

Avenger

Sovereign Stars Book 1

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Dedication

For Jo, as always

From the Author:

The World of The Sovereign Stars!

In the year 2052, physicist Mark Holder discovered the Slipstream drive—a traversable wormhole drive—and mankind reached for the stars and began to colonize the galaxy. For centuries, mankind continued to colonize system after system without coming into contact with intelligent alien life. But man is a natural predator, warlike and greedy. After many generations of minor warfare, humanity faced a near-extinction-level event remembered now only as The Purge.

The vast majority of humanity did not survive The Purge. Those that did owe their survival to a few hundred Heroes—starship captains and generals—who brought an end to The Purge and began to restore order in the galaxy.

These Heroes are thought to have had a range of powers, including telepathy (commonly called Psy), telekinesis (commonly called TK), and even a form of second sight that allowed them to see events in the future and thus predict probable enemy movements (these are the Seers).

Over the centuries that followed the end of The Purge,

these Heroes of old passed their powers down to their children. And so, the Heroic Families were formed, bloodlines that can be traced to the present day.

After The Purge, humanity embraced a form of monarchy. Each star system with a habitable planet (which serves as the Capital for the system) became a Kingdom in its own right. In almost all cases, the royal families can prove their bloodlines come from Heroic blood. Although, over time, the bloodlines became clouded, despite efforts to keep them pure.

Present Day, Year 3278

Mankind, now in a kind of golden age, has achieved a level of stability not seen since long before The Purge. People live for an average of 175 years. Kingdoms are actively colonizing once again, exploring out through the network of Slipstreams. Outposts and settlements become colonies, and colonies eventually become kingdoms in their own right.

Science rules the day, and even those of heroic bloodline do not have TK or Psy abilities. Most of humanity believes the stories of the Heroes are only legends and fairy tales.

The military is now partially unified and partially fragmented. No substantial war has been fought between kingdoms for more than two hundred years, so there is now a single United Sovereign Fleet (USF), but the Carrier Groups within this fleet pledge loyalty to a specific king and kingdom. Individual kingdoms also have a royal militia, a kind of security force.

Overseeing all of these kingdoms, the United Sovereign Fleet acts as royal peacekeepers and protectors. But what do you suppose would be the outcome if they had to face a threat from a superior alien race?

Hello, my name is Krista. I'm the *Avenger's* artificial intelligence, her AI, and I'm going to tell you the story, the whole story.

Prologue

Falling Stars

New Hope
Planet Typhon
Persei Star System

Kyne Minnah had a headache. Several lines of code just wouldn't resolve themselves. He'd spent hours working through a dozen different options and nothing seemed to work. The glitch stared back at him, stubborn and embarrassing.

Elio and Tobin are going to wonder what I've been doing all week, he thought. This bug is going to set the whole project back a week or more.

Then, just when Kyne felt as if he was at the end of his rope, a network error hovered above his holographic display.

"What the vac?" Kyne muttered, keying in a query to the network center. The answer that came back was puzzling.

Kyne leaned back. *No connection? The Slipstream network was offline? What the vac's going on?*

The signal cleared the network center downtown, and the

X-ray transmitters all seemed to check out, but the Slipstream network station wasn't responding. *Well*, he thought, *there's nothing I can do about that. I wonder...* He tapped the data pad on his arm and tried to contact the network center, but there was no answer. He stared at the lines of code, shook his head, leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. *Damn it!*

He decided to go for a walk. The network going down was annoying, but at least it bought him some time to stretch his legs. *What time is it, anyway?* he wondered. He glanced again at his data pad. It was past midnight. *Stars, no wonder I'm seeing double*, he thought.

"Hey, Telsa," Kyne said as he rose from his seat. The AI chimed to let him know it was listening. "Put my gear to sleep. And unlock the front door."

Another chime and the holo faded as his computers powered down.

Kyne grabbed his hat. A notification chimed on his data pad as he stepped out of his front door. He ignored it.

The night sky was beautiful, a deep black ablaze with twinkling white stars.

The streets of New Hope were quiet and the air was cool.

When Kyne had first heard of the open invitation to move to the Persei System, one of the most distant star systems in Known Space, he'd ignored it. He wasn't the pioneer type. Why join a primitive, colonial settlement halfway across the galaxy? Then again, he did enjoy the quiet life. And his home planet, Odin, was a busy, overcrowded boisterous world. So Kyne went ahead and signed up.

Now, he traded a few hours a week of IT work for a small house at the outskirts of New Hope where he could dedicate most of his time to his real passion: developing games and apps with his buddies.

Of course, if the network was down he wouldn't be able to

do much coding. Sure, Elio would be angry, but what was he to do? It was out of his control.

His data pad chimed again. Kyne pulled up the display and the face of Mole Barrion appeared, a recorded message. The older man didn't look happy; he sounded angry.

"Minnah, you promised you'd have the gravcars programmed before morning," Barrion grumbled. "I see that this still is not done. Please do not disappoint me, Minnah. I want the celebration tomorrow to be spectacular. I need those gravcars. Do not... let me down." The image faded, the message complete.

Kyne sucked in cool air. *Damn it*, he thought. *I'd completely forgotten.*

Well, he decided, *no time like the present. With the Slipstream network down, there's no point in going back to the house, anyway.*

He changed direction, made a right at the next block. The garage where the gravcars were stored was no more than a twenty-minute walk.

The celebration, the first annual Founders Day for New Hope, was supposed to be a big deal. At least that's what Barrion was hoping. And Kyne had promised to take care of programming the gravcar parade to trace a route through New Hope's streets, firing pyrotechnics into the air and displaying holographic dancers. It would be quite a show, but Kyne still had to program the cars to follow the route the city committee had mapped out. The project was an easy thirty-minute job. He'd just been putting it off.

He was beginning to feel sleepy, so he picked up the pace. He decided he'd finish up programming the route for the gravcars and then walk home and go to bed. Then, while everyone else was enjoying the show and drinking enough synthol to fry their brains, maybe he'd be able to figure out why the Slip-

stream network was down. Was it system-wide or just on planet Typhon itself? His mind started to race as he considered the possibilities. There was nothing like a new puzzle to work through to get the blood pumping.

People were starting to wander from their homes, he noticed. *Late-night holodrama watchers, probably*, he thought. *Upset over the network outage, too.*

Kyne waved at several of his neighbors as they stumbled around their front yards in the dark. A few blocks farther on, a gravcar hummed by, flying half a meter above the street.

He didn't take any notice at first, but, at some point along the way, he saw people were standing in their front yards staring up at the night sky. He smiled to himself. *What do they think they'll actually see, the network satellites with their bare eyes?*

But, the closer he got to the town center, the more people there were on the street, all looking upward, some calling out to each other and pointing. Kyne reflexively glanced up at the sky himself. And that's when he saw them.

Stars.

At least they looked like stars... at first.

But, unlike most stars in the night sky, these were not white, and they didn't twinkle. These stars burned bright blue.

More and more blue lights appeared in the sky above New Hope. They grew brighter and brighter until they were by far the brightest stars in the sky.

"What the vac?" Kyne said as he stopped walking and stared like everyone else.

Suddenly, sirens began to sound downtown. *An emergency alert? What's happening? Could it be pirates? They never attack anything on the surface.*

Then it began. A needle-like beam of blue light from one of

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the bright blue stars struck a building just a few blocks from where Kyne was standing.

There was an almighty thunderclap, and the building exploded into a million pieces.

Screams followed the destruction. The emergency alarm was joined by another, and then another until the air itself vibrated from the noise.

The blue stars were descending on New Hope, their blue beams raining death and destruction on the city.

Kyne ran, his heart racing. But there was nowhere to go.

Chapter One

Prince of Orso

The Orso Royal Palace
Planet Caerus
Orso System

Elio Lorne, Prince of Orso, stepped into his bedroom suite, his hair still wet from the steam shower. A robot servant stood at attention in the corner, its eyes glowing the dim blue of sleep mode. He finished drying his shoulder-length blond hair and threw the towel on his bed and slipped into a robe before plopping down on the cushioned chair in the middle of the suite.

He glanced sideways at the small stand beside the chair where he'd left his halo, a circlet of corinium and circuitry. He grabbed it and slid it onto his head. The halo had been adjusted to fit snugly just above his ears.

Elio loved moments like this—his first time accessing his halo with his new forearm data screen. He held up his forearm, the form-fitted polydyethylene data screen flexing with the

movement of his skin. He'd had the latest version installed earlier that day. The vitals sensors of this new model no longer required the old-style wrist plugs. It had nano probes that inserted themselves through the skin into the nervous system. The Xion V15 would not be available to the general public for another three days, but through his royal connections, Elio had received his a few days early. He smiled at the thought of the citizens lined up for blocks, waiting for the new version.

He tapped the touch screen on his forearm to take him to the main menu and selected "gaming." His data screen synced with the halo. He touched the sensor to activate the halo and felt the familiar tingling sensation of the nerve-jack. Then, less than a second later, he was no longer sitting in his chair in his suite. Instead, his avatar, a Middle Eastern boy, stood in a bare white room, holographic displays hovering in front of him, welcoming him.

With a thought, he accessed the control panel for Old Earth Assassin. He and his friends had been developing the game for months. Elio was in charge of the coding, Tobin handled research, and Kyne Minnah took care of graphics. They had advanced far enough to be able to play the beta version for the first two levels.

As the game loaded, Elio opened a second window and went over the code for the holographic connections. There had been some bugs in it last time they'd played, but those should have been corrected with the latest update.

The game began, and Elio was surrounded by the holographic realism of the game's universe. He was standing in a town square, surrounded by stone buildings with thatched roofs. The streets were crowded with people. Merchants in the marketplace hocked fruits, vegetables and other wares.

The setting was Old Earth, before the systems settlements,

before the Slipstream, before The Purge and before humans developed the gifts of TK and Psy, *if they even existed at all*, he thought. The Earth of this historical time period was primitive: stone streets, horses and carriages, no computers or combustion engines. It was an ideal time to be alive on the first human planet.

Elio enjoyed the quiet, slow pace of this world. Since there were not many records of life before The Purge, he didn't know if the details were correct. But from Tobin's research, it was as close as they could get it, at least for now. They'd continue the historical research later.

He walked his avatar down the street. When he'd jacked into the game, it should have triggered notifications to Tobin and Kyne that he was there.

Where are they? he wondered. *They should be here.* He sent them a message. It didn't go through. *Bad connection? That's odd. The inter-system network hasn't experienced an outage for decades.*

Elio had heard about them, but the new servers on the Slipstream Control Stations had multiple levels of backup.

He continued down the street and was about to approach the spice seller when, suddenly, a loud beeping interrupted the game and everything froze.

"What the vac?" he said to himself.

"Your father wishes to speak to you, sir," a pleasant AI voice sounded in his halo.

"Not now, Dinka," Elio said. "I'm busy."

"The summons is urgent, my prince. The king wishes to speak to you. You must comply," Dinka insisted.

Elio swore under his breath, then said, "Fine. Exit to home and enter virtual briefing."

The world of the game faded away, and Elio felt his bones

and muscles tingle as his avatar shifted from the small Middle Eastern boy to his normal, thirty-year-old, six-feet-six-inch self.

He was back in the stark white room for only a moment before his surroundings shifted again to a hologram of his father's Royal office.

Elio's father, Orson Lorne, King of the Orso System, was seated at a large, ornate desk.

The king was in his sixties and a little on the heavy side. He, too, was tall, as were all the decedents of the Heroic line and, like Elio, he had a mane of thick blond hair. Unlike Elio, he wore a constant scowl that contorted his bearded face.

The large room, the massive desk, the ornate, militaristic decor were all designed to strike fear in the hearts of visitors, but they had no effect on Elio.

"Father?" he yelled. "I was in the middle of something."

The king arched an eyebrow. "Another child's game, was it?" he asked.

"It's what I do," Elio replied. "I'm a gamer. It's important to me."

"It's a waste of time," the king said angrily, "and it isn't fitting for the crown prince of a Sovereign System to waste so much valuable time in a world of virtual nonsense."

Elio looked around, waving his hands at the virtual replica of his father's office, then said, "Really? You're saying that while you're jacked into... this?"

His father's face turned a deep red. "I'm contacting you this way because I don't have time to waste waiting for you to cross the palace," he said. "This is a busy day. We have network outages throughout the Galactic Arm, and I have back-to-back meetings all afternoon."

"Right," Elio said and rolled his eyes. *Network outages?* he thought. That must be why he couldn't link up with his friends. One of them, Kyne Minnah, was way out in Persei System.

“Son,” the king said, “we’ve gone over this before. You’re a Royal. You need to act like one.”

“By doing what?” Elio asked.

“By not spending your time playing these games for one.” The king sighed. “This is not how our ancestors lived. It is not what they intended for us. They discovered these systems, colonized this planet and lived well. They had the Gifts. Our forefathers who founded this system had the strongest TK and Psy powers ever recorded.”

Elio crossed his arms and said, “Ever recorded? That’s the point, father; there are no records. None of us have those powers anymore. We don’t even know if they ever really existed.”

The king was taken aback. His cheeks shook as he jerked his head back in surprise. “How dare you?” he said. “You will not speak of such things in my presence.” He pointed a scolding finger at him. “Their powers still remain in our royal blood, even if we are unable to access them.”

“Really, father?” Elio asked. “Are you serious?”

“Of course, I am,” he replied.

“You’ve been listening to the old priests too much,” Elio said. “No such... *gifts* exist. Show me a recording of one of them using the magical telekinesis or telepathy, then I’ll believe it.”

The king stood and puffed out his chest. “It would surprise me, my son, if you showed any potential to have such powers.”

“Why? Do you have them?” Elio said and held up his hands sarcastically.

“The TK and Psy were a gift,” the king replied. “It allowed the royal class to break away, to be who they were supposed to be. And you would not be sitting there enjoying the fruits of their labors without those Gifts. You may not believe in them, and I cannot make you. However, I do ask and expect you to at least conduct yourself like an honorable

man. And you will not mock the Gifts or our ancestors in my presence.”

“Well, when the day comes that I develop telepathy,” Elio said, “you will be the first to know. And then maybe you’ll treat me like an adult.”

The king gritted his teeth and was about to say something when another form materialized beside Elio. “Ha!” He scoffed when Duke Rodor Steren’s plump form appeared.

“Your Majesty,” Steren said, bowing deeply. He glanced in Elio’s direction and mumbled, “My prince.”

Of all his father’s dukes, Steren was the one Elio disliked most. The two-faced little man spent all his time at the palace kissing up to the king. Elio had no idea what the duke actually did to deserve his title.

“Good. Now that you’re both here,” the king said, “I’ll make this quick. I want both of you to travel to Tor in the Pricus System first thing tomorrow morning.”

Elio’s mouth dropped open, but it was Steren who protested first.

“Certainly, your majesty, but Prince Elio isn’t needed, sir. I’m sure I can handle things.”

The king raised a hand to hush the duke. “I know you can handle the diplomatic proceedings, Rod. But I want my son to get some experience, to learn from you.”

“Experience with what?” Elio blurted. “Eating with the correct fork? I don’t want to live my life shaking hands with stuffy colonists, Father!”

“I’m not asking what you want, Elio,” the king said. “I’m telling you. The Pricus System is requesting permission to set up mining outposts. The colony of Pricus City on Tor is under my jurisdiction. The governor has also requested our input as to how the operations are to be run.”

Mining operations? Elio thought. *What a bore.*

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Elio noticed the duke was steaming. Elio grinned. “You’re not scared I’ll cramp your style, are you, Rod?” he asked.

Steren self-consciously patted his long black hair. “It’s Duke Steren to you, you little shit,” he muttered under his breath.

Elio grinned at him but didn’t reply.

“I have spoken,” the king said. “Everything has already been arranged. This is a simple mission. Shake a few hands. Kiss a few babies. Give the governor what he wants. That’s it. Rod, I want my boy to get some experience.”

The duke wasn’t happy, but he gave another unnecessary bow and said, “As you wish, Your Grace.”

“Well, I still don’t want to go,” Elio said, crossing his arms.

“You will go, even if I have to order a marshal and a dozen of my personal guards to drag you from your bed and throw you into the shuttle,” the king growled.

Elio let out a long breath. He knew his father had to be obeyed. He’d be going.

“Fine!” Elio snapped.

“Good, that will be all,” the king said.

Elio’s father waved his hand dismissively, bringing up his personal display and, with another wave, the room dissolved, and Elio was back in white space.

He hit the escape command and returned to the reality of his room, sitting in his chair. He lifted the halo from his head and threw it on the table.

“Dinka,” Elio said, pointing at the still, apparently sleeping robot.

“My prince,” the robot responded.

“Find me some clothes,” Elio said. “I have an errand to run. Oh, and I want some breakfast. The usual.”

“As you wish,” Dinka said.

Elio went to his bathroom to brush his hair. A few minutes

later, another servant robot entered the suite bearing a tray of food.

He'd eat, get dressed and put on a smile, *but*, he thought, *if I have to go on this stupid mission, I'll do it my way.*

And that meant he had a little light hacking to do.

Chapter Two

The Queen's Pleasure

The Orso Royal Palace
Planet Caerus
Orso System

A quick walk through the palace and across the courtyard brought Elio and Dinka to the military compound.

Elio turned to his robot and said, “Dinka, find a terminal that can access the control tower, flight plans and royal orders.”

“Yes, sir.” The bipedal robot lumbered to the closest terminal. Elio liked this V6000 series of service robots. It was something about their humanoid form. Sure, Dinka was constructed from dura metal and carbon fiber composites with some very sophisticated custom updates designed by Elio himself, but Elio liked talking to a bot that had two arms and two legs. For some reason, he didn't like the old standard palace bots that made it feel like he was talking to a trashcan. Elio had also had Dinka custom-painted with a silver and black scheme to ensure the bot didn't look like an ordinary service bot.

Dinka beamed his access code into the terminal's scanner and began typing on the screen. The bot's ocular system could scan through lines of code far faster than even Elio could.

"Terminal 7H in the communications bay will work, sir. And it is currently open." The bot's oval-shaped head turned to look at his master.

Elio nodded. Dinka tapped in several commands, then signed off and exited the system.

"Thank you, Dinka," Elio said and set off through the military offices with an air of confidence, as if he was supposed to be there. The few soldiers and pilots who were around were used to seeing Elio in and around the compound, not that any of them had enough rank to question him anyway.

He checked the nearest tracking screen on the wall to see if Lieutenant Dravo, his Marine buddy, was in the building. Dravo could get him into the communications bay no problem. The marine was always willing to risk doing little favors for Elio as long as he got access to the Royal's social credit coding. They were great friends anyway, had been for as long as he could remember and, with Dravo's help, Elio had learned how to fly and handle DEW weapons, while Dravo was able to visit the high-class clubs and party with the rich and elite. It was a match made in heaven. Unfortunately, Dravo seemed to be absent.

Elio sucked his lower lip, thought for a moment, then made up his mind and walked confidently into the communications bay. He found Terminal 7H and began tapping, typing, on the screen. The screen asked for his military identification number, and he typed in a generic maintenance code he'd found previously. That let him into the system. The maintenance department didn't have their passwords updated nearly as often as they should.

He opened the control panel and ACCESS DENIED filled

the screen. A default settings code bypassed that, and he was into the system. He inputted a cross-site scripting code into the search field and the system began searching for possible password matches.

He minimized that window and searched for an open port in a new window. Port HH9Z would work. He opened that, and when it asked for a sixteen-character password, he went back to the password matches the system had found for him. There was only one match that had sixteen characters. After inputting that into the port, he was now in the control tower system. *Too easy.*

Elio grinned to himself. He really should bring up the flaws in this system to his father at some point. But then he wouldn't be able to have his fun.

Not only did his mind work more like a hacker than a politician, but Elio felt alive when he was solving a coding puzzle. Nothing made him feel more dead than sitting in a boring political meeting. It was the thrill of problem-solving, of using his intuition and knowledge of hacking that he loved. But if he got caught again... Well, his father had warned him there would be consequences. Hacking was not a suitable occupation for a prince, which was one of the reasons he enjoyed it.

Elio found the royal orders for the Pricus envoy that had been entered into the system only that morning. If he was forced to travel, there was no way he was getting stuck in some spartan USF ship with that back-stabbing little bastard Duke Steren.

That being so, to the one USF Diplomatic vessel and battle cruiser escort ship assigned to the trip, he added *The Queen's Pleasure*, his personal yacht, to the clearance manifest.

The Queen's Pleasure was a gift from his long-departed mother. She passed just two weeks after his twenty-first birth-

day. *The Queen's Pleasure* was... special, sleek and fast, and Elio had tricked it out to suit his needs and personality.

Elio looked around. No one seemed to notice him. He saved the changes, logged out and left the terminal.

The following morning, after Dinka had moved Elio's effects onto *The Queen's Pleasure*, the prince joined Duke Steren and the other officers at the military bay. King Lorne was also present to officially see the delegation off.

The Queen's Pleasure was inside the hangar, ready for take-off, next to the Diplomatic vessel.

Duke Steren's round face turned towards the king in surprise. "Your Grace, it was my understanding that I would travel with the royal delegation."

The king shrugged. "I don't write the manifests, Rod."

The duke stroked his black hair, revealing a nervous tell. For supposedly being a political expert, Steren was not very adept at concealing his emotions. Elio knew arriving at their destination in a separate ship from a royal family member would instantly show the welcoming committee on Tor that the duke was not on the same social level as the prince.

"Well, shall we be off?" Elio asked.

Steren was still trying to conceal his frustration. King Lorne tried to conceal a smirk as he briefly made eye contact with his son. Elio knew this unspoken gesture of approval would be the only way his father would praise him. This was the closest thing in his thirty years that Elio had gotten to an "I'm proud of you, son." It was evident the king still wished Elio would do something more patriotic or political with his life, but Elio was still his son, his only son. And even the king himself couldn't resist being proud of his son's... strategic move.

"Thank you again, father." Elio bowed his head. "We will return in good time."

Elio turned and walked towards his ship. Duke Steren

could do nothing other than say his goodbyes and go to his own generic diplomatic vessel.

“Good morning, my prince,” Kyla, the ship’s AI said as he entered the flight deck. “I hope you’re having a pleasant day.”

“Very much so, Kyla,” Elio replied. “Bring up the systems, if you please.”

The ship trembled slightly as it came to life. A dome-shaped hologram of the star systems and the proposed route to Tor appeared between the command chair and the one usually occupied by a copilot, in this case, Dinka.

“Take us out, Kyla,” Elio said. “No, better wait for the duke. I don’t need to make him any angrier than he already is.”

He watched as the diplomatic vessel lifted on its grav drives and moved slowly out of the hangar.

“Now you can take us out,” Elio said.

“Rendezvous with cruiser *Vanguard* in seventeen minutes and fifty-four seconds,” Kyla said.

Twenty minutes later, the three ships were already out of the atmosphere and on their way towards the Slipstream. The military cruiser took the point of their V-shaped standard formation: Steren’s ship on the left and Elio’s on the right.

Elio checked the speed of the Cruiser ahead of him and manually typed it into the navigation computer.

“Is there anything you would like me to get for you, sir?” Dinka asked as he looked at the prince from the co-pilot’s chair.

“No, thank you, Dinka.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Would you like to take the controls, my prince?” Kyla asked.

“Yes, thank you.” Elio placed his hands on the yoke, adjusted the thrusters, then sat back in his seat. He enjoyed the power of the ship and the mental challenge of putting his piloting skills to use. He wasn’t too excited about the trip, but at

least he could pilot his own craft and not have the duke breathing down his neck the entire time.

Some twenty-seven minutes later, traveling at one-tenth light speed, the tiny fleet was on vector to the Slipstream Control Center. They reduced speed. The massive wormhole grew in size as they approached. If it wasn't for the semi-purple haze around the edge of the wormhole, it would be almost impossible to see the Slipstream. The Slipstream refracted light differently inside of its borders than in normal space, resulting in the haze.

Elio never got tired of watching the phenomenon. He wondered what the ancients must have thought about these massive wormholes when they were first discovered more than a millennia ago. He wondered what life was like before the Slipstreams—before interstellar travel. There was little recorded history about life in those primordial times, when humans were confined to Earth's solar system, prior to the first traversable wormhole—now called a Slipstream—being discovered way back in 2047. It had been another five years before physicist Mark Holder developed the Slipstream drive that gave humanity access to the network of wormholes.

Elio was suddenly jerked out of his reverie by the warning buzz and a voice in his ear that told him they were approaching the gateway, the white and gray control station floating some ten thousand kilometers from the mouth of the wormhole.

His communicator came to life. "This is Slipstream control. You are approaching the gateway. Please identify yourself."

Elio jumped to hit the comm screen before either of the other two ships could answer.

"Slipstream control, this is Queen's Pleasure One on route to the Pricus System requesting Slipstream access," he said, then sat back and grinned at the thought that Steren must be beside himself with rage, because once the formation had been

defined, the ident would be locked in for their entire journey, there and back. The Pricus System receiving station would ask for Queen's Pleasure One, not the call sign of Steren's ship, another jab at the duke. Elio smiled.

"Roger, Queen's Pleasure One. Please activate your drive and send coordinates when ready." The female voice from the control station was calm and even.

Elio turned on his ship's Slip Drive, then tapped several times on the screen in front of him, The terminal lit up, and lines of digits and characters scrolled across the screen until finally they settled on the current Slipstream frequency.

"Sending coordinates now." Elio hit the "execute" icon.

"Coordinates received, Queen's Pleasure One. You are approved for Slipstream approach. Proceed on heading 325."

"Roger, control. 325." Elio tapped the heading into the ship's vectoring computer.

"Cruiser FH29 *Vanguard* here. Roger, Queen's Pleasure. Heading 325," the captain of the cruiser confirmed for his own computer.

Elio waited for Steren, enjoying how the duke would have to confirm the same.

"This is diplomatic vessel Orso Five. I am also confirming heading 325." Steren tried to sound like he was actually doing something, but Elio knew the duke's ship would be on autopilot. But the duke wanted to make sure the control station knew it was a diplomatic mission. He never missed a chance to impress. Even if it was a simple comms confirmation.

Once all three ships had locked in the same coordinates, they would move as one through the Slipstream. The thrusters of all three ships worked in unison and positioned the formation at the correct angle facing the wormhole. Then they waited for the control station to confirm the headings.

"Roger that," the female voice said without emotion.

“Queen’s Pleasure One, you are go for Slipstream access. Good luck.”

“Thank you, control.” Elio switched off the comm and placed his hand on the Slip Drive control screen, looked over at Dinka and said, “Here we go.”

The bot nodded its metal head in approval.

Elio engaged the Slip Drive, and the familiar sensation of being pulled into the wormhole washed over him. The stars disappeared as the ship entered the black mass of the Slipstream.

End of sample
