

**BOOK TWO OF THE VALE SERIES
GHOSTS OF THE VALE**

SAMPLE

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Chapter One

The only illumination on the hull of the *Torrence* came from her navigation strobes and the light spilling from her viewports. The small vessel crept through the void of interstellar space, a lonely outpost of humanity in the darkness of the Cygnus Vale.

The *Torrence* was a quad engine survey vessel derived from a Kobo class freighter. A three-kilometre towed sensor array stretched out like a tail from her stern. It was lit by blinking red strobes every 10 metres along its length.

Jack Lawson walked onto the darkened flight deck carrying two mugs of coffee. The only sound was the hum of the air scrubbers and the occasional beep or ping from the instruments.

“Hey Rosa, I brought you caffeine.”

Rosalita Lopez stirred in the pilot’s seat and took the aluminium mug from him, she groaned.

“No need to thank me,” Jack said, taking his seat at the data processing station. The seat pedestal gave a squeak as he settled in.

Rosa glanced over at him. She was holding her mug with both hands, enjoying the warmth and inhaling the aroma. She liked it hot and sweet with frothy milk substitute. She smiled after the first sip.

“What are you doing up here? I pull the night shifts to get away from everyone. You are invading my space, asshole.” She pushed her seat back and stood. She stretched, extending her arms above her head, her fingertips brushing the overhead consoles. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes.

“I like the view,” Jack replied.

Rosa flipped him the bird and sat in the pilot’s seat. She started a sequence of routine system checks. Jack continued to stare at her lithe body, cocooned in her light blue flight suit over which she wore a faded Venture Survey branded jacket. Light shining from the consoles painted Rosa’s pale skin a rainbow of colours. Every so often a faint smile graced her elfin features, leaving Jack to wonder what she was thinking.

He turned his attention to more pressing matters and tapped his login into the sensor suite workstation. The boot process took an eternity as his preferred applets loaded onto the screen, each occupying a unique space in front and behind of his holographic display. He rubbed his hands over his face and sighed.

“Why did I take this job?” he muttered.

“You bought into Carson’s bullshit, like the rest of us,” Rosa replied.

She was right.

Jack was a 33-year-old a data analyst with a reputation for finding viable star systems. Two years ago he had been hired by Jez Carson, the sole owner of *Venture Survey Incorporated*, a small data harvester working on the Frontier.

This time next year the company will be flying, we’ll all be millionaires...

Carson spun a good line and on paper it appeared plausible, a small outfit with a moderate asset base and a history of lucrative finds.

That was before Venture leaked cash, lost clients and suffered a lack of attention from its owner. Carson's answer had been to buy more ships and fritter funds on profitless vanity projects. Carson was a master at doing anything to avoid hard work or fixing the obvious problems facing his company.

Jack could not understand how Venture continued to operate; Jez Carson's sole priority was to make enough profit to survive another day and draw another dividend.

It was bullshit and after this run Jack Lawson was done.

He pushed thoughts of Carson's failings to one side; he had work to do.

He studied the preliminary data capture. The numbers were much as he expected. The Cygnus Vale was known for low stellar density, so why his boss thought it a viable prospect was anyone's guess.

"So, Asshole, how long have you been a night owl?" Rosa asked, her voice snapping him out of his thoughts.

"I'm avoiding Carson; I'm fed up of being the go-to guy for his BS."

"When you leave he'll be lost. He'll try to get me to tie his boot laces and wipe his ass. I dunno if he's dumb or just lazy." Rosa stood and came over to his workstation, resting on the console next him.

"Good luck to him with that. You can't do your own boot laces," Jack replied, looking up at her.

Rosa drained the last of her coffee.

"You can handle things up here?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Good, I'm going to bed. When you're done with your numbers, you know where I am." A coy expression danced on her face. Her close-cropped hair gave her an impish, mischievous appearance.

Jack grinned. "I dunno, I have a lot of numbers to crunch..."

"All work and no play..." She ran a finger under his chin.

"Yeah I know, makes Jack a dull boy." He laughed. "The sooner we get done the sooner we go home."

He watched her leave and wondered what plans she had for the future. Somehow she had gotten under his skin, yet he knew so little about her. Rosa Lopez was an enigma. Sometimes he could catch her off guard, make her smile and see something in her eyes that could stop his heart. She was intelligent, funny and damn hot between the sheets.

Jack did not know what she saw in him. He was tall and ungainly; his hair rusty brown and prone to becoming greasy if left unwashed for more than twelve hours. His nose was a little too small and chin a little too square. Jack did not consider himself ugly, but he could not imagine Rosa giving him a second look were they not living in the same tin can.

Punching above your weight as always, Jacky Boy...

When he left Venture, he wanted her to come with him, maybe set up their own company. He had practised asking her many times but had yet to grow a pair big enough to follow through.

As it was Carson kept finding excuses to keep them out here. Denny Franks, the ship's engineer, was certain the *Torrence* would be impounded as soon as they returned to Baikonur Station. From what Jack had seen of the financial reports, Denny was probably right.

He studied the numbers as they scrolled up the screen in front of him. The towed array scanned a 360 degree field around the ship, processing data from as far away as 10 light-years. The array was tuned to detect gravimetric distortions, electromagnetic emissions and spectral anomalies; anything that would indicate a viable system. Finds would be logged and sold to the MegaCorps. A habitable planet would be all they needed to secure the company or perhaps for Carson to buy a bigger yacht.

So far all they had discovered were rocks; some had breathable atmospheres but even those were barren, dry lumps of base minerals. Worlds like that were ten-a-penny on the Frontier and just as common in the Core Systems. The navigational data and chart revisions had value, but not enough to turn the company around.

The raw data scrolled up his screen, endless lines of green text, he did not need the data modelling algorithm to tell him what it amounted to, so he let it scroll past while he reviewed the data captured in the previous eight hours.

In the 108 cubic light-years they had scanned the highest scoring object on the Marsh Scale had been rated 8.

The Marsh Scale was a thirty-point measure of a star system's viability. The midpoint score was considered the minimum to warrant a detailed survey. The data summary reflected what he was seeing on the current acquisition.

Another dud scan.

The number of independents working the Vale could be counted on one hand. It had little to do with the restrictions enforced by the Vega Treaty and everything to do with economics. The lucrative finds were all in the Orion Expanse or the Black Reach, not here in this stellar wasteland.

Jack pushed the chair back and put his feet on the console. He closed his eyes and dozed.

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The alarm sounded an insistent bleep, increasing in volume the longer it went unacknowledged.

Jack Lawson snapped awake.

"Well hello, what are you?" he murmured, pulling his headphones straight. Tapping on his keyboard he rotated the array to face the source of the anomaly.

He had seen nothing like the data scrolling past his eyes.

He keyed his station's com-link.

No answer.

He keyed it again.

"What?" Captain Ty Moore's groggy voice came on the line.

"I found something, Cap," he said.

"So log it. I'll review it tomorrow."

"Ty, this is big; it's something I have never seen before."

"Are you telling me you can't classify a system? Jesus Lawson, why is the company paying you the big bucks?"

"That's my point; it's not a system. I have gravimetric distortion yet negligible EM emissions. I can't make sense of it. It is artificial and not of human origin."

A pause.

"I'll be up."

Jack closed the link and called up a series of advanced filters. A few clicks on his touchscreen started the data washing and refinement process.

An hour later Moore made it onto the flight deck. A dark-skinned bear of a man, so tall he had to duck through the hatch. He wore his greying hair in a severe crew cut. His expression alternated between scowl and smile. Rosa arrived a few seconds later, as did Denny, the slightly built, fast-talking engineer; his blond dreadlocks swayed as he walked.

"Carson?" Moore asked.

"Figured I would let him lie in bed longer. You're the Captain; you can wake him."

Jack gave Moore a printout of the raw data. Moore silently studied it, his lips moving as he read.

"This is not a glitch? You ran a diagnostic?"

"For fuck's sake, Cap. You want to tell me how to suck eggs?" Jack snapped.

Rosa winced. Ty Moore had a foul temper; it took little for him to lose it and throw the toys out of his pram.

Moore glared at him with small dark eyes hovering beneath his heavy brow.

"Sorry, I'm..." Jack started.

“It’s okay,” Moore said, a look of realisation dawning on his face. “This object is large?”

“Three astronomical units in diameter. I detected planets orbiting beyond it. Three gas giants, the largest has 22 moons; there are atmospheres on three. They’re non-viable, all colder than a witch’s tit.”

Moore sat in his command chair, studying the printout.

“You think this is what I think it is?” Moore asked.

“A Dyson Sphere is my guess...” Jack replied, trying to hide the uncertainty in his voice. Dyson Spheres were theoretical megastructures constructed around stars to collect energy. It was technology hundreds, possibly thousands, of years ahead of humanity’s capability.

Moore gave a ghost of a smile.

“That’s what it looks like. I’ll be damned; the client was right.”

“You mean this wasn’t a speculative trip? You knew we would find something? What the fuck, Ty? We’ve been out here for months. If you had shared that little insight I might have been able to cut the search time.”

“Carson told me the client had a lead on something big. When he told me where we were going, I asked why. Guess what he said?”

Jack stared at him.

“He told me not to ask, Jack. So I didn’t. That’s why I had nothing to tell you.”

Rosa shrugged and slipped into the pilot’s seat. She clipped on her headset.

“Different day, same shit,” she muttered.

Moore frowned and nodded. They had been with the company a long time and knew the score.

Jack sent a vector to the NaviComp. He swivelled his seat and gave Rosa a wink before turning to Moore.

“So my finder’s fee...”

Moore glared at him.

“You’ll get what you signed on for, just like the rest of us.”

Denny Franks slapped Jack on the shoulder.

“Dude you crack me up. You would be a richer man if you had a galactic dollar for every line of bull Carson fed you.”

Jack shared a high five with the ship’s engineer.

“True that.”

“How long, Rosa?” Moore asked.

“Seventy-two hours,” she replied.

“Okay. Keep me posted,” Moore said as he left the flight deck.

“Hey Cap!” Jack called after him. “You want me to tell Carson?”

“Let him sleep. I can’t deal with his bullshit on an empty stomach.” Moore’s voice faded out as he headed for the galley.

Jack sipped his cold coffee and turned his attention to the console. The numbers were astonishing.

Forget looking for another job, I won’t need one.

