

Connections



*Part Three of the Black Devils story arc, part of the Empire Wars series
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Felisia was an old world, perhaps the oldest in the Empire. Certainly it was from here that the Empire first sprung, back in the days when the Felisians had first discovered space travel, and had used their new power to bring their dominion to new worlds. Some had joined willingly, like the Torosians, and others had been conquered. The last great conquest had been over the Canids, who had also carved out an empire amongst the stars. These two mighty empires fought for dominance, and many worlds died before the Canids were defeated, and they became another part of the Empire. Now, once again mighty empires fought amongst the stars, and waged war on the ground of a hundred planets. Yet Felisia stood untouched and unafraid, for in all her long history no enemy had ever set foot upon her ancient soil.

I had never been to Felisia before, and I did not know what to expect. The little I knew about the planet was mainly about its history, some of which I have shared with you. However, I had five days to expand my knowledge and indulge myself in whatever this planet had to offer. I was excited, not just to be going to Felisia, but to have such a lengthy leave from my duties. My mentor, Robert Gray, had managed to get me a whole week's leave, although I lost a day either side in travel. But that left me five days free to do with as I willed. My time would not be all my own though; the purpose of the leave, and my trip to Felisia, was to attend a party thrown by Gray. He was holding it to celebrate his recent promotion to Captain, and as he was stationed on Felisia the party was being held there.

The journey from Bovis on the public space-ferry had been uneventful. As we glided into the spaceport, I caught my first glimpse of Felisia. I was surprised to see that the spaceport was not on the ground, but suspended several hundred metres into the air by what appeared to be whole buildings. I had never seen the like anywhere in the Empire, or indeed out of it. After clearing customs and collecting my baggage, I stepped out of the spaceport, and once again was struck by how different this world was. The spaceport was high in the air, but it was by no means the tallest building. Huge towering skyscrapers, some as wide as a rockball field, dominated the skyline. Between them air-cars flew along invisible highways, crowding the sky. Even this was a surprise, for although I had seen air-cars before, I'd never seen them in such number. On Salarim, where I grew up, most of the vehicles were ground-based, and even on Bovis I rarely saw more than a hundred travelling the sky roads at any one time.

I noticed that some of the air-cars bore the legend "taxi", and a large number of these were parked out the front of the spaceport. So I hailed one, and climbing in, gave the pilot the address of the hotel where I was staying. As we took off, the pilot, a light-furred Musteline, asked me "First time to Felisia?"

"Yes," I replied, "How did you know?"

He chuckled. "You've obviously never been in an air-car before. What brings you to Felisia?"

"My old CO's just been promoted, and he arranged some leave for me."

He glanced at me for a second, before returning his gaze to the sky ahead. "You're a soldier then? Star Corps?"

I nodded, and said, "Yeah, Ground Combat."

I saw his eyes widen slightly at that. "Ah, a dead-red." He said, "So tell me, what's going on with the war at the moment?"

I cringed slightly at the term "dead-red". It was a colloquial term for Ground Combat, referencing the colour of their helmets. But the "dead" referred to the division's high mortality rate, which no soldier serving in it likes to be reminded of. Unfortunately the term had somehow found its way into public use, and civilians were likely to use it without thinking of the connotations. So, I ignored it and responded to the taxi pilot's question. "I don't actually know exactly how things are going. My unit's been on operational stand-by for the last few months." He nodded sagely, as if confirming something with himself "So, not good then." he said.

Surprised, I asked, "How do you figure that?"

"You've not been on any missions lately, so it suggests that the offensive has dried up. If that's the case, it suggests that the Alliance has got the upper hand, or at least is holding things steady."

I didn't respond to this. I hadn't ever considered that the Black Devil's operational status could be connected with the success of the war effort. Now, this simple taxi driver had given me something to think about. According to the official reports from Star Corps, ever since the Battle of Voborous the Dresk had retreated within their own territory. Yet no reports of major battles had been made, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers were being held back, waiting to be put into action. Why was Star Corps not going on the offensive? I had no answer, and was still pondering the question when the taxi pulled up at the hotel.

The hotel was not particularly fancy, or even nice. A soldier's pay, even one on a Ground Combat salary, did not buy luxuries like expensive hotel rooms. So I instead settled for a small business hotel near Gray's offices. As Felisia was such an important world within the Empire, Star Corps maintained a large presence here. Gray worked in one of their many holdings, a large tower block that also included several function rooms, one of which Gray had hired for the party. He rented an apartment a short distance away, and his instruction to me was to call him there when I arrived. As it was still the middle of the afternoon though, he would still be at work, so I had some time to spare. After checking into the hotel, I decided to take a short stroll and see the city.

Walking out of the hotel, I stepped onto a broad walkway. The pavement ran across the front of the building, and several businesses had doorways that opened onto it. Air-cars flew alongside the path, occasionally pulling over and

stopping with their doors level for someone to board or alight. It was remarkably like any street in the cities I'd seen, despite the fact that I'd never been to a city that was built off the ground.

The path I was on was part of a network, connected to the next building across by means of a bridge under which air-cars zoomed. As I walked, I noticed that signs of the war were everywhere. Recruitment posters dotted the walls, and the streets were filled with people in uniforms. I counted at least ten different types, from the blues of Star Corps (two different shades, one for officers and one for enlisted soldiers) to the browns of the Imperial army. One uniform that I didn't see was the bottle-green and red of Ground Combat. That was not that odd, because Felisia was a long way from the front lines and most soldiers on leave preferred to wear "civvies", or civilian clothes. I myself was not wearing my uniform, and it felt odd to walk down the street without being noticed. Always on Bovis I had worn my uniform, and for the first time since I had joined the Corps I was incognito. It felt strangely liberating not to be noticed, and I walked slowly, enjoying myself as I blended into the crowd.

The next morning, I took a sky-bus to the Royal Park. The gardens here were famous for their beauty, and there was at least one native plant here from every planet in the Empire. Seeing as this was my first time to Felisia, I did all the tourist things, including the Park. The gardens here were connected to Felisia's Royal Palace, where the kings and queens of the early Empire had lived. It was still owned by the royal family, even though few of them ever came here. However, due to the war we were not allowed inside, so we had to make do with taking photos of the outside. The nearby Royal Park Museum was open however, and I took a guided tour through several hundred years of the Empire's history.

I came out knowing much more about the ancient history of the Empire than I had ever cared to know. The tour guide had covered the first and early second dynasties of the Empire, a thousand years ago. This was long before Pantheroids like myself had ever been part of the Empire, long before the Canids had even come to our world. When they arrived, they enslaved the Pantheroids, and my people became part of the Canid Empire. It wasn't until the last years of the Canid Empire, at the end of the third dynasty, that the Pantheroids were no longer kept as slaves. Since the Canids fell to the Empire three hundred years have passed, but the animosity between Pantheroids and Canids has continued to this day. While the Empire puts on a unified front, tensions simmer below the surface. If my lesson in Imperial history had taught me anything, it was that things today are no different from how they were a thousand years ago.

It was lunchtime when I left the Royal Park, and I had just enough time to take in the Lapushian Falls before heading back to the hotel. The party was tonight, and I wanted to get a few hours sleep in before the event. Switching between time zones tended to upset a person's natural rhythm, and when those time zones were on different planets, the problem was compounded. The length of a day differed greatly from planet to planet, and adjusting could be difficult. If I didn't get some sleep now, I would be only half-awake for the party in the evening.

I awoke to my alarm, then got dressed, and called a taxi. The party was formal dress, and I wasn't going to walk the few blocks in my suit. I was wearing black, but the suit was actually a few shades lighter than my own fur. I had a yellow shirt and tie to contrast with the dark colours and complement my amber eyes. The taxi dropped me off at Gray's work, and I walked inside. The girl at the desk saw my suit, and asked "Captain Gray's party?"

I replied in the affirmative, and she reached for a datapad. "Name?" She asked me.

"Lance-Corporal Cameron Naylor." I said, wondering whether I should have given my rank or not. This was a Star Corps building after all. Even the receptionist was in uniform, and she had sergeant stripes too. She looked up from the pad and noticed me looking at her sleeve. The smile she gave me seemed to say that yes, she might just be a receptionist but she outranked me and she knew it.

"Fourth floor Mr Naylor, then turn to your right and just follow the signs."

"Thanks." I said, and headed over to the elevators, feeling her watching me all the way.

When I found the room, I found that the party had already started. There were about thirty people already there, and I didn't recognize anyone. I went looking for Gray, and found him chatting to an old Canid in the dress uniform of an army major. My mentor spotted me and beckoned me over. "Cameron! Good to see you. Cameron, this is Christopher Hardcastle. Christopher, this is Cameron Naylor." We shook hands, then Gray put his hand on my shoulder and firmly steered me away. "Excuse me Christopher, there's some people I want Cameron to meet." As we pushed off into the crowd, Gray said in a low voice. "Phew! I'm glad you saved me. Hardcastle means well, but he does tend to be a bore. Full military dress too! You'd think the old boy would have come in something more comfortable. At least you've got the right idea Cameron."

He looked me up and down, admiring my suit. He himself was dressed in a grey suit with dark pinstripes. He wore no shoes, and I could see his metal feet poking out from underneath his trouser legs. Gray had been wounded many times in battle, and a lot of his Feliform body had been replaced by cybertronics. From the waist down he was all machine, and he had a plate in his skull.

As Gray and I were talking, he noticed a young Pantheroid woman standing in the corner. "Come with me, there's someone I want you to meet." He said, looking over my shoulder. Following his gaze, I saw her and stopped. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Her fur was a glossy black and her eyes were the most brilliant green. She wore a simple dress of white that hugged her figure. Then Gray was walking over to her, and I followed. "Raven," I heard him say, "There's someone I'd like you to meet. A fellow student of mine. Raven, this is Cameron, Cameron, this is Raven."

"Hi." I said dumbly, and held out my hand. She took it, and flashed me a smile that made my heart melt.

"Hi, nice to meet you."

Gray disappeared then, presumably to go and talk to someone else. Meanwhile, I was left to make conversation with this beautiful young woman. I was actually tongue-tied in her presence. Luckily for me, she spoke first.

"So how do you know Robert?" She asked.

"He's used to be my commanding officer." I told her. "I'm in Star Corps. How do you know him?"

She hesitated for a brief moment, then said, "I was injured, and he helped me get better. So, I take it you're in Ground Combat?"

We talked about our jobs for a while, and I found out she was also in Star Corps. She was a pilot aboard a starship, and a first lieutenant. That explained why she called Gray "Robert". The Ground Combat Division followed a different rank structure to the rest of Star Corps, so now, even though he was a captain, Gray was of the same rank as Raven. I, as a lowly lance-corporal, had never dared to call an officer by his first name, not even Gray. But Raven and Robert approached each other as equals.

Of course, as soon as I learnt that Raven was an officer, I tried to apologize for calling her by her first name. But she laughed and told me not to worry.

"We're not in uniform," She said to me, "and both of us are off-duty. As far as I'm concerned, we're just two people who have met at a friend's party. But I don't want to talk about work anymore. Tell me about yourself. Are you from Thera?"

I told her no, and that I'd never seen the homeworld of our people. She told me that she had lived there most of her life, and we chatted about Thera. Eventually we were joined by a tall Ursine carrying two glasses of wine. He handed one to Raven, and introduced himself to me as Jack.

"How do you know Gray, I mean, Robert?" I asked, to break the ice.

"I don't," he answered.

"He's my date." Explained Raven, and slipped her arm through his.

I cursed inwardly. Raven was such a beautiful woman, and it hurt to see her already taken. Raven made things worse, unintentionally, by asking if I had brought a date. I had to answer no, I hadn't. The invitation had included partners, but it had been a long time since I'd had a girlfriend.

I chatted to them for a little bit, but I wasn't really listening. As soon as I could, I made an excuse about wanting to grab a drink. Making my way to the drinks table, I accidentally bumped into a small Canid. "Sorry" I apologized.

"I'm fine, don't worry about it." He replied, and extended his paw. "Miles Standing. And you are?"

"Cameron Naylor." I said, taking his paw.

His eyes lit up with recognition when he heard my name. "Nice to meet you, I think I've heard my uncle talk about you." He said.

"Your uncle?" I asked, wondering who that could possibly be.

"Oh, Robert's my uncle. Not my real uncle, of course, but close enough. He and my dad were old war buddies, and when dad died he helped out."

"Oh right." I said. "Tell me, what did Robert say about me?"

Miles scratched his head, as if he was trying to remember. "You're the one who was in the prisoner of war camp, aren't you?"

I nodded, and he continued. "That's right. Uncle Robert was quite relieved to hear you hadn't been killed. But what was the camp like? Did you learn anything about the Dresk?"

"A little." I answered cautiously. I had come to respect the Dresk during my incarceration, and I had not told Star Corps most of what I'd learnt in my time as a prisoner of war.

"That's absolutely fascinating." Said Miles excitedly. "We'll have to do an interview sometime."

"An interview?"

"Oh yes, I'm a journalist. Freelance at the moment, and I'd love to do a piece on the Dresk. I think the ordinary person deserves to know who the Corps is fighting. After all, it's so much easier to hate a faceless enemy."

Now I was intrigued. Miles had unknowingly echoed my own thoughts, and he seemed fairly adamant in his beliefs. As an independent journalist too, he was not restricted by so called "anti-sedition" laws like the news networks were, or reduced to writing propaganda like the reporters who worked for the military. Miles was in the best position to write fairly and openly about the Dresk.

However, I was still wary about the idea. After all, I'd only just met Miles, and I didn't really know anything about him. So I told him I'd think about it, and gave him my contact details on Bovis. "If I move, Gray will know where to find me." I told him. Miles promised to get in touch, and we parted ways.

The rest of the party passed in a blur. I talked to at least a dozen other people, and everyone had a different story to tell about how they came to know Gray. I had never realized before just how many people Gray mentored, or how wide his influence was spread. There were soldiers here from every field of service; Star Corps, Ground Combat, Imperial Army, Spaceforce. There were infantrymen, gunners, signalmen, starship crew, medical staff, pay officers, even some from Intelligence. For the first time I began to understand how Gray stayed so well informed. He'd surrounded himself with people who were as loyal to him as they were to the Empire. There were some civilians too, such as Miles, who were friends of Gray. There weren't many of them though. Gray had been in Star Corps for a long time, and most of his friends were in the service of the Empress.

The party continued long into the night. Gray made a speech, and there was a cake in his honour. As this party was to celebrate his promotion to captain, the cake had been made in the form of a captain's uniform.

It was several hours after that the party ended, and we all trooped out into the cold night. I had ordered a taxi, and soon I was back at my hotel and asleep.

I spent the next couple of days just relaxing in the city. On my last day of leave, Gray contacted me. He wanted to see me before I left. I agreed, and we arranged that he would meet me at the spaceport for lunch before seeing me off.

After lunch, Robert handed me a package wrapped in paper. "I have a present for you."

The package was soft and flexible. Curious, I tore open the wrapper. Inside was a Ground Combat Division dress uniform. I was puzzled as to why Gray would give me such a thing, when he knew that I already owned one. My bewilderment must have shown on my face, because he said, "Look at the sleeve."

I turned the garment over, and smiled. On the sleeve were the stripes of a corporal.