ships and the broken bodies that did it. It was the betrayal of the being he loved. Why had Anaiya not told him ... But she had not. The thought was as cold as a pulsating cryo-fragment, stabbing deep into his brain. There must be a way out, a way to avoid all of what was to come ... something, anything that might ...

Yurom interrupted. "Orders? Path's narrowing."

"How long to intercept at maximum?"

Yurom told him. It was not much, but it would have to do. “Here.” Aldanouri swiped the *Express*’s profile into the simulation bubble in front of him and pointed to a spot on its hull. “Make sure our optimum intersect will hit there. I want it down, and I want all the flash points at that location fully disrupted.”

“By itself—”

“It won’t do much, but it will cause the systems to draw power as they compensate, and it will decrease acceleration until they do,” Aldanouri said.

“If it works?” Yurom asked.

“I want a boarding party ready. Light weapons. She won’t be able to put up much resistance. Take her alive.”

Yurom coughed discreetly. “I think, from the way Zarlais was talking, it would be better if we—”

“Is he standing here, or am I?”

Yurom looked away for a moment, and then back. “No argument.”

“Select the boarding party and adjust allocation until all external cyclic weapons are powered to full.”

Before the most recent overhaul, the vessels that would soon clash had been nearly identical, differing only in the date of their manufacture and in a few other inconsequential ways. Both starships had been manufactured to the best standards available. Over time each had been repeatedly overhauled and altered. The *Express* was slightly more maneuverable and held a slightly larger power reserve than its soon-to-be-enemy. That difference might seem minor, but in void combat even miniscule advantages were sometimes enough to enable those that commanded them to prevail.

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Anaiya Sonra scrutinized the small representation of both vessels on the plot in front of her. Each vessel had a roughly conical profile circled at intervals by hull traversing rings that held turret slots. The turrets held a mix of weapons: plasma emitters, particle beam cannons, sub-light missiles, drone bays, point defense weapons, lazars, and multiple-snouted bolt throwers, which could use a wide variety of solid, explosive, implosive, separating, and energetically charged types of ammunition.

The missiles, though sufficient to disable minimally protected craft, could do little against the *Skein*. Similarly, the lazars, though effective at carving through standard inert matter, would be nearly helpless against standard dissipation fields. And the particle beams, though effective against those dissipation fields, would be nearly useless when employed against even thinly armored hull sections. Despite their individual weaknesses, when those weapons were used in combination and to their full potential, they could cause complete bodily destruction to the targeted vessel, as well as to the organic or synthetic crew within.

Anaiya's time of contemplation ended. With less than a minute before estimated first contact, she queued one of several combat maneuvers that she had input into the interface of the *Express*. She hoped she would not have to use the missiles. If things went as planned, the plasma emitters and particle cannon would be enough.

It was time. "Initiate Combat Sequence A-3. Proximity and vector settings marked," Anaiya ordered.

The ship's interface responded. "Acknowledged. Full-power mode for weapons has been selected. Does the captain of this vessel wish to adjust this choice before the initiation of combat operations?"

"Negative."

“Fatal force use authorized,” the interface replied. “Weapon sets are fully powered and prepared for use. Offensive pattern spread commencing.”

On the simulation inside the bridge, the gleaming, silver form that represented the *Skein* angled in and down.

“Modify.” That approach angle by Aldanouri was risky for both of them. “Reduce acceleration to limit 4 and adopt special sequence 9.” The bridge quivered, as the *Express* sliced its acceleration factor from near maximum to less than a third of that.

To their credit, the *Skein*’s crew detected Anaiya’s attempt to counter and immediately shifted their acceleration to compensate, but the response, swift as it was, was insufficient. The *Skein*, moving faster than the *Express*, drifted past. Its weapons, already arrayed along the traversing rings for a side pass, were now nearly useless until they could be moved back along the rings to offset the unexpected maneuver by the *Express*.

As Anaiya watched, the automated systems of both vessels expended power, and the turrets raced along the traversing rings. Each ship struggled to get the full turret set into the optimal angular position before the other could do the same.

Plasma and energetically boosted particles tore across the void, turning the paths they followed white-hot and leaving behind glowing trails. Fields came to life, glowing red, before being dispersed as their energy-absorption capacity blasted past the maximum safe point. Lazes and bolts followed, pounding against the weakened places in the fields of the *Skein*. One by one, they ripped deep, while the *Skein*’s own weapons were still curving around and refocusing on the place where the *Express* was not supposed to be, and now was.

The space between the ships lit up, again and again, as the exchange of destructive potential continued.

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Paz Aldanouri suppressed a cry of shock as bolts tore through a fluctuating field and smashed against the *Skein's* outer armor. The bolts penetrated deep before repair and damage mitigation could respond. Chain explosions hammered even deeper, shattering the Insta-solve, even as it formed and flowed from the inner storage tanks and expanded into the breaches where it hardened and temporarily shielded the endangered zones from further damage.

“Get those fields down. I authorized full power, didn't I?” Aldanouri was aware that his voice was ragged but, with what they faced, he could not afford to care.

“I don't think we can,” Yurom said. “The recent upgrades of the *Express* make it more powerful than we anticipated. Comparative assessment says they're capable of taking half again as much as ours—maybe more.”

“Concentrate the attack on one part of the hull. We must punch through and get inside.”

“What good will that do?” Yurom asked.

“When we overwhelm the local recharge and blow out the nearest flash points that sustain it, she'll have to divert power from weapons to the shield. If she does, we'll cut the amount of incoming we're taking and give our automated repair systems a chance to catch up.”

Moments passed. “It's working, but not to the extent we need,” Yurom said. “We're nearly at maximum acceleration factor. If we don't hit that ship hard in the meantime, we're not going to be able to stop it.”

Aldanouri nodded grimly. He had done what he could to avoid the consequence that he now faced, but Anaiya Sonra, for reasons that likely only she would ever know, had prevented it. “Get those fields down. Full missile and bolt spread authorized. Maximum explosive yield.”

“Target?”

“The bridge. I want that hull bored through ... and everything along the path is to be disintegrated.”

“Lieutenant, if we pull this off, Commander Sonra won’t survive. A hit that powerful will hollow out the bridge like a meteor ripping into a planetary crust.”

“She made her choice,” Aldanouri said.

The *Express* and the *Skein* rapidly closed the distance separating them. The level of acceleration was far beyond what was recommended for any maneuver except one that built toward superluminal transition. It was something that should never be attempted while actions that might drain the ship’s main power generators and reserves were ongoing. Both ships were nearing the limit beyond which they would experience serious malfunctions and threaten the bodily integrity of the organics aboard them.

For a moment, Anaiya Sonra wished that fate could be changed, could somehow be manipulated to prevent what was about to occur. What must occur. Then the missile launchers and bolt throwers of the *Skein* pivoted to an optimal firing angle, and Anaiya knew that Aldanouri had abandoned the idea of merely disabling the *Express*. She was left with only one response.

“Offensive parameter modification.” Anaiya’s voice did not waver or fade as she issued the new instruction set. “Target section D7 upon achievement of optimum range. Use of all weapons is authorized.”

“Objective?” The interface’s voice was as cool and collected as Anaiya’s own.

“Total destruction of targeted section before the same is achieved against this vessel.”

“Adjusting. Adjustment complete. Parameters ready for execution. Range convergence imminent.”

“Implement.”

Live simulation displays blazed bright when plasma and bolts ripped deep into the central section of the *Skein*. Shock wave upon shock wave, blast after blast, tore deeper into its already wounded side. The shattered protective armor and the reddish puffs of solidified Insta-solve liquefied and then transformed into gas as the superheated and super-accelerated weapon payloads of the *Express* found their targets.

“Return fire!” Paz Aldanouri yelled, over the raging din that had erupted on the bridge. “Focus, focus!”

“We’re doing that,” Yurom said. “I’m reading insufficient power in mounts A1, A2, B3, C3.” A roaring alarm blasted across the bridge. “Primary dispersion field overload critical. Terminating field power flow to avoid generator kickback. Attempting to adjust armor for increased—”

Violent vibrations ripped through the bridge, shaking the walls so violently that the simulation displays threw out random color spots and shifting blank spaces. Then, data feeds failed and displays stopped sending. Aldanouri knew that the layers of armor that protected the bridge had ruptured. He opened his mouth.

But Yurom spoke first. “Get out!” Pure panic altered his first officer’s voice; it was nearly unrecognizable. “Critical breach! Unsafe—”

A terrible sound drowned the rest. Desperately, Aldanouri clung to his conform, but he knew it would do nothing to save him. Failed simulation displays broke apart and revealed the barren, curved bulkheads behind them. All around him, there were cries of panic and terror, lurching bodies, and pounding footsteps.

Heat as if from a fabrication installation’s superheated core poured from the walls and from those ghastly wounds. A still-existing simulation

pane revealed the gash that had been torn in the *Skein's* center section. It spouted molten material, and the ship's exterior was shrouded with plumes of superheated gas. The gash extended down to the curved section of outer compartments that covered the bridge's outer spin surface.

Aldanouri sat and stared at the simulation pane, at the pair of massive multi-spiked objects as they bored into his ship. He watched as his crew launched drones to halt the in-vectoring projectiles. He watched as those countermeasures failed. He felt the deep trembling as implosive and explosive charges blasted away the last layers of his ship's protective armor, compressing and then fracturing them past their failure points. He watched as explosive detonations filled the air with chunks of disintegrated composite that had once been bulkheads, and with the remains of what had once been sapient beings. After that, Paz Aldanouri saw nothing at all.

Filled with despair, Anaiya Sonra watched as organic life ended. It was the least she could do, and yet it was not enough. She watched as the pair of Balefires imploded against the *Skein's* last layers of protection. As those protective layers disintegrated, one by one, defying the best attempts of the ship's repair systems and Insta-solve. As the final barrier that separated those weapons from the goal they sought was swept aside. As the final missile, as if directed by the hand of some cruel, revenge-minded deity, sprang into bright, unrelenting life, and washed the bridge—and all it had once protected—with existence-ending fire.

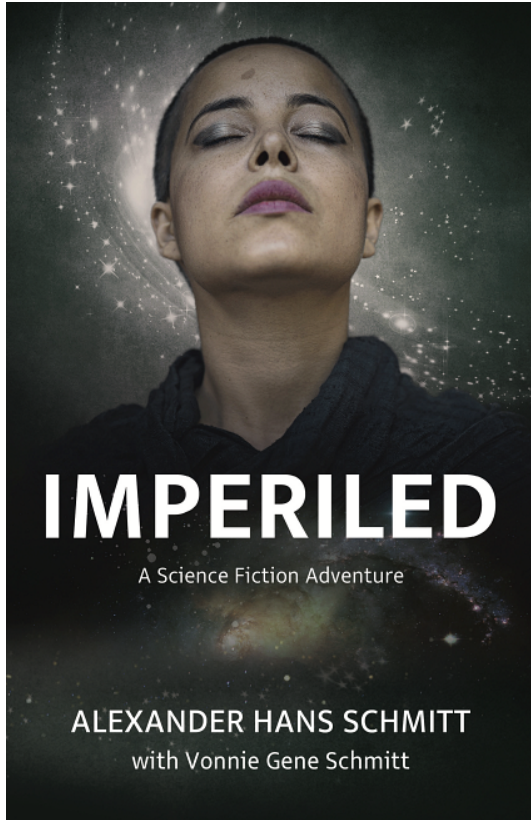
Anaiya continued to watch as the *Skein* drifted, aimless and out of control, its ravaged side still glowing as flammable gas vented from its wounds. She watched as the conveyor of the *Express* activated, as acceleration built past critical, as the slight visual distortion and ever-present hum produced by the time variance rectifier of the *Express* joined

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those other sensations. Finally, she watched as her ship slipped beyond the reach of ordinary reality, surging forward into that place that lay beyond, beside, and within it.

Anaiya hoped that some of those on board had survived. Some could have had current personality insurance and, in three or four years, after proof of the destruction of their bodies had been properly reviewed and certified, after those backups had been properly reconstituted, after their newly localized bodies had been certified by those responsible for such things ... After all these things were accomplished, they would be returned to regular existence with no memory of the terrible event that had destroyed their previous organic manifestations.

Regardless, it mattered. Anaiya thought of those to whom she had been forced to lie. She thought of those she had left behind. She thought especially of the man she had loved for over a decade, Paz Aldanouri. Grief gripped her as she embraced the magnitude of her loss. Finally, she thought of those who had fought alongside him to stop a being that they believed was a traitor, a smuggler, and worse. Whatever the truth, their journeys were swallowed by a void that would never remember why they had fought or why they had died.



*When the unthinkable happens, what would you do to save yourself? In **Imperiled**, Alexander Hans Schmitt takes readers on a gripping journey with Junior Commander Anaiya Sonra in an unforgettable tale of resilience and discovery.*

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