

Galactic Apocalypse

Chapter One

Officer Rylie's apple pie sat half-finished. It was too tepid. Sipping his coffee, Rylie looked up from the sports page and looked around. All sorts of species were in the Ricky Rockets Space Stop, but he made a mental note of the total lack of tentacles. There was a guy with eyes which protruded from his head and a human or two with their wrinkly ears, but not one decent tentacle in the whole place. It was equivalent to being stuck in a cage full of zoo monkeys. He had muttered as much to himself moments before as he had used the public urinal, when there was nobody around to hear him. This backwater space stop in this tentacle-forsaken sector, he thought, was hell to anyone with a basic sense of dignity.

If it hadn't been for that routine stop near Betelgeuse he wouldn't have to be here surrounded by lesser forms of sentience.

His comm-link scratched with white-noise static. "Rylie, Code two nine near moon beta."

Rylie reached down to press the switch. "Ten four. On my way."

As he got to his feet he hurriedly put on his helmet. Code two nine meant riot situation. Every cop in the area would be there and he didn't want to be the last one to arrive. It would look bad. He reached into his pocket and dropped a bill onto the counter.

As he pulled out of the space stop on his space cycle a personal transport whizzed past going way too fast. He sneered. As he pulled into the space lane headed to moon beta he thought to himself that the driver had had no tentacles.

He switched on his warning beacon, flashing blue and red, and zoomed past a lumbering cargo ship.

He had hoped that this would be another relaxing day on the beat. Not much happened around the tip of the third spiral and that was about as much good as Riley could say about the area.

He saw a ship coming the other way. It had a glow and as it approached it became apparent that something was wrong. Rylie peered ahead. The ship raced towards him, veering wildly and on fire. It caromed towards his cycle as it passed. "Oh crap!" Rylie angled upwards, narrowly missing the bulk of the ship and passing through the flames emitting into empty space.

He straightened out his cycle and looked to see the ship retreating into the distance behind him in

the rear-view. When he put his eyes back on the space lane he saw more than a dozen ships coming at him. They jostled and bumped each other in total disregard for the rules of safety. If they weren't aimed straight for him, en masse, he would have taken the time to make a note of at least twenty traffic ordinances they were blatantly violating. A smaller ship got in the way of a larger one, exploding as the larger ship barreled through it.

Rylie slammed the brakes and screamed as ships of every size and color whizzed past. It took a while for him to find the courage to open his eyes again, but, after one last ship had gone by, he did. The Shadow loomed before him, darker than space and without form or reason.

An eerie buzzing sound like skittering insects filled his cockpit... or was it his mind? Rylie screamed out, grabbing his head as madness enveloped him.

"We're live in two minutes, people!", the voice of the production manager cut through the chaos inside studio four. After the attack the galaxy was in a state of confusion and the situation aboard the Spaceship One was no exception. Everywhere people scurried to get things into position for the President's address, jostling and bumping. "No! Not that. Replace the background with a gas giant."

Sitting behind the desk President Sunbeam stared at his make-up artist as she applied his foundation. Her focus was fixed on the subtleties of skin complexion, but she was aware of the attention.

"Get that planter outta' the way!"

Sunbeam said, "Make my eyes piercingly blue." It was his favorite eye color, followed closely by indigo. "You have sure hands... that's a sign of confidence."

Her voice quavered, "President Sunbeam?"

"What is it, Jenny?"

"Will we be overrun by the Shadow?"

Sunbeam, considering the implications, said nothing for a long moment. "Have you ever seen the moon fields of Lovell Six, Jenny?"

She shook her head, 'no'.

"They're beautiful." He took her hand in his and held it near his chest. "We may be facing the end of reality as we know it..." She shut her eyes. "No. Look. Look at me." She looked and Sunbeam touched her cheek, saying, "Can you feel this?" She settled her face into his palm. "All we have is this moment."

"Twenty seconds 'til air! Positions people!"

Jenny pulled herself away and a man pointed a large camera at the President. The production manager counted down to five, then continued silently with his fingers. Sunbeam fixed his collar. 'Four'. Took one last glance at his speech. 'Three'. Cleared his throat. 'Two'. 'One.'

On the bridge of the Space Thunder Albert and Diggs watched the address on screen. Albert lit a joint, the smoke wafting around his blonde curls as the Federation jingle played over the logo. Diggs said, "This is heavy, man."

Albert felt his tie-dye shirt with the face of Bob Marley grinning as if to say, 'Don't worry 'bout a thing', expressed his sentiments better at that moment than any words he could actually say himself.

Diggs interjected the shirt's message, "Think about it. They could be from another galaxy. If they have the technology to travel that far we don't stand a chance."

President Sunbeam appeared on screen, sitting behind his desk. Albert held the smoke in his lungs, "The President's on, he'll tell us what to do."

They listened. "People of the Milky Way, this is your President. As I'm sure you know we have been attacked by an unknown force. I'm going to be honest with you, we have no idea who these guys are, what they are, or what they want."

The Captain, who had named her ship 'The Space Thunder' in an attempt at irony, lay in her meager quarters eating blueberry yogurt and taking little drags from her sneak-a-toke. A blaster was strapped to her hip. The address played on the mini-screen in her palm and her other hand lay on her stomach. She felt queasy and that meant bad news. It was easy to understand, though. They were at war.

A vice-like knot cramped up in her belly. She grunted and, turning off her screen, wondered at the feeling. It had to be this Shadow thing, but... She hailed the bridge.

"Diggs."

"Yes, Captain..."

"Plot a course. We're leaving the sector."

"You got it."

She got up from her bunk and made her way the short distance to the bridge. She saw Diggs standing at navigation and looking with obvious concern at the display on his console. A layer of dank smoke hung in the air.

Albert said, "Captain, we just got hailed."

“Who is it, Albert?”

“Its a federal ship.”

“Okay.” She put her hands out to steady herself. “Stay calm. That’s an order. What class?”

Diggs answered, “Its the Spaceship One.”

Both men looked to the Captain, who cocked her head to the side. “The President’s Ship?”

"That's the one."

She put her hands over her head. “What are we going to do? We’re so screwed right now, guys!”

Albert hung his head and Diggs blinked his eyes. This was not what they had required from their Captain.

“Okay,” she said. “Hide the weed.” She hurried over to remove a baggy on Albert’s console. “We missed anything?”

“Nah. That’s it.”

She turned to face the vid-screen, straightening her back and making sure her black vest was on right. “Put them through.”

“Wait!”, Diggs cried and they looked over. “The bong.” He hurried to the rear of the bridge where a two footer stood on the floor. He placed it gently behind the navigation console. “Okay.”

Albert patched them through. The screen popped on, showing a Naval officer in mid-sip from a coffee mug. The mug read ‘Shoe Goddess’ on its side.

“This is The Captain of the Space Thunder. How may I be of assistance?”

The officer held the coffee near his chest. “This is the Spaceship One. State your business.”

“We’re delivering medical supplies for the orphans of Dregs Four.”

The officer casually checked his console. “That’s strange... according to our records your ship is on the smuggler’s watch list.” His tone was like that of a commercial pilot addressing his passengers over the inter-comm, authoritative yet calming.

Diggs spoke up. “Oh, we’re done with that shit. We’re into helping orphans now.”

“Those poor little kids,” Albert added, his hand over his heart.

“Would it be alright if we sent a crew to board your ship, just to make sure?”

“Board our ship?”, she hesitated. The Captain was about to reply when red lights flashed throughout the deck behind the officer. He looked around himself, bewildered, and a siren began to blare. The screen went blank.

“What the hell was that?” The Captain stared at the empty screen.

“I don’t know,” said Diggs. “But I guess it means we’re free to go.”

“Agreed. Get us clear of this moon and plot a course for Deja’va.”

Admiral Hazey rushed through the halls of the Spaceship One towards the President's office. Crew hurried everywhere, wending their way around each other and shouting over the sirens. Red lights flashed, casting a threatening light over the metal corridors. He came up to the office door and yelled over the noise, "Open! Emergency protocol alpha gamma." The door slid open.

The office was empty. "Mr. President?" There was no one. "Where could that nincompoop be?" He turned to leave when he heard a womanly squeal. He turned to face the empty desk. "Is that you Mr. President?"

From under the desk Sunbeam shouted, "Go away!"

"But, Sir! The Shadow are attacking."

Below the desk Jenny was near panic. Sunbeam stroked her hair, his finger to his lips as he silently and desperately pleaded for her to be calm.

"Mr. President!"

Sunbeam popped his head up from behind the desk, "I'm busy!", and retreated again.

"Sir!"

Sunbeam emerged, sitting, his shirt tousled, and The Admiral could smell it- the smell that someone gave off when they are just realizing that they are going to die. It smelled like rat piss. He hated that smell. The Admiral stood at attention as the President struggled to compose himself.

"Admiral. The situation is dire. I'm placing you in charge. You have my full confidence."

The Admiral saluted crisply, "Yes, sir," and about faced before marching out of the office grumbling to himself.

The Admiral entered the bridge. The screen showed a ball of darkness flying towards them. It left a trail of madness in its wake. He barked, "Report!"

The weapons officer turned to him, "Sir, they've launched some sort of weapon."

"How long 'til impact?"

"Twenty seconds."

"Evasive maneuvers, launch counter measures!"

The Secretary of Education, who had been standing idly by with a deeply concerned look, felt the time was now to speak up for these aliens and their potentially delightful culture. "Admiral, how do we know its a weapon? For all we know it could be their way of saying, 'Hi, how ya' doin'?"

"Ms. Secretary, it would make me happier 'n a pig in shit... but just in case I'm gonna' blast 'em to little bits."

The ship lurched to the side as a skittering buzz grew louder in their ears.

“Brace yourself for impact!”

An explosion rocked the ship. The Admiral caught himself on the railing and he looked to see his crew and the dignitaries writhing and crawling on the floor, tearing at their flesh with anguished faces.

“Stay at your stations!” He yelled, but he felt his mind slipping away. “That’s an order,” he struggled to get the words out. The siren’s blaring increasingly intermingled in his senses with madness. His head tilted to the side and his eyes no longer discerned what they were seeing. He whispered to himself, “Abandon ship,” and was gone.

"Thirty seconds 'til warp," Diggs watched his readout anxiously, trying to will it to go faster. His console bleeped. "I'm reading an escape pod in the vicinity."

Albert's computer bleeped. "Captain. I'm picking up a distress signal."

"No time. We're warping out."

Albert and Diggs were silent. They understood their Captain's decision as the best one considering the circumstances. The Captain heard their silence, bearing it, and blurted, "Okay fine! Diggs, cancel warp. Albert, hail the pod."

"Yes, Captain." Albert hailed the pod.

President Sunbeam appeared on screen. He was nearly naked and lipstick marks covered his face. He held his fists close to his chest and his eyes were distant. "They've all gone mad..." He was talking to himself.

"Mr. President?"

He seemed to notice them for the first time.

"Are you okay?"

Collecting himself, he smiled. "Yes, I'm fine. I think they've gone. Would it be too much to ask for a rendezvous?"

"Of course. We'll pick you up."

"Thank you," he said and the Captain turned to Albert and gave him the 'cut' signal.

"Alright, guys. No mention of the weed. We gotta' drop him off somewhere without attracting attention to ourselves."

The escape pod had crashed on a nearby moon. The Space Thunder landed near it and the crew stood in the cargo bay watching the President bound across the moon towards them from through the window. He entered the hatch and pressurized the chamber. The door slid open and Sunbeam removed

his space helmet.

He sniffed the air. "I smell something funny in here."

"Yes. We're transporting medical supplies. They're headed for the orphans of Dregs Four."

"I don't know about you, but I could really use a little somethin' to ease the ol' head. Whaddya' say? They won't miss a few nugs." Sunbeam looked to the Captain pitifully. "Please?"

"Well, just a nug or two won't hurt I guess."

The neon-like glow of the classic rock posters from the 1970's under the black light had begun to give the Captain a serious headache- that and the fact that the 'Are you Experienced' album was now in its fifth run through the stereo.

As Jimi prophesied 'You may never hear surf music again', the Captain squinted her eyes, wondering what surf music was and- Bam! She realized an insight from her third eye. They were late. Not just late... they were 'we are going to die at the hands of a hit man sent by a drug smuggling magnate' late. Her mouth gaped in silent horror.

"What's wrong Captain?", asked Diggs.

She turned her head slowly and replied, "We're all going to die."

"Whoa there," Sunbeam removed his face from a bong. "Somebody needs to ease up."

"We missed the drop to Java."

Albert and Diggs realized the Captain was correct. They hung their heads in an epic bummer.

Sunbeam couldn't stand it. "No. Come on guys," he urged. "Its not so bad. I'll explain everything to this Java dude."

The Captain shook her head. "There's so much more I wanted to do."

"Hey, I've got an idea. You ever been to Lovell Six?"

Albert and Diggs shrugged.

"Let's go!" Sunbeam stood, exhorting excitement with his arms. "You're going to love it there." His eyes looked to a far off place, "...the way the moons hang over the salted oceans."

"Sounds lovely!" Albert was smiling again.

"Hey," Diggs added, "We're fucked anyway, why not?"

"You're the president now, sir," the tone in the voice of Elbert, the vice-president's aide, befitted the momentousness of the announcement. Gerald's eyes lit up. He stroked the ring of hair around his enormous bald spot. "Honest to God?"

"I shit you not, sir."

"That decrepit heathen is dead and gone?"

"Taken by the Shadow."

"Praise God," Gerald took the small crucifix out from under his shirt and kissed it fervently.

"Kneel with me," he commanded and his entire entourage knelt down in the corridors of power around him. "Dear Lord, King of kings, grant me the wisdom to guide this galaxy out of the darkness into which it has so deservedly fallen."

The crowd got to their feet with a chorus of amens.

Gerald got down to business, "Now, I want a meeting with the top military brass." His aide wrote furiously in his notes. "I want a man following me around with a cross." He ripped off the crucifix around his neck. "A real cross not one of these puny ones." He tossed it aside. "Something good and heavy. And I want the Virgin of Harihar brought to me. Oh yeah, and I want fences around every living planet and homosexuality is now strictly forbidden, write me up an executive order."

"On it."

As Gerald walked away, accompanied by his entourage, the aide finished writing down the list and Gerald added loudly, "And no more gawdamned abortions!"