

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.

The Empress's face was one of disbelief. To even suggest negotiating with a sworn enemy can be seen as treasonous at best.

"Don't give me that look. You know damn well why we need to negotiate."

"But our forefathers..."

"Our forefathers were descendants of slaves who rose up against their masters. They had a reason to be angry; to mistrust others. We don't and our stubbornness against the other is going to end us."

"Our people, our father will not stand for this."

"The Emperor is in no state to stand for anything and as for our people, maybe you should get off your ship and have a look around. They need something a little more than the glory of victory."

"Your falling under the PC trap."

"I'm not going to argue with you. The decision is done."

The screen shut off.

"You see Lee?" she began. "My dear brother is a lost cause. Something will need to be done and soon!"

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. Her 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.

.....

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. She went over to the com panel.

“I’m at the Bay, please unlock the access door!”

“Your commbadge should be able to unlock that for you.”

“It was stolen. You know the whole emergency thing?”

“Oh yeah. The how do I know it’s you. It says here that you’re already inside your shuttle.”

“That’s the thief you idiot. You just saw me literally two minutes ago.”

“Hey!” the technician was clearly offended by the remark.

“Look my ship is about to be stolen unless you open that door. I don’t think your superiors would appreciate a diplomatic incident. We can always take the negotiations to the Trader’s League.”

“All right, all right. Don’t get your yarn tangled,” quoted the Catarian.

As the doors unlocked, the engines began to glow.

“He’s about to fly off. Lock down the clamps.”

“He’s overridden the system. He’s relocking the doors.”

“Over my dead body.”

Commander Belle pulled out her weapon and blasted a hole in the access door. It took another blast set at maximum to get through the main shuttle access. However, before she could hop on the shuttle began to take off.

“You’re not getting away that easy.”

In a display that would have made 20th/21st century human screen actor Tom Cruise proud, she leapt onto the outer hull and held onto its outer struts. The shuttle began to rise faster towards the open bay doors. The inertia almost flew her straight off, but she was stubborn, just like her parents.

She managed to pull herself up towards the gaping hole that was the main entrance to the shuttle. The shield systems were already in place. She was stuck between an EM field and a high place and it wouldn’t be long before she either lost grip or lost consciousness or both.

“Shit!” she thought.

The Commander looked above to see the man from last night, standing at the hole.

“Are you fucking nuts?”

She couldn’t reply as all her concentration was being spent just holding on.

“You humans are awfully stubborn, I’ll give you that.”

The mystery man, Milton, turned off the shields and pulled her in. The commander collapsed on the shuttle's floor.

"Weapon systems have been locked."

"Bloody hell."

Chapter 4

Billiam was out of breath when he reached the capital city's defence headquarters. Something major was going down. He could see a frantic buzz of activity. The displays, which lit up the room with an orange glow, were tracking something in the air space above the city. That much he could see.

"The shuttle is entering the stratosphere and accelerating," shouted one defence operator.

"Five hundred metres per second," went the second. "Five hundred and fifty metres."

"Colonel, the McGuffin is asking about the state of their Commander," went the third.

Billiam could see the Colonel considering his response.

"Inform them that she entered the shuttle a few minutes ago. We don't know any more than that," the Colonel ordered. "Ask them if they know who the hijacker is, and get an engineering team down to Bay 13 and find out what happened. I want to know how they managed to hack our systems effortlessly. "

The Colonel saw Billiam standing in the entry way.

"Billiam, get your ass over here," the Colonel ordered.

Billiam was surprised to here him say a human idiom like that. Tra'duers were a little uncomfortable referencing certain parts of the body. He went over to him.

"Billiam, do you know much of this Commander Lilianna Belle from the McGuffin?"

"Hmmm. Lily?" he pondered. "What has Lily got to do with this?"

The Colonel caught him up to speed. Billiam gave a smirk. Looks like Officer Lily Perfect screwed up royally. A little taste of her own medicine.

“Well...” he began.

“Colonel, the Empire Flagship Victory has just entered the system and is requesting to speak to Central Command,” the first officer interrupted.

“Does Central Command know what’s going on?”

“Yes, they were informed of the situation the same time we were.”

“Well transfer the ship to them and let them handle it.” The Colonel returned to Billiam. “So, the Commander?”

“Well, she’s the golden child of the new PCF apparently and usually a goodie two shoes. However, in saying that she is a decent officer. This is out of character for her.”

“It would seem so. Now her carelessness is about to cause a diplomatic incident.”

On the monitors the shuttle was climbing fast. Much faster than any shuttle Billiam had ever seen. This didn’t look right, it didn’t feel right. Then Billiam saw it, another vessel approaching the area.

“Is that the Victory?” he pointed out.

“Yes!” came a voice in his ear. “Watch, Captain Dirk as you witness the raw power of the universe itself.”

Billiam looked around him to see where the voice had come from. There was no one standing near him. They were too busy monitoring the situation, including the Colonel.

“Tell the Victory to back off. We need a clean shot with the tractor, as soon as we get that back online,” he ordered. “Tell me how on Isothorpe did he manage to do that, too.”

Billiam felt a sharp pain in his arm which made him spasm. His vision began to blur.

“Let, it begin”

“The McGuffin is moving into a defence position.”

“Tell them if they fire their weapons they are in violation of the neutrality of the ITU and we will respond in kind. Tell that to the Victory too.”

RUMBLE

Billiam felt the ground shake beneath him. Then again. The walls were shaking as well.

“What’s happening Lieutenant?”

“We’ve got a seismic disturbance. I’m not sure where it’s coming from,” replied the second officer.

But Billiam could see it. On the display, something appeared near the escaping shuttle.

“The Universe OPENS! Witness it’s power.”

Billiam grasped his head in pain. What was going on? He was starting to hear voices, the world was shaking around him. Did he drink too much the night before? Was this all an hallucination?

“Sir, something has just appeared above the city, five hundred kilometres above the city.”

The officer switched the display. On the main screen was a section of atmosphere being sucked in on itself, similar to how light gets pulled into a black hole.

“What am I looking at here?” asked the Colonel.

“I believe it’s a rip in space and time. I don’t know how that’s possible.”

“Well, what else could go wrong this morning.”

“Sir,” a fourth officer shouted. “The shuttle has stopped. It’s holding its position fifty kilometres above the ... anomaly.

William watched on as the chaos continued around him. The defense headquarters was in a panic. First a stolen shuttle, two opposing ships about to start a war on neutral territory, a rip in the spacetime continuum in the middle of it. It was chaos.

“The universe is chaos, Captain Dirk. It is its natural state,” came the voice.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“A friend, an ally.”

“Who are you?”

“We are the ones that can restore what you once had, Captain Dirk,” the voice replied. It was a cold and heartless voice.

“Do you have anything to do with this? This could destroy the city, the entire planet if you don’t stop it now!”

“We are not the ones responsible, but we know who. We can stop it though.”

“Then stop it.”

“In due time, but first we need you to agree to help us.”

“Help you with what exactly?”

“Help us return to the old ways. You remember them, don’t you? The glory days where men became legends.”

Billiam thought back to the glory days of his career, when he Commanded the PCFS Flagship Ultimatum. His heart swelled and his mind raced.

“Yes, I’ll do it. But you have to stop this anomaly before it does irreversible damage.”

Billiam phased back to reality. He shook his head as the goose bumps retreated. He could now feel the room violently shaking around him. The windows had begun to crack, some of the displays were offline, and there were loud screams coming from outside.

“Any ideas?!” the Colonel yelled.

“Sir, the Victory!” the first officer shouted. It’s being sucked into the anomaly. It got too close.”

“Is the tractor beam online yet.”

“Negative,” came a reply from behind Billiam.

“Ten seconds,” the first officer counted. “Eight, six, four... It’s being pulled apart.”

A bright white flash appeared in the sky above the city. Blinding everyone in the command centre, except for Billiam. He was paying attention to the main screen, which now showed the anomaly was gone. The destruction of the Victory had closed the anomaly

“Return to your living quarters, Captain Dirk. You have much to prepare.”

“What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to follow that shuttle!”

Billiam looked at the screen. Like the Victory it had disappeared, however there was a trace.