

Mind Frag

114

by Kyle Eggleston

The U.S.S. Fearless dropped out of FTL and entered the Comeki Star System. As it made its way to the Shuka home world, it avoided Dubor space as much as possible. Any ships caught entering their space were subject to search, the crews possibly kidnapped and never returned, and the ship destroyed. Bert McDuff wanted to avoid all of these things at all costs. He wasn't sure if these possibilities were rumors or if they actually happened. One thing he did know was the Dubor seemed to set their eyes on more than just the Shuka population. The only thing was, he didn't want to find out first hand.

As they neared space station Crimson Gamma, Bert allowed a sigh of relief. His crew had been on a long range deep space reconnaissance mission. Not as far out as the Rim, but pretty darn close. They were looking to dock with the station for some R&R.

"Open a channel." Bert ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Metcalf acknowledged the order. A moment later she reported in. "I have C&C on the line sir." She looked over her controls making sure the channel was secure. Who knew who could be listening in even on a normal subspace channel. "Line is secure."

"This is Commander Bert McDuff of the U.S.S. Fearless." McDuff said into the open air. "Requesting permission to dock."

The main viewer's image changed from that of the space station to Commander Kate Monson, the first officer of the Crimson Gamma. "Acknowledged Fearless, you are cleared for docking port seventy..." Her voice trailed off. "Fearless, looks like you've been through a hell of a battle. I'll see that a maintenance crew is dispatched."

McDuff nodded. "Thank you commander. Docking port seventy, aye." He closed the channel. Bert smirked to himself, a battle? No. An ion storm maybe, but there never was any battle.

Looking around the bridge, he took in the sight of his crew. They were tired. This latest mission had taken a lot out of them. Long range missions weren't for the faint of heart. McDuff was proud of his crew, they stepped up to the challenge and got the job done in half the time expected. Yes, he was awfully proud of his crew, they deserved accommodations.

A half hour later, Bert exited the docking port and walked around the station. It hadn't changed since he had been there six months ago, since the incident that had taken him to rehab. He was a changed man, a different man. You might even say a better version of the man he had been. Either way, he had changed for the better and that was a good thing.

Bert headed to the Medical Bay where he expected an old friend to be there waiting for him. He walked passed aliens and smiled at them as he did so. They deserved to be there just as much as he did. Bert didn't know why he didn't see that earlier, but now it was all clear. All aliens were welcome no matter where they came from. That was now important to him.

* * *

Jack O'Brien sat in his office filling out the usual paperwork when a ship docked with the station. He was in charge of overseeing the repairs to all fleet vessels. It was a thankless job, but someone had to do it, and he couldn't just shove it off onto a subordinate not when a highly classified mission was at stake. In a week the Fearless would be in Earth's dry dock undergoing proper repairs and its crew being debriefed. For now they could just relax and enjoy life as it came to them. Jack was happy for them, they deserved it.

As Jack looked over the file, he noticed something that didn't add up. It was probably a clerical error, but he wasn't sure. According to the file, Commander McDuff was aboard the Fearless when she left for her mission, but according to other records McDuff was on Mars undergoing treatment. Jack scratched his head, the man couldn't have been in both places at once. It was impossible. He made a note to look into it further and went onto the next ship that needed repairs.

* * *

Down in the docking bay, Madison Park walked towards the Fearless and whistled. She had seen her share of heavy cruisers come through the station in her four years of service there, but never seen one this in bad of a shape. Madison was surprised the ship even made it into FTL without tearing itself apart from all the damage. It had been through one hell of a beating, that was for sure.

"Alright crew, we have a job to do. Let's get to it." She shouted to her maintenance engineers. At her command each member of her crew donned on space suits for an EVA in

order to start making repairs to the ship. They weren't equipped with the necessary room inside the station for the Fearless to dock. She was just too big. So an EVA was required.

Activating her helmet, Madison felt fresh air coming in, she breathed it in. It was the same air as the station, but somehow in the enclosed environment of the suit it tasted different, smelled different. It just felt different overall. She preferred it to the station's air actually for some unknown reason. Leaving the station through an airlock, she activated her magnetic boots and stood on the hull of the Fearless. It was a sight to see. Something Madison never grew tired of.

Madison stood over a scorch mark and looked at it for a moment. No ion storm would produce such a mark on the hull of a ship. Whatever the commander's mission was, he didn't want people to know he had been fired upon. It wasn't her job to question what happened to the ship, or to question the commander. That would be the major's job and she was glad to leave him to it. Selecting a tool from her tool belt, she activated it and got to work patching the Fearless up. She figured it would take a day and a half to patch all of the holes, but she and her team were up to the task at hand.

* * *

Med Bay was rather quiet that morning. Matt Allen, the Chief Medical Officer of the station, was busy dissecting something. It was an alien bug that was found crawling around in the stations food stores. Who knew how long it had been in there gorging itself on the food stuffs, but it was dead now. Matt wanted to make sure it didn't pose a threat to the inhabitants of the station. He would hate to see a lot of good food go to waste due to one little bug.

"Doctor Allen, always poking and prodding some poor innocent creature." McDuff said as he walked into Matt's office. He was joking of course, but isn't that what doctors did? They poked creatures until they figured out what was wrong with them in order to fix them? That's what McDuff thought Matt did for a living.

Matt looked up to see Bert smiling at him. "Bert McDuff as I live and breathe, I heard the Fearless had docked. Welcome aboard." He stood and offered his gloved hand.

Bert looked at Matt's hand. "Maybe after you've washed bug guts off of it." He said.

Matt looked at his hand and nodded. "Well it's sterile, the field is activated. But I get ya." He said. Matt put his hand down. "So, out of rehab and back from a dangerous mission. Life must be going good for you."

Bert shrugged. “Who said anything about a dangerous mission?” He said trying to brush it off. The less Matt knew the better. Bert’s mission was classified, not many people knew about the mission; only higher ups in the chain of command. They liked to keep it that way. Who was Bert to argue with orders.

Matt raised his hands and backed off. “Got it. No dangerous mission. I understand. So, what brings you to Med Bay?”

Bert shook his head. “Oh nothing, just catching up on old times. Speaking of old times, you’ve been a lieutenant for how long now? When are they going to promote you and make you a lieutenant commander. Heaven knows you deserve it.”

Matt shrugged and smiled. “I don’t know Bert. When the brass deems it necessary they need a lieutenant commander in charge of a Med Bay on a space station. I guess it’ll happen when it happens.” He wasn’t upset about his rank, he was happy where he was at. Getting a new rank just added more paperwork to the pile that was already mounting. He really didn’t want or need that extra work. More people to report to, that sort of thing.

“Don’t be so modest.” Bert said. “When they see to it my ass. You *know* you deserve that promotion. Let me pull some strings, you’ll be a lieutenant commander before the year is up.” It was true Bert had some connections in the chain of command. Some people owed him some favors and he planned on calling those favors in, anything for a friend.

Matt continued to smile. He decided to change the subject. “How’s your crew doing?” He asked. “Anyone need to see a station doctor? I know how those Med Bays on a star ship can be. Understaffed, not qualified enough nurses. It can be a nightmare.”

Bert returned the smile. *Fine change the subject.* He thought. *I can accept that.* “Oh I think we’re doing alright.” He said. Raising his hand to his right temple, he stumbled for a moment. “Damn headache.”

Matt leaned forward. “Headache?” He asked. “How long have you had that? I can take a look.” He walked around the desk to where Bert was standing and escorted him over to a bed where Bert sat down regaining his balance.

Bert thought about how long he had the headache. He couldn’t remember when it started exactly, just had a rough estimate. “Maybe a week or so? I’m not sure.”

“A week? You’ve had this headache for a week, and this is the first time you’ve talked to a doctor about it?” Matt asked. “Bert, we’ve known each other for a long time. I know how you can be. Strong headed, stubborn at times. But you need to take better care of yourself.” Picking up a scanner, Matt ran it across Bert’s forehead. “Well I don’t see anything out of the ordinary, no obvious sign or cause of the headache.” Grabbing a syringe, he prepped Bert’s

neck and injected him with a medicine. “This should help with the pain for now. I want you to get a full scan though. There could be some underlying cause I’m not seeing.”

“Thanks doc, I’ll have it checked out if it gets worse.” Bert hopped off the bed and walked out the door to Med Bay.

“Bullheaded man.” Matt muttered under his breath. He had a feeling there was something more to the headache than Bert was letting on. Without a full neural scan, he couldn’t tell exactly what the cause of the headache was. Headaches were a thing of the past, ever since medicine had made its leaps and bounds in evolution, no one really got headaches anymore.

“Medlog” Matt spoke into a small device. “Just treated Commander Bert McDuff for a headache. I recommend a full neural scan be performed by his ships physician at his earliest convenience. End Log. Send receipt to chief medical officer U.S.S. Fearless.” He knew Bert wouldn’t appreciate Matt having the Fearless’s CMO checking up on him, but well someone had to.

* * *

Eight hours had passed since Madison started working on the Fearless. According to station regs, she was required to take a two hour break after working an EVA for eight hours. So they worked in shifts. Delta shift was currently in rotation. She sat in her small office reviewing the work still waiting to be done.

“Got your note.” Major O’Brien said as he walked in her door.

“Major.” Madison said greeting Jack. “I would have come to you sir.”

Jack smiled, he liked it when she called him sir. Even though she wasn’t part of the Earth Force Alliance, she wasn’t an officer but an enlisted crew member. He liked the respect she gave him, it allowed him to do his job more efficiently. Not everyone was cut to be a line officer, some just wanted to get out into space. That’s what Madison had wanted, so she signed on to get through the schooling necessary and out into space. Crimson Gamma was her fifth posting and she loved every moment of it.

“You said they went through an ion storm?” Madison asked.

Jack nodded. “Yes, their official logs state so. I can have them transferred to you if you wish. Along with the ships engineering logs. Commander McDuff himself says they went through an ion storm, I see no reason not to believe him.”

Madison sighed. "Then we have a problem sir. Scorch marks don't lie." She handed him a report she had drafted. "Here are my findings."

Accepting the piece of paper, Jack reviewed it. He frowned at what he read. Setting it aside he shook his head. "No, your crew must be mistaken. There was no battle. The ships logs don't even record such an event. Those kinds of logs are difficult to manipulate."

"Difficult yes, but not impossible." Madison said. "I stake my reputation and my career on this report sir. Something happened out there and it wasn't any damned ion storm." She handed him another report. "Here's an analysis of the blast patterns, they're consistent with the blast patterns on your escape shuttle Grilka brought you in. They're Dubor."

"What?!" Jack read over the piece of paper. It was all there in black and white. He couldn't believe his eyes. Madison was right the blast pattern was of Dubor origin. Handing the report back to Madison, Jack felt his pulse quicken. What would the Dubor want with an Earth Force Alliance ship? He was confused. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, I'll look further into it. Keep me apprised of anything else you find out."

"Of course." Madison said. She hated delivering bad news, but it was the truth and she had a duty to report the truth no matter where it led.

Leaving her office, Jack wanted answers. There was one person on the station who might have them. Grilka, she was after all a member of the Dubor race. She knew how they thought and would act in such an incident. If the Dubor had anything to do with the attack on the Fearless, she might have some clues as to why. He thought the Dubor were only interested in the Shuka home world. If that had changed, Earth was now a target. Another thing bothered him, why would loyal officers of Earth Force lie about what had happened to them? Either they did it by choice or were ordered to. Jack wanted answers.

As Jack walked towards Grilka's quarters, he called down to security. "Chief Killpack, this is O'Brien. Come in."

"Go for chief." Killpack said into his comm unit.

"Track down Commander McDuff of the Fearless and have him escorted to my office please. I have something to ask him." Jack ordered. "O'Brien out."

Killpack looked across from him. Bert was seated in a chair in the security office. "Seems like you're a popular person today commander. You heard the order. Best be getting up to the major's office asap."

McDuff smiled. "We'll have to continue this conversation another time. Sorry chief." He said standing up from his chair and exiting the security office.

Killpack wondered why the major wanted to talk to the commander. *Must be something important*, he thought. Turning around, he focused his attention to his security monitors. It was about time he made his afternoon rounds.

* * *

Grilka stepped from the steam shower and put on a robe. Looking in the mirror she fussed about how her hair was out of control. Picking up a brush she attempted to tame the wild that was her hair with little to no success. It was typical for her hair to be this uncooperative especially since she started living on the station. Back on her home world, there was a constant mist that would allow for her hair to curl naturally. But on the station she had to do it manually. It was a pain, but something she was getting used to.

The door chimed interrupting her grooming routine. Setting the brush down, Grilka left the bathroom and entered the main living area. "Enter please." She called through the intercom. The door opened.

Grilka smiled at the sight of O'Brien. "Jack." She said. "Yes, please come in. what can I do for you major?"

Jack stepped inside her quarters. He noted that she had redecorated a little since last they spoke. It was coming along nicely. Some things he wouldn't have picked out for his own quarters, but those were his tastes and these were Grilka's. She could do whatever she pleased.

"Why would your government attack an Earth Force Alliance ship?" Jack asked point blank. There was no point in beating around the bush. He needed to know what the Dubor intentions were.

Grilka looked shocked. "What?" She asked. "I have no idea what Ketish's motives are. I thought our people were only interested in retaking the Shuka planet. Not attacking Earth. If they attacked one of your ships major, be prepared they will do it again."

Our people. Jack thought. She had to remind him he was part Dubor. Damned heritage. He visibly winced at the thought. Being related to that race did not sit well with him. Jack was still getting used to the fact that he was part Dubor.

"I know you were Ketish's mistress for a time." Jack said. "You said so in your declaration of intent to leave. In all that time did he ever show interest in Earth? Please Grilka, this is important."

Grilka shook her head. She ran her fingers through her long hair. To her knowledge Ketish hadn't even spoken of Earth. He had no interest in the planet or the human people as a race. If they did attack an Earth ship, this was news to her.

O'Brien had to believe her. She had shown no reason not to believe her yet. Grilka had shown to be a competent ally so far. Jack didn't have a reason *not* to believe her.

"I might be able to find out some answers for you major." Grilka said. "It may be tricky, but there are some people on Dubor who abhor Ketish. It's been a while since I've talked to them, some are in his inner circle. Let me reach out to them and see what I can find out." She paused. "It might take some time."

Jack sighed. Time was something he didn't have. If there was a threat to Earth, he needed to know as soon as possible. Handing her a data crystal he informed her of its purpose. "This will allow you to access the subspace comm relay. Use it sparingly but as needed. We need to know what we're up against, if anything."

"Of course." Grilka said accepting the data crystal. "I'll get started right away. We'll get to the bottom of this major, trust me." She watched him leave her quarters and wondered what exactly she would find out. Sitting down at a computer terminal, she got to work.

* * *

Bert paced around the major's office waiting for him to show up. For a man who wanted to speak with him urgently, the major sure was taking his sweet time. Bert remembered the last time he was in the major's office. Their conversation wasn't that productive. He had tried to warn the major of how wrong it was to have a space station orbiting an alien world and how it was wrong to be helping them. Oh how times have changed since then. His outlook on aliens had shifted drastically for the better. Funny how life manages to change things for you when you least expect it. Bert was lucky he didn't lose his command over it or get demoted like he had feared.

Jack entered his office to find Bert admiring his collection of medals. Most of them were from the Earth Civil War. Jack was proud of his medals, there were some rare ones in his collection. They didn't just hand those out to anyone, you had to be someone special to receive such medals. Jack was just that, special.

"Commander, good you're here." O'Brien said. "Please have a seat."

McDuff sat on a chair across from O'Brien's desk. "Major, mind telling me what it is you are so eager to discuss? Your security officers cornered me in a corridor and escorted me

here.” He lied of course, just to make the major uncomfortable about his order to the security chief. But Jack didn’t need to know he came willingly.

Jack frowned, he hoped the security team hadn’t roughed the commander up too bad. All he wanted to do was talk and get down to the truth of some things. He sat across the desk from Bert. “My apologies commander, I only wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah?” Bert asked. “About what exactly?”

Jack took in a long breath. “Your ship wasn’t caught in an ion storm commander. It was attacked by a Dubor ship, possibly more than one.” He said. “We have proof that you were under attack. As my dock workers say, scorch marks don’t lie.”

Bert shook his head. If he had been attacked, he would have remembered that. “No major, your dock workers are wrong. We were in an ion storm. My ships logs can corroborate that much of my story. The rest is classified for now. The mission we were on is classified, security level eleven is required to unlock that information.”

Jack frowned. He only had security clearance ten. Eleven was reserved for generals and above. He was just trying to help the commander out. If something happened out there and he didn’t remember it, there could be a larger threat at play. Jack didn’t like that thought. He needed to know what he was up against, what Earth was up against.

“Please try and remember commander. This is important.” O’Brien pleaded.

Bert sighed. “I’m telling you the truth major. It was an ion storm. We haven’t seen so much as a Dubor since we left Earth. Question my crew if you don’t believe me. Maybe you’ll believe one of them.” He tapped his foot on the deck nervously. It echoed throughout the room.

“Ship logs can be manipulated, granted it’s difficult but they can be changed.” Jack said. “Memories can be falsified as well or altered in some way.”

Bert felt his throat close slightly. His mouth tasted like cotton. “You mean like a mind frag?” He asked. “Wouldn’t you think I’d know if my mind was fragged or messed with? Major please, give me some credit.”

A mind frag. O’Brien thought. Of course, why hadn’t he thought of that in the first place. “My doctor tells me most of your crew have reported headaches to him and received treatment. A headache can be a side effect of a poorly executed mind frag. Usually ones done out of haste or in a hurry.” He paused, Jack didn’t want to order a neural scan but it felt like the necessary thing to do. “I’m ordering you and your crew to submit to a full neural scan. You can either have your own doctor perform the scan or Doctor Allen onboard the station. I’d prefer if you’d let my doctor look you over. I understand you’re friends.”

Bert nodded. "Yes sir." He said. Now he was getting worried. These were serious allegations the major was presenting to him. If his memory had been affected by a mind frag, he wanted to know about it. Bert could understand one or two of his crew members having their memories messed with or altered, but his *entire* crew? That sort of thing was unheard of. "I'll report to Med Bay at once."

"I'm sorry to do this to you commander." Jack said. "But if there is something fishy at play, we need to find out."

Bert nodded. "Agreed. If that's all sir?" He stood from the chair.

O'Brien smiled. "Yeah, that's all. I'll check in later to see how your scan went. Dismissed."

Standing at attention, Commander McDuff did an about face and walked out of the office.

Now all Jack had to do was wait.

* * *

The neural scan took hours to perform. If it was done too quickly any evidence of a mind frag would be destroyed. Matt Allen sat back and reviews the results of the scan. Bert would be out for another couple of hours, he wasn't going anywhere. Matt had never seen a mind frag quite like this before. It had been a rush job for sure. Sloppy work. A correct mind frag would leave no trace of one being performed. This left fingerprints all over, like someone wanted it to be found. Either that or it was performed by someone who didn't know much about the human brain.

If the major's suspicions were correct. If a mind frag was performed by the Dubor and they didn't know enough about human brains to perform the procedure effectively that would explain the readings Matt was seeing.

"You poor bastard." Matt said. "What did they do to you?"

"Doctor." Major O'Brien said as he walked into Med Bay. "I hope you have something for me." He wasn't sure he wanted to know what Matt had exactly, but he knew it was necessary to find out.

Matt turned to face the major. "Your suspicions were right sir. Bert's been mind fragged. It was poorly done by an ammeter at best. Someone who clearly doesn't know the human brain." He handed the major a data crystal. "Here are my findings, I'm sure the rest of

his crew will have similar results. I've lined up a schedule to run tests on them all. At this rate we'll be here for at least a month."

O'Brien gripped the data crystal in his fist. He had hoped he wasn't right. That his assumption was wrong somehow. He couldn't imagine the torture Bert and his crew had gone through. Well in a way he could imagine the torture part as he had been in a Dubor holding cell himself for an extended period of time.

"Odd they would want to be found out." Jack said. "Either they really didn't know what they were doing, or they wanted to leave a trail." It dawned on him. "They want a war."

"Sir?" Matt asked.

"Think about it. Your sworn enemy has the protection of an ally, Earth. What more would you want then to get them out of the way before you attack your enemy." Jack said. "It only makes sense. They are going to come after Earth. They've already started to. This is just the tip of the iceberg."

Commander Metcalf entered Med Bay and walked up to Major O'Brien and Matt Allen. "Sir." She said. "I was ordered for a neural scan?"

"Yes lieutenant commander." Jack said. "Doctor Allen will perform the procedure, please give him your full cooperation."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Commander Metcalf said, she proceeded to remove her duty jacket.

O'Brien looked to Matt. "Keep me posted." He said.

"Aye sir." Doctor Allen said as he got back to work.

Three days later, Doctor Matt Allen had performed full neural scans on a handful of the Fearless crew. All of the results came back the same. They had all been mind fragged. Matt didn't see a use for further testing the rest of the crew. He was certain they would all come back with the same results. They needed to be seen by someone with more expertise in mind frags, someone on Earth where they could receive proper treatment. The memories couldn't be recovered, but at least the crew would be able to move on from this ordeal and try to piece their lives back together.

* * *

O'Brien met with Commander Bert McDuff in his office. He gave him the news of his doctor's findings. McDuff was beside himself. How could he and his crew go on with t his

knowledge? How could they live out the remainder of their lives knowing there were holes in their memories where things happened that they didn't recall? He didn't know what to do or how to move forward. The doctors on Earth would be able to help some, but they would never fully recover.

"I'm adjusting your orders." O'Brien said. "You are to report back to Earth to undergo psychological examination and treatment. That goes for everyone on your crew."

"We have a debrief with General O'Neil tomorrow." Bert said. "How will I explain this to him?"

Jack handed Bert a piece of paper and a data crystal. "This will explain to the general everything he needs to know about what's happened. Well at least what we know of the situation. There shouldn't be a problem with that."

Bert nodded. He understood how cranky General O'Neil could get if he didn't get his way, but under the circumstances the general wasn't likely to get his way as it was. He was just going to have to deal with it.

"I see you're scheduled to depart the station within the hour." O'Brien commented. "Safe travels commander." He held out a hand, Bert shook O'Brien's hand.

"Thank you sir." He exited the office.

Jack looked at the door where Bert had left. He didn't admire what the commander had in store for him back on Earth. It would be a rough couple of months. Eventually he would be given his command back, but Bert wouldn't ever be the same man again. Not after experiencing what he experienced at the hands of the Dubor. Jack could only imagine the hell they put the commander and his crew through. He hoped the best for them and hoped the Dubor weren't planning something on a grander scale. If they could take over a ship the size of the Fearless, there was no telling what they could accomplish. Hell, there was no telling what they had in mind for Earth. That scared him to death.

The End