

Chapter 2

“Empress on the bridge! Stand at attention!” heralded the sergeant of the guard.

The Empress may have been of small stature but she commanded an imposing figure. Everyone on the bridge stood at attention, facing towards her but with her heads down in a mark of respect to one of the members of the royal family. However, it went deeper than that. Unlike the other members of the family, the Empress (her unofficial title), had joined the service on her own merits and had earned her fellow officers their genuine respect.

She raised her hand. The crew relaxed and went back to their stations.

“Sergeant, I said there was no need of the fanfare.”

“You did, mi lady, however Master Prime overturned ...”

“Did my dear brother explain why?”

The sergeant paused.

“Sergeant, I assure you, there will be no consequences for repeating the words of our .. Commander in Chief.” The words sounded bitter in her mouth.

The sergeant swallowed hard. “He said...” The Empress gave a nod for him to continue. “He said that you needed to be reminded of your station.”

The bridge gasped. The Empress looked around the red and gold adorned bridge that screamed power and influence. The crew awaited her response. They knew there wasn't any love lost between the siblings. When her brother became de-facto leader after their father fell ill, she was livid. She was the eldest after all, but tradition still stated that the line of power went down to the closest male heir. Her anger nearly caused a war with their Frogilian neighbours.

She rolled her eyes so hard that half the sector caused of heard it.

“Well, remind me to thank Master Prime for his reminder.” She looked over at the officer standing by the command chair. “Captain Lee’dur, can I see you in your office please.”

The captain nodded. “Yes, admiral. I mean Mistress Se’cond. I mean Empress.”

She smiled. The captain was twice as big as her, but she knew he feared her. “Come along. I don’t have all day for you to decide what to call me.”

The captain was about to respond but thought better of it and followed her inside.

The door closed behind him as he entered.

“Mainframe, black out mode!” she ordered.

“Blackout mode initiated,” replied the mainframe.

“Your acting skills are up there with the rest of them, Lee.”

The captain bowed.

“Brother is absolutely ridiculous. He hates the rules as much as I do, but all of a sudden their necessary. He’s such a hypocrite.”

“True, but as long as he plays the tradition card he has favour with the powerful members of the council.”

“A bunch of crusty old men. How did we let such a bunch get a stranglehold of our Empire? We’re being grounded into mediocrity.”

“I heard they were pushing for this meeting with the Planetary Collective.”

"It's not a meeting, it's a peace summit. They want to send cargo ships through our territory so they can cut us off from our trading partners. They want us to with and die like some slug." She banged her fist on the captain's table, leaving a sizable crack on the transparent surface.

"Surely, he's not going to agree to go. The people would riot if they knew we were negotiating with the enemy," the captain inquired.

The Empress looked out the porthole. The stars seemed dimmer than normal, as if the energy of the galaxy had been turned down. She sighed.

"I don't know Lee." She didn't turn to face him. "Our people are suffering out there because of my inept brother and his council puppet masters.

"Something needs to be done." He placed his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. She reciprocated the gesture by holding his hand. He brushed her long wavy red hair aside and kissed her neck. This made her smile.

"Oh Lee. I wish we had time for that," she brushed his hand away and stepped away from him. "However, as you said, something needs to be done. Something needs to change.

"Beep, Beep!"

"We're in blackout mode. We shouldn't be receiving any calls."

The Empress gave a deep sigh and pressed the accept button.

"Oh, brother of mine, what pleasure do you honour with me today."

"You will refer to me by my proper title." Her brother demanded.

"I'm sorry, Master Prime what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

"I'm here to inform you that I will be attending the conference on Isothorpe in the Emperor's place." Things were worse than she imagined.

Chapter 3

“Beep Beep!”

Commander Belle open her eyes to see the bed empty next to her. She smiled. Just how it's supposed to be; wham bam thank you Commander. She didn't like the awkward why are you still here conversation.

“Beep Beep!”

She stretched over the bed. One of the advantages of being off ship was that she could have a bit of fun without half the ship gossiping. That was always a headache, especially in her position.

“Beep Beep!”

Unfortunately, this didn't include being uncontactable.

“Computer, who's calling?”

“It's Executive Assistant Franay,” the monotoned computer replied.

“What the hell does she want? Computer accept, audio only.”

The computer clicked. “How can I help you Ms Franay?”

“I was told you were one of the PCFs best and brightest. I see their standards are slipping.”

“I'm sorry, did you wake me up early just to insult me?”

“You're still in bed?! How unprofessional. I'll to speak to your Commanding Officer.

“What? Computer, time please?”

“The time is 0835 local time.”

“Oh shoot! My apologies, it would appear that I forgot to set the computer to wake me up.”

“You have an hour to get yourself together Commander and get me my report or I will get your Captain to assign someone more professional!”

“Oh fuck!” she thought, “The report.” But what she did say was “I’ll be there.”

The assistant ended the call.

“Shit, shit, shit shit.” She mumbled. “Damn, Lily! One night stands are for shore leaves!” She jumped out of bed and took a hyper shower. Well, a normal shower but the hyper makes it sound cooler. As she went to put on a fresh uniform she noticed her pad on the bed. There was a message on the front.

THANKS FOR A GREAT NIGHT! I HOPE YOU HAD FUN. YOU MIGHT NEED THIS TODAY.

At the end of the message was an attachment. She opened it. A wall of formatted text appeared on screen.

“It’s the report!”

Lilianna took a double take. Did her one-night stand really do her work for her. The first question was why? The better question...how?

Something didn’t feel right. She picked up her comm badge.

“Mcguffin this is Commander Belle”

No answer.

"I repeat Mcguffin, this is Commander Belle."

Again, no answer. She took her badge to check, however it didn't take long to realise that it was a fake. A good one, too. That bastard.

"Computer, hail the PCFS Mcguffin."

"Authorisation Required!" the computer requested.

"Belle 31472 P I"

"Request granted."

The Mcguffin's bridge appeared on screen. Captain Myres was sitting on the Captain's chair, looking perplexed.

"Commander, can we help you with something?"

How was she going to explain this? That she had been compromised on one of the most important diplomatic missions of the century?

"Commander, is everything ok?"

She took a deep breath. Belle knew deep down that admitting the mistake was better than getting caught in a web of lies. Her ego should not interfere with the fate of the galaxy, no matter the consequences.

"My COMM badge has been stolen, can you track it?"

"Stolen, how? By who?" The captain gave a nod to one of the officers off screen.

"By a guy," she took a deep breath. "By a guy I met last night."

"Yikes!" came a voice off screen.

The Captain's face held in a smile. "And how did this guy get the opportunity to take your comm badge?"

"Do we really need to do this?" she thought. Thankfully she was interrupted.

"Captain, I'm picking up the signal. It's in the city's South East. Looks like it's heading to the diplomatic docking station."

Without hesitation Commander Belle picked up her weapon and headed out the door. "I'll cut him off before he gets there."

Before the Captain could respond, she was already out of the picture.

"Well, you can cut out the transmission now lieutenant."

"Do you think the Commander ..."

"Lieutenant!" the captain ordered.

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It had taken some convincing, however, the Commander managed to get access to the emergency transporter. It worked similar to how starships travelled faster than light, but on a much smaller scale. It would push the body into subspace where time and space folded in on itself, making the travel between two points that much faster. However, it had its dangers and was only used in extreme emergencies such moving troops to combat invasions or moving diplomats to safety after assassination attempts. She was able to spin it as a diplomatic emergency.

"Are you ready?" asked Fidorian technician. Thankfully they had their own translator otherwise all that Belle would have heard was a series of barks and howls.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Push it!"

Her body began to be pulled backwards. To Commander Belle it felt like she was being vacuum packed like dehydrated rations. There was a flash of black, red and white. Before she had a chance to blink, she had made to the other side.

“You alright, Commander?” asked the Catosian technician again with a translator to hide it’s meows and hisses.

“Where am I?” she gasped, still trying to catch her breath.

“At the diplomatic shuttle bay. Is everything ok?”

“No, it isn’t.” She asked the technician to update the McGuffin before she ran off to catch the son of a bitch.

“The docking station is on the left.”

Belle turned around and ran to the left. She kept running until she got to Bay 13 where her shuttle was still docked. She was relieved to see it was still there