

# ***BLACK SWAN PLANET***

*Written by:*

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***FREE SAMPLE – CHAPTER ONE***



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## CHAPTER ONE

### PINATAS, PONIES, AND PRESENTS

I had begged, borrowed, bribed, and blackmailed my way into an invitation for the Emperor's Private Birthday Ball on his own personal star-cruiser. Figured I'd crash the party with my nearly invisible dust-cameras and show the over-taxed, miserable populace how Caligula celebrates his birthday. I'd exhibit a shocked reaction to the fine wines being served at an open bar, the Antrusian caviar by the bucketful, various delicacies, fancy dress, and perhaps some dignitaries sampling the happy gas that's illegal on all worlds of the empire but not covered by laws while space-borne. I'd explain how much it costs to transport all the notables from the twenty-seven worlds to this one party and close out with "It's good to be the Emperor!"

All this broadcasted on a live, holovision feed to the galaxy. My fans would eat it up.

After all, that's what I do. For I'm Raka Varoule, and my show, *Raka Live!*, is the seventh most popular investigative reporting program in my demographic and time-slot, with notable popularity within mental health institutions with locked-out video controls. Detractors say that's because my program immediately follows *Calming Meditation with the Stars*, but my agent insists that I connect with this crowd in particular.

As I approached the main ballroom door, I heard a strange sound, much like the sound of an elephant's trumpet call coming from inside. I took a deep breath and tapped my shoulder to awaken the cameras. A confirmation signal flashed in my eye reading: Live Broadcast.

"This is Raka Varoule, and here is what your emperor does with your tax dollars!"

When I opened the door, I stared in stunned silence, unable to speak as I took in the vision of the most disgusting display of depravity one could ever imagine. This wasn't an X-rated scene. The mere concept of what I saw would make a pornographer blush, swear an oath of celibacy, and live as a eunuch for the rest of his life. Before me wasn't a ménage à trois; this was a ménage à two hundred. Emperor Caligula's pale, naked bulbousness was on full display in the center of the room lying on a bed of what looked like pure cocaine. A tube from a huge hookah pipe connected to several lifetime supplies of hospital-grade happy gas hanging from his lip while a rubber-suited dominatrix spanked him with a long, leather whip cracking in the air. An unnatural orgy of animal, mineral, vegetable, and device surrounded him.

As an elephant passed me, I recognized the source of the trumpet. A 'three-legged' midget chased a chimpanzee that wore a pink ballerina's tutu. To call the monkey pantsless was more or less true. The monkey *was* wearing leather chaps, but by their very nature, they were by definition, assless. Naked acrobats, archbishops, and anacondas in various acts danced and squirmed around, defying logic and human limits. Spread across the floor were the widest selection of illegal drugs, paraphernalia, and contraband devices with functions my brain couldn't fathom. All of this was being broadcasted across the galaxy in 3-D holovision during the family-viewing block.

While I stood there dumbfounded, an alarm pierced through the din of the party. People and animals startled as the voice of the ship's computer announced, "Unauthorized broadcast transmission detected in the main ballroom!"

The emperor struggled to his feet, fell flat on his face, and let loose a thunderous expulsion of flatulence.

The computer voice continued, "Location of transmission found."

Dozens of purple targeting lasers pointed at me, and every eye in the room turned my way. I knew I had to say something memorable as these would likely be my last words. My brain kicked into overdrive. "Oops! My bad."

Caligula's royal guard stormed the room, dressed in their full silver battle regalia with the red, yellow, green, and blue stripes of the Empire emblazoned across their chests. Their rail weapons were drawn, and their laser-sights fixed on various parts of my anatomy. They generally targeted my chest, although one repeatedly strayed toward my crotch until one guard elbowed his neighbor to raise his aim. One shot would tear a hole clean through my body. *I'm doomed.*

The emperor stumbled back to his feet with the aid of two royal guards and grabbed one of their rail guns.

“I’ll take the shot!” Caligula boomed, raising the weapon to his shoulder.

I dropped to my knees, my voice cracking into a falsetto scream. “Please don’t kill me! Oh, please no!” I sobbed as a warm stream of liquid ran down my leg. As I faced death straight in the eye, my eyes blurred from tears, and my gaze darted from one guard to the next.

A high-pitched scream pierced through the air, and I caught the motion of a chimpanzee swinging from a crystal chandelier, his pink tutu rustling in the air. He launched himself at the Emperor, knocking the gun from his hand, shrieking, screaming, and bouncing on Caligula’s head. The Emperor fell face down into the mountain of cocaine causing a dust cloud of white powder to explode everywhere. The royal guardsmen turned their guns toward the monkey, and *then* something surprising happened.

The dominatrix emerged with an oversized hammer and took a mighty swing at the regulator assembly of happy gas canisters. A loud hiss escaped from the metal, and a huge cloud of blue gas vapor steamed out at high pressure. For a moment, I smelled a mixture of banana, burning rubber, and rotting eggs.



When I awoke, I stared into the mesmerizing hazel eyes of an angel that drew my soul into a sea of intense infinity. My heart fluttered as a sense of euphoria came over me. I didn’t want to break the spell of her gaze, but my eyes caught a glimpse of her pale skin that looked too magical to touch and too perfect for words. Her hair flawlessly sculpted into a curl framing a lovely oval face, centered by a tiny nose with a touch of an upward turn to the tip. Her hands balled into fists she used to gently ease me from my slumber by pounding them into my face.

“Wake up, you idiot!” she demanded in a husky voice.

A stream of blood dripped from my nose as I tried to stand, but I fell back into semi-consciousness, unable to lift my own weight. I fought back the black curtains trying to overwhelm my vision. Luckily for me, she had a strong back and flipped me onto her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“This one better be worth saving,” she said, carrying me away. The jostling made my stomach turn, and I fought back the urge to purge. The chimp led the way to the launch bay and into a shuttlecraft opulently decorated in a style I’d call tacky-elegance. She dropped me, face-first, onto an Imperial seal. My clouded mind started to piece things together. *This is the emperor’s personal shuttle!*

I struggled to my feet, staggering into the shuttlecraft’s cockpit and into an argument of epic proportion. A tall and skinny, dark-skinned Rastafarian argued with the dominatrix about programming the shuttle’s destination while the chimpanzee jumped on the control board screeching loudly and motioning with his hands.

“Don’t be a ginnygog, mon! We go to Katochia. My cousin set us up good,” the Rastafarian said, reaching for the controls. The monkey hissed at him and bared his pointed white teeth.

“Katochia? That drug den will be swarming with contraband agents after what just happened,” the dominatrix said. “We have to go somewhere they wouldn’t think of. A border planet without much influence from the empire.”

“Where you thinking, whip lady?”

“Eclipse.”

“You crazy! That hunk of ice got nothing but Feds and fuckers. At least Katochia got ganja.”

“Can I offer a suggestion?” I asked.

“No!” they chimed in unison. Even the chimp narrowed its eyebrows and snarled at me.

I ignored their response. “We need to go somewhere, now. Make the first jump and get some space behind us. That’s the plan, right? Get away from this mess and figure out what to do? Can we do that and talk about our destination after we’re away?”

The Rastafarian flipped his dreadlocks. “The dunku has a point. We need to go now, wherever we go.”

“Fine. We make a quick emergency jump, and while the ship’s computer determines where we ended up, we’ll decide where we’re going,” the woman said. She took the controls and expertly launched the shuttlecraft into the vacuum of space.

As we accelerated hard, I slid backward into the rear wall of the cockpit, unable to raise a hand.

When the acceleration burst stopped, she raised the safety cover for the emergency jump button. She slapped the button down. The Chronos Drive spooled up. For an instant within the ship, time no longer existed.

This was my first superluminal jump in a small ship. Commercial ships are so smooth you might not notice the jump unless you happened to be looking outside a window and the star-field suddenly changed. In a shuttlecraft, the Chronos Drive is barely big enough to create a complete time-pausing field around the ship. It takes all available power. I found the effect sickening. One side of my body was immobile and dead, and the other was still active and alive.

People react to this effect differently. Some have a sense of doom, others of euphoria. Many become nauseous. Unfortunately, on this day, I learned monkeys react to it with projectile vomiting.

I had an instant as the Chronos Drive shut down when I became aware of my own existence. I couldn't move, and right then the monkey puked all over me. *If I ever smell a banana again it will be too soon!* My stomach decided out was better than in, and I retched furiously, falling to my knees.

Once I re-gathered my wits, several facts became apparent. I was suddenly a wanted man, exposing Emperor 'off with their heads and despoil the corpses' Caligula as a freaky, drugged-up pervert. I was trapped on a small shuttlecraft with two people I didn't know or trust, a chimpanzee wearing assless chaps under a pink tutu, and no plan. The reek of the chimp's vomit covered my clothing. My first priority became finding somewhere to clean up and put on some fresh clothes.

The shuttle had one room clearly designed for Caligula which took up most of the shuttle's space with a mammoth bed, his clothing and personal belongings, lockers, and some entertainment nodes. The rest of the ship was just big enough to sleep four separately while a galley kitchen, food storage lockers, a small bathroom, life support, and the Chronos Drive filled up everything else. I searched around and found a folded bathrobe in a cabinet. I peeled off my clothes, dumped them into a laundry chute, and took a quick shower. A few minutes later, I emerged and reached for the bathrobe. The chimpanzee, no longer wearing the tutu but still in the assless chaps, snatched the bathrobe from the wall-hook and ran off with it.

"Come back here, you little..." I said, watching the monkey jump into the dominatrix's arms. He screamed, pointing at me, bent over to touch his own ass, then wagged a finger back at me.

There I stood, naked, having just chased this monkey, and he was telling this gorgeous creature I had tried to touch him. *Why do things like this keep happening to me?*

"Really?" she asked, her face contorting. "You couldn't even wait until we knew where we are before trying to molest the damn monkey? What's wrong with you?"

"This isn't how it looks. I swear, I never touched the monkey," I said.

The chimpanzee hugged her and acted terrified. He made a spanking action with his hairy hand and frowned so low, even a clown would cry.

"Look, can you at least hand me the robe?"

She looked at me, glanced down at my crotch, and laughed. "You must be freezing."

"Give me the robe."

She curled her lip. "Fine. I think you scared little Marco enough with that...thing."

"He stole the robe! I never even touched him!"

"The bad man is calling you a liar, Marco."

Marco bared his teeth at me, laughed, then scurried off out of sight.

"So now I know the monkey's name. I'm assuming you know mine?"

"I know *of* you. You're that pathetic loser on the holovision. Some investigative reporter, right? But I have you at a disadvantage, and since you already seem disadvantaged enough —" her gaze dropped again to my groin. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Maven. Maven Blackheart."

I covered up. This wasn't going well at all. *Maven Blackheart. If an angel had a name, it would be Maven Blackheart.* I cleared my throat. "Raka Varoule, at your service."

She let loose a laugh I'll never forget. "Tell me, why might I ever want *your* service?"

I noticed an ever-so-slight glimmer in her eye and a small smile cross her lips. My heart thumped, my hands started to sweat, and I blushed. I needed a good comeback line. "Because my service is good?" *I did not just say that! Oh, my gods, I did. Why didn't I just say, "Because I'm a total tool?" or "Because you're hotter than the monkey?"*

Maven rolled her eyes. "You'd better be good for something, or I'll space your ass. Do you have any idea of what you cost me with your stunt?"

“My stunt? It was an investigative report. It’s what I do.”

“And I was doing what I do. You ruined fourteen months of my work. But we can talk about that later. We need to figure out a plan. The emperor will send his goons after us, and we can’t outrun them in this ship. Our only hope is to go where they can’t find us.”

I heard a scream coming from the other end of the ship. “Holy bumboclot, I’ve found the mother lode!”

Maven and I both ran toward Caligula’s suite. When we got there, the Rastafarian wore the biggest grin I’d ever seen.

“We got ganja, opium, cocaine, heroin, an’ Antrusian ‘shrooms. All fruits ripe, I’m tellin’ ya! I found neural stimulators, virtual real’ty ultra-porn, transcendental modifiers, and Margonian toad secretions. This stuff is bad like yaz. You could stone an army!” He turned toward us as Marco bounded into the room and buried his nose into an open brick of cocaine. The Rastafarian ignored Marco’s actions. “I’m being a dang-fool. We haven’t met yet. I’m Nicholai.” His eyes never came up to meet ours. He was too busy looking at the stash. “I run ganja fo’ da’ Emperor.”

“Raka Varoule. Investigative reporter.”

“Maven Blackheart.”

“And what do you do, whip-lady?”

“What I do is my business,” Maven said, her eyebrows spiking. We shared a moment of awkward silence.

“Apparently the monkey is called Marco,” I said.

As soon as I said ‘Marco,’ the chimp raised up from his brick of cocaine. His face was white, and his beady eyes stared me down. He pounced, springing from one side of the room. He flew through the low artificial gravity with unnatural speed, grace, and ferocity while we all ducked and covered our heads. Marco screamed a simian chant I could only interpret as ‘I freaking love cocaine! Watch out for me because I have way too much energy for this small room! I’m bounding from wall-to-wall and will bounce off your head! My nails are sharp, my teeth are long and nasty, and I’m completely out of control. Look at that! It’s shiny, and I can pick it up and throw it at you, and wow! It broke into a million pieces and was really loud, so I need to shout louder. If I bounce really hard, I can smack my head into the ceiling with a loud crack!’

He fell to the floor like a bird shot from the sky.

“Is the little bugger dead?” Nicholai asked.

Maven edged closer to Marco. “No, he’s breathing.”

“He’ll have one hell of a headache,” I said.

Nicholai and Maven rolled their eyes.

She picked the monkey off the floor and laid him on the bed, gently placing a fluffy pillow under the chimp’s head. “Maybe we should lock the stash back up? At least keep Marco from the cocaine. Then we need to meet in the cockpit and figure out a plan.”

“Let’s meet in fifteen minutes,” I said.

“Fine. But don’t think you’re in charge around here.”



I searched for some clothes only find a few choices, and none of them were appealing. The emperor wore clothing about thirty sizes too big for me. My other option was some see-through lingerie. My palms started sweating knowing I couldn’t look like this in front of Maven. I knew there had to be more. I finally found a closet containing a silver Royal Guard battle uniform, emblazoned with the rainbow stripes of the Empire.

When I put it on, it seemed loose, but once I fastened the last connector, the suit compressed and auto-adjusted to fit me. Perhaps it was a little too perfect for my preference because I lacked the Kevlar-plate undergarments the real guards wear. Prediction: chafing inevitable.

The suit had a variety of controls built into the gauntlets I had no clue how to use. I started pressing buttons in random patterns and found some combinations stiffened the material and pressurized the suit. Another triggered the communication link to the Imperial Security Network. Something told me that might come in handy at some point.

When I arrived at the cockpit, I found Nicholai already there, but Maven hadn't arrived yet. He busied himself fiddling with the communication systems, listening to a news update. Maven walked in wearing what looked like a sheet tied into a sarong. As she settled in, Nicholai pointed toward the communicator:

*"...dead or alive, substantial reward for any information leading to the capture and decapitation of three subjects who stole the emperor's shuttlecraft. Reward reduced if executed prior to presentation to the emperor. Suspects are identified as Raka Varoule, Investigative Reporter for Albatross Broadcasting Company, Maven Blackbeart, occupation unknown, and Nicholai Anterwon, occupation unknown. Suspects may be accompanied by a chimpanzee. If found, the reward can be collected at any imperial outpost. This concludes this special broadcast, brought to you by Vibratron Prescription Undergarments. Vibratron is really neat; they put a smile in your seat. We're all wearing Vibratron! Ask your doctor if Vibratron brand vibrating prescription undergarments are right for you."*

"Oh shee-it!" Nicholai said.

"This is not good," Maven said. "We can't outrun the broadcast. It's simultaneous throughout the galaxy."

"Actually, that's a common misunderstanding. We say that the broadcast is live across the galaxy, but not quite," I said.

"So, what are we talking about, a few seconds delay?" Maven asked, fidgeting with the controls. "That's negligible."

"It can be several months delay through the galaxy. Hear me out. I'm in broadcasting, so I know what I'm talking about. We use two different methods to communicate through the galaxy. The first, and by far most expensive, is a paired quantum transmission. There are two communication nodes with matching quantum systems. What is sent from one node is received at the second at precisely the same time regardless of the distance between them. These nodes are set at the major hubs throughout the twenty-seven worlds. There are only twelve of these nodes in our broadcast system. They say the reason for this is the quantum particles have to be manufactured —"

"Get on with it!"

"Right. The major distances are covered immediately by broadcasts between nodes, but minor distances are covered by good old laser transmission slowed way down to the speed of light. So, in theory, a ship jumping from one sector to another could beat its own launch broadcast message as long as it jumped past the last of the quantum nodes." I paused, looking for any kind of acknowledgment and couldn't help but smile. "This is broadcasting 101."

"Where are the nodes, exactly?" Maven asked.

"Obviously, that's an Imperial secret. If someone knew the exact locations, the nodes could be interfered with or destroyed." I raised my hand and rubbed my chin. "A person with years of broadcasting experience could infer the rough positions of outer nodes by comparing date stamps on broadcasts and then on the review numbers as they come back in. Some of the border worlds take months to get the numbers back in. Until now, I never really thought it important."

"You may just have some value after all, little man," Maven said. "This ship is just large enough for a Chronos Drive, and its computer is barely adequate to pinpoint our location in space. It was never built to travel between worlds. The jump system was designed for emergencies, but we can line ourselves up and point in a direction to go. When we jump, we'll travel approximately in that direction and cover an estimated amount of distance. The way things are looking right now, it's going to take a solid twenty-four hours for the generator to handle another jump."

"Just drop me off at Katochia," Nicholai said. "I'll take da' stash and be gone. I'm da' Emperor's ganja runner; da' dunka will spare me once I talk to him and give 'im a *special* deal."

I shook my head. What was he thinking? "Kotochia is not where we want to go. We get logs back from them in minutes after a broadcast. There's definitely a node near Kotochia. We need to head for the border planets. Maybe even toward the barbarian worlds."

"Barbarian worlds? They be cannibals there," Nicholai spat.

“Yeah, and deadly walrungs, mountain-sized rats, and poisonous, microscopic roaches, too,” Maven mocked. “Those are just stories. They are ‘barbarian’ in the sense that the empire doesn’t control them. They’re so far from galactic core, there’s no profit in trading with them. They aren’t truly barbarians.”

“Nobody knows for sure,” I said. “During the early days of the empire, everyone expected continual growth. The StarSeed program was set up to terraform habitable planets, and the planets nearest to the core were seeded first and later colonized. They repeated this process until we established the twenty-seven worlds. But constant expansion of the empire was unsustainable. The last few outer worlds were left alone.”

“You’re full of drad,” Nicholai said, “No knowledge of da empire! That is a dream, mon!”

Maven cracked her knuckles. “He could be right. I’ve heard the same stories. Maybe the barbarian worlds are just like us but neglected by the empire? There wouldn’t be a node near them, would there?”

“Of course not. Why spend billions on a quantum node for a neglected sector of space? The further we jump toward barbarian planets, the more likely we are to be ahead of the signal or perhaps even to permanently escape.”

Maven’s face wrinkled. “Then what? Say goodbye to the empire forever?” Her eyes looked up as if she were thinking about this. Had she been thinking about any of this? “But it’s not like we are flush with options. Besides, my career is dead and gone now anyway.”

“And what career is that?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

“If I ever think you need to know what I do, I’ll tell you.” Maven’s eyes cut me down like a sickle through tall grass.

“Right. Well, I know that you have the basic skills to launch a shuttle craft from a capital ship, so as far as I’m concerned, you’re a pilot. Can you plot a course to the barbarian worlds?”

“If someone can tell me where they are, I can plot a course. But it’s going to be a series of jump, recalculate, jump again, and adjust again. We may overshoot our target and have to backtrack. In a ship designed for this, it would be no problem. But with this ship, it’s going to be tough to get anywhere.”

I could tell by their look on their faces they didn’t like this. Not one bit. “And of course, we don’t know exactly where we’re going. But I still have access to my communication logs. Maybe we can find something in the historical record to give us a clue. All I’ll be able to come up with is the best guess.”

“Your best guess better be good, little man. You got us into this mess,” Maven bit her lip. “In the meantime, I’ll take an inventory of what we have. We need to know how long we can support ourselves. I may be able to help out if I can crack Caligula’s code.”

“And I’ll take inventory of da stash. I know how much this stuff is worth.”

“What about the monkey?” I asked.

Her eyes glared back. “Marco does what he wants, and there’s no controlling him. He’s got a way of proving himself worthwhile over time.”

I snorted. “I’ll believe that when I see it. He’s a menace.”

“Don’t forget he saved your life. You know... Back there, with the Emperor.”

I laughed. “You think he meant to do that? He probably had too much cocaine. Or maybe the midget scared him. Could be any number of explanations. He *wasn’t* trying to save me.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Marco has always proven to be worth keeping around,” she said.

“Fine. But keep him away from me.”



I found a communications terminal and logged into my account. I sorted messages and checked time stamps. A short time later, I had a list of the planets that took the longest time to respond. I called up a map of the Galactic Empire and started marking locations. In general, I found what I expected. The outer worlds took longer than the inner worlds. But no clear pattern emerged, and there wasn’t an indication of where “barbarian worlds” were. I pounded my fists on the table, and my guard’s suit buzzed. I looked at the gauntlet and saw a tiny red light flashing. When I touched it, the communicator came alive:

*“This is Lieutenant Morrow. We have positive identification. The Emperor’s shuttlecraft has been located. Load EMP missiles.”*

*“EMP’s? Why not tact-nukes?” Came a response.*

*“Remember boys, we get more if the emperor removes their heads himself. Missiles locked...”*

I ran to the cockpit, dove for the emergency jump button, and slammed it down. The wave of reality shifted, and a shower of monkey puke rained on me in super slow motion. The star-field changed.

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