

Chapter 8

The head chambers were dimly lit, the pews adorned in red and gold drapes to honour the late Emperor and the heir. As the closest member of the deceased, she was expected to say a few words to honour them and rally the people. She couldn't figure out what to say. How could you honour someone who you were plotting against only a couple of days ago? And how is one meant to rally the people when they themselves struggle to get out of bed?

If they asked her to give a speech a day ago, sure. She was out for blood for those who would attack so blatantly and say it was an accident. But now, even as she was presumably the most powerful member of the Empire, she felt powerless.

She couldn't strike against the shuttle that had somehow destroyed their flagship unprovoked because they can't find it. She couldn't retaliate against the McGuffin who just stood there and did nothing because they were hiding behind the protection of the ITU. And the Governors and Councillors warned against provoking the ITU as they were the Empire's biggest trading partner.

Governor Buxtab was part of the official guests attending the Ceremony of the Fallen. He was the only Governor in attendance as he was the only one who could make it before the ceremony. For the past day he had been the Governors' council's mouthpiece going everywhere the Empress went. He said he was there to assist her, to get her up to speed with the current situations across the Empire, but the Empress knew better. He was there to make sure she didn't screw things up before the Governors could put their people in place.

"And now," the priest preached, "our beloved Mistress Se'cond will honour the fallen."

The priest looked expectedly at her, the candles at the podium giving him a slight flickering shadow.

"Mistress?" he whispered.

She took a deep breath and stood up. Her ceremonial black robes felt heavy on her. The hem swept across the ground as she walked towards the podium. While the light on the podium blinded her from seeing the hundreds in attendance and billions watching on screens across the Empire, she knew they were there watching and reading every move she made. Some in that crowd were already plotting her demise, she knew. Lee'durs sources of information were already talking about plays for power. Some challenged the legitimacy of her ascension, some declared her unfit to rule, some were planning to secede and become independent and the bolder Governors were moving their troops into position.

Powerless.

The prompter in front of her, though not visible to anyone else due to an ocular implant, began to roll slowly. This was the pre-written speech that her new speech writing staff and whipped up for her.

“My brothers, sisters and kin. We gather here today to honour our fallen who were killed in the name of ...”

The screen read. ‘the Empire and everything it stood for,’

But that was a lie,

She could see her advisors at the corner of her eye. Their faces were tense, afraid that she would deviate from the script that had been prepared for her. They had groomed Master Prime to succeed from the Emperor when he passed through the veil. They had not gotten their claws into her. And they wouldn’t now. The Empire was listening and she was going to make sure she was heard.

“We are here today to demonstrate what happens when you deviate from the path that has been laid out for us since the beginning. My brother, our Emperor fell because we were capitulating to our enemies.”

There was a hushed murmur in the crowd. Governor Buxtab got up to stop her, however, Lee’dur and his unit put him back in his place.

“My brother was an honourable man, but he was weak, a pale comparison to my father and our forebearers. This has allowed a sickness to spread throughout the Empire, a sickness I intend to cure. Many Governors seek my demise because they believe they are better fit to rule, because they want the power for themselves and exploit the people underneath them for their own gain. They are willing to spill the blood of the Empire for this. I don’t want this. If there is blood to be spilled, it will be the fools of the Planetary Collective and their Trader’s union puppets.

We have a long struggle ahead of us kin. But we’ve been there before. Our people rose against our abusers, those who stole us from our worlds. We were outgunned and outmanned at every turn, but we prevailed because we were united. We will be united once more! For the glory and honour of the Empire!”

The crowd stood stunned. This was not what they expected. The high – ranking officials were surrounded by Lee'dur's guard. The Empress waited for a response.

"For the Empire!" a member of the crowd shouted.

"For the Empire !" shouted another.

"Long live the Empress!" shouted a third.

More and more members of the audience began to shout similar cries until everyone joined in.

"FOR THE EMPIRE!" the Empress screamed. "Now go and spread my kin. Let my detractors know that I'm not afraid of them. If they want the throne, then they can come to me and take it themselves. They shouldn't spill innocent and honourable blood for their selfish desires.

The crowd cheered and gave a salute.

The Empress turned to face the honoured guests in attendance. None of them were celebrating. She smiled as she walked to them. Her eyes were locked in with Governor Baxtab's.

"A rousing speech your excellency," he calmly stated. "However, I don't believe this was the time to whip the people into a frenzy. I understand you're in a lot of pain at the moment, but to challenge the Governors openly is an overreaction.

Lee pointed his ceremonial blade towards the governor's neck.

"Now, now Lee'dur," she smiled. "He is simply stating his honest opinions. We do not kill for that."

Lee backed down. Baxtab swallowed hard.

"If I surrounded myself with 'Yes' people my ego would get so large that I'd explode."

Baxtab gave an unconvincing chuckle.

“Please, tell me Governor Baxtab, in your honest opinion, how do I salvage this situation?”

Baxtab was confused. “W...well, we can send a detraction saying that you were swept up in the moment. It’s understandable given the situation.

“That’s brilliant Governor.” The whole group was confused, including Lee’dur. “You will be a valuable advisor to me for my reign.”

“I’ll do my best your eminence. However, if you’ll excuse me, I have matters to attend to.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Her smile grew wider. “Captain Lee’dur! Please escort our guest to his quarters on Omega deck. The Governor is going to be staying with us for a while.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well I need to keep my advisors safe, below deck.”

“You can’t do this!”

“Oh yes I can. Don’t worry. I’m not going to kill you. As I said, I won’t spill Empire blood for power. And I also need you as an advisor. I need to know what the rest of you will do now.”

She snapped her fingers and the guards dragged him away.

“Admiral Pawen!” she ordered.

“Yes, your eminence?” he kneeled at her.

“There is no need for that. The Empire does not bend the knee to anyone.”

He stood up.

“I need you to make sure that everyone in the Empire heard what I had to say. I have no doubt that some would have tried to censor my words”

“Of course. Any else your eminence?”

“Oh, I have a whole list. Let’s start with that.”

“Very well,” he turned away to follow his orders.

“I forgot to mention Admiral.” He paused. “When you are ensuring the loyalty of those in charge of our planets let them know that as of now the Governors have been absolved of their positions. The military commanders on each Empire world will be in temporary Command until a new system is put into place.

The Admiral smiled. “As you wish, your Eminence!”

The Empress felt better.

Chapter 9

Billiam grimaced at everything he saw. The structure of the station, if you could call it one, was a mishmash of countless vessels, no doubt plundered from pirate raids. They were the plague of the galaxy. They were degenerates who took what they wanted, when they wanted. Scum of the universe in his opinion. He never thought he'd step in a pirate stronghold. When he became captain again, these people would be his first target; arrest the whole lot of them and let rot in a penal colony. They can fight amongst themselves.

"Ah human," a grotesque green mass of an alien called out. "It's not often we see a human from these parts. PC or Empire?"

Billiam rolled his eyes. The creature slithered around in front of him.

"Ah a freelance human, then? No matter. I'm willing to trade for Empire coin, PC credits or anything of value."

"I'm not interested." Billiam sidestep them and continued walking,

The creature slithered up to him and placed an appendage on Billiam's shoulder.

"But you know nothing of what I have. How could you know? What I have might surprise you."

"Get your greasy green tentacle off me."

"My my, don't we have a temper for a human. Must be an Empire. Escaping before your Mad Empress destroys this side of the galactic core?"

"I don't have time for whatever your selling. Now let me leave before you regret it." At that moment he pulled out a weapon and aimed it at the creatures appendage.