

EMPRESS OF THE SUN

Also by Ian McDonald

Planesrunner

Be My Enemy

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EMPRESS OF THE SUN



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To Enid, as ever.

Author's Note: There is a Palari dictionary
at the back of the book.

I

A dot of brilliant light. In an instant the dot exploded into a disk. The disk of light turned to a circle of blackness: a night sky. Out of the perfect circle of night sky came the airship, slow, huge, magnificent. Impeller engines hummed. The Heisenberg Gate flickered and closed behind it.

“Voom,” Everett Singh whispered, blinking in the daylight of a new Earth. He lifted his finger from the Infundibulum’s touch screen. Another Heisenberg jump, another universe.

And the bridge of the airship *Everness* shrieked with alarms. Yellow lights flashed. Horns blared. Bells rang. Klaxons shrieked. *Impact warning, impact warning*, thundered a mechanical voice. Everett’s vision cleared at the same instant as the rest of the crew’s. He saw . . .

“Atlanta, Dundee and sweet Saint Pio,” whispered Miles O’Rahilly Lafayette Sharkey, the airship’s weighmaster. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, was his usual supply for quotes. He had a verse for every occasion. When he called on the saints of his old Confederate home, it was serious.

. . . Trees. Trees before them. Trees beneath them. Trees in their faces. Trees reaching their deadly, killing branches towards them. Trees everywhere. And *Everness* powering nose down into them.

“This is . . . This shouldn’t be happening,” Everett said, paralyzed with shock at his station on the bridge. “The jump . . . I calculated . . .”

“Sen!” Captain Anastasia Sixsmyth bellowed. One moment she had been at the great window, striking her customary pose—riding

breeches and boots, blouse with the collar turned up, her hands clasped behind her back, above her the soft velvet stars of Earth 1. The next moment she was staring an airship-wreck full in the face, shouting, "Take us up!"

"It's on it," her adopted daughter shouted. Sen Sixsmyth was as slight as a whippet, pale as a blizzard, but she was pilot of the airship *Everness* and she threw every gram of her small weight on the thrust levers. Everett felt *Everness* shudder as the impeller pods swivelled into vertical lift. But airships are big and long and lumbering, and it takes time, a lot of time, too much time, to make them change their course. "Come on my dilly dorcas, come on my lover . . ."

Impact warning, impact warning, the alarm shouted. It had a Hackney Airish accent.

"Belay that racket!" Captain Anastasia thundered. Sharkey killed the alarms, but the warning lights still filled the bridge with flashing yellow madness.

We're not going to make it, Everett thought. We're not going to make it. Strange, how he felt so calm about it. When it's inevitable, you stop fighting and accept it.

"Ma'am . . . Ma . . . I can't get her head up," Sen shouted. Captain Anastasia turned to Everett Singh. The great window was green, all green. A universe of green.

"Mr. Singh, Heisenberg jump."

Everett tore his eyes from the hypnotic, killing green outside the window and focused on the jump control display on Dr. Quantum, his iPad. The figures made no sense. No sense. He was frozen. IQ the size of a planet, as his dad had once said, and he didn't know what to do. Scared and unable to do anything about it.

"I . . . I . . . need to calculate . . ."

"No time, Mr. Singh."

"A random jump could take us anywhere!"

"Get us out of here!"

Sharkey glanced up at the monitors.

“Captain, we’re grounding.”

The bridge quaked as if shaken by the hand of a god. Everett clung to the jump station. Captain Anastasia reeled hard into a bulk-head. She went down, winded. Sen clung to the steering yoke like a drowning rat to driftwood. *Everness* screamed; her nanocarbon skeleton twisted to its limits. Ship skin tore with ripping shrieks. Everett heard spars snap one by one like bones. Tree branches shattered in small explosions. The hull shuddered to a crashing boom.

“We’ve lost an engine,” Sharkey shouted, hanging on to his monitor screens. He sounded as if he had lost his own arm.

Everness drove into the thousand branches of the forest canopy. Green loomed in the great window. The glass exploded. Branches speared into the bridge. Captain Anastasia rolled away as a splintered shaft of wood stabbed towards her. Sen ducked under a branch ramming straight for her head. The bridge was filled with twigs and leaves.

“I’m giving her reverse thrust!” Sen yelled. Everett grabbed hold of the wooden rail of his jump-station as *Everness* shuddered right down to its spine. There was an enormous wrenching, grating groan. The impaling branches shifted a meter, no more. The vibration shook Everett to the fillings in his teeth.

“I can’t move her!” Sen shouted.

“Leave her. You’ll burn out the impellers!” Captain Anastasia cried.

“If we have any left,” Sharkey said.

Captain Anastasia relieved her daughter at the helm. “Mr. Singh. Take us back to Earth 1. On my word. Everyone else, stand by. This will either cure or kill.”

“No!” Sen yelled as she saw her mother’s hand raised above the *flush ballast* button.

“Come on, you high and shining ones,” Captain Anastasia

whispered. "Just once." She brought her hand down hard on the red button. *Everness* lurched as hundreds of tons of ballast water jetted from scupper valves. The airship strained. Her skeleton groaned like a living thing. Tree branches bent and snapped. A jolt upwards. Everett could hear the water thundering from the valves. It must look like a dozen waterfalls. *Everness* gave a massive creak and lurched upwards again. The branches tore free from the bridge in a shower of leaves. The airship was lifting. There was a crunching shriek of metal strained beyond its limits. *Everness* rolled to one side, then righted. All the power went dead. Screens, monitors, controls, lights, navigation, helm, communications. Dr. Quantum flickered and went dark.

Captain Anastasia took her hand off the *flush* button. The water jets closed. The silence was total and eerie.

"And behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house . . . and I only am escaped alone to tell thee," Sharkey quoted.

"I'd prefer a report on our status Mr. Sharkey," Captain Anastasia said.

"Status?" a voice bellowed from the spiral staircase outside. "I'll give you our status!" Mchynlyth, ship's engineer, burst onto the bridge. His brown face was flushed with emotion. "We're bugged. You know those big munchety-crunchety noises? Well, those were our engines coming off. That's why we've nae power. Circuit breakers cut in. And I near got half a tree up my jaxy. I'm sitting down there looking down at dead air in six different places. Our status Captain? How about bugged, bolloxed, and utterly banjaxed?"

Everness creaked, dropped two meters, and came to a final rest. Brilliant rainbow birds clattered up from roosts. They weren't birds, Everett realized. Those bright colors weren't feathers.

"Where are we?" he said.

Captain Anastasia whirled. Her black face was dark with anger.

Her eyes shone hard. She flared her nostrils, chewed her lip, waiting for the anger to subside enough to be able to speak civilly.

“I thought you knew, Mr. Singh. I thought you knew everything.”

Everett’s face burned with shame. He felt tight, choked, sick in his stomach. Burning behind his eyes, in his head, in his ears. Shame, but anger too. This was not fair. It hadn’t been his fault. He had calculated perfectly. Perfectly. He didn’t make mistakes like that. He didn’t make mistakes. There was something wrong with this world. That was the only explanation. He wanted to shout back at her that he didn’t make mistakes, that she was as much to blame. He shook with anger. The words burned hot and hard in him. Captain Anastasia turned to the rest of her crew.

“Let’s get her lashed down and back to airship-shape and Hackney-fashion again.”