

A total solar eclipse is shown at the top of the image, with the sun's corona visible against a dark blue sky. Below the eclipse, the sky transitions to a lighter blue with scattered white clouds. In the foreground, a dark, rocky mountain peak rises above a calm body of water, likely a lake or bay. The water reflects the sky and the mountain. The overall scene is serene and dramatic.

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SUDDEN
ECLIPSE

Star Dynasty Saga
Episode One

Sudden Eclipse(Free Sample Chapters 1-19)

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"The sun has perished out of heaven, and an evil mist has overspread the world."

The Odyssey, Homer

Chapter One

The Commonwealth Star Alliance Regent, George "Traveler" Ravenhold sailed through twilight space with Regent Squadron. He was called Traveler affectionately by his people, because he took the time to travel to the far-flung reaches of the Alliance to see to the needs of the people. He didn't rule from comfort of his palace on Tranquility, but kept himself abreast of the concerns of those citizens who struggled with issues other than what clothes to wear to which party.

Traveler, a popular leader, ruled the CSA as had his family for one-hundred years. His great-great grandfather, Victor Ravenhold, had been a retired naval officer who invested in his own business. Victor became an industrial tycoon who invented twilight travel among many other things. Twilight space was so called because of the absence of light during flight, since the ship traveled faster than light. Twilight travel had revolutionized life in the quadrant by speeding the progress of trade and technology.

When Victor Ravenhold saved the CSA Navy with his own private fleet by defeating the Raiders and ending the Thirty Year Raider War, the CSA senate appointed Victor Ravenhold its first Regent by popular demand.

Victor had discovered the connection between the Raiders who'd plagued the CSA and the Draconian Empire, exposing the true agenda of the Draconians to dominate and enslave the entire quadrant.

Traveler, a dark-haired, handsome man of medium height with an intensity about him that his supporters found attractive. He had an elegant grace and eloquence of speech that even his detractors couldn't deny. Traveler's powerful leadership kept peace in the quadrant, while the Draconians conquered any isolated and unprotected planet, enslaving its population. As they had with every one of the Regents since Victor, the Draconians hated Traveler Ravenhold.

The famous Regent Squadron, the best fighter pilots of the CSA Navy, escorted Traveler on his tours of the CSA. As they sailed through twilight space, the six dark blue ships of Regent Squadron maintained close formation on Regent One.

Traveler's Cerberus Heavy Fighter, Regent One, was painted the royal blue associated with the Regency. The Ravenhold coat of arms, a gleaming silver shield with a golden castle over which flew a black raven, decorated the ship's fantails. The name painted in gold under the ship's canopy stated simply, *Traveler*. The white star of the CSA on the nose of the craft was embossed with the golden bolt of lightning long coupled with Traveler who always seemed to arrive like a bolt of lightning whenever trouble threatened the CSA.

This was a special trip for Traveler. He was visiting the CSA Fleet in the sector bordering Draconian space known as the Freedom Border Sector. Since it shared the longest continuous border with the Draconians, the CSA Navy was on constant alert against the Draconians' frequent attacks. Traveler had served in the Navy with distinction as a young man, and so looked forward to his rare opportunities to visit his Navy.

For the last month, the Freedom Fleet had prepared to receive their beloved Commander-in-Chief. The crews spent hours on spit and polish and paint on their proud ships. Traveler planned to spend a day of appreciation with the Navy, beginning with an acrobatic fly-by with Regent Squadron, followed by his addressing the fleet from the flagship, the battleship *Indomitable*, affectionately called the *Indy* by her crew. Traveler's address from the *Indy* would be carried via live vid feed to the rest of the fleet. Then he

planned to inspect the ships and their crews. He would follow-up by enjoying some free time and meals with men and women of Freedom Fleet.

At a point in their flight plan precisely one hour from Regent Squadron's arrival at its destination, a warning tone on Regent One's command console announced a terminal failure of the FTL system. Traveler communicated his emergency to Regent Squadron's leader, "Thor this is Traveler, I'm showing a complete failure of my FTL in fifteen seconds. I need to exit twilight space immediately."

"Regent Squadron, prepare to exit twilight space on Traveler's mark," Thor ordered.

"Three-two-one, mark," Traveler said calmly, and the squadron exited twilight space into the inky blackness of deserted Rim space like seven silver arrows with bright blue points appearing out of nowhere. It was a place made remarkable by its lonely emptiness. Even the stars were few in this remote sector of space.

Thor immediately contacted the CSA Navy Headquarters over his secure com channel, notifying them of Traveler's situation and their coordinates. Thor noted with a little trepidation on his Navigation or Nav panel, that Regent Squadron's location was at the closest point to Draconian space along its route to Freedom Fleet's location. He looked out of his ship's canopy at Traveler's ship. Regent One's power seemed to be failing as its lights flickered.

"Thor, now the ship's showing multiple system failures. It looks like I need to perform a cold restart on the ship's computer. Please standby." Regent One said as his ship stopped dead in space. The marker lights on Regent One's fantail died as Traveler powered down Regent One.

Regent Squadron drifted closer to Traveler's ship in concern for his welfare. They aimed their bright landing lights on Traveler's stricken fighter to give him light. In moments, CSA HQ relayed Thor's emergency call to Freedom Sector's Fleet, and the cruiser, *Hornet*, was dispatched immediately to recover Traveler and his stricken ship.



A proximity alert sounded on Thor's scanner. He glanced in panic at Regent One and noted it still lacked power. He prepared his tractor beam to pull Traveler's ship to

safety if needed, and searched the scanner for the enemy contact that had caused the alert. However, the scanner indicated no enemy threat. *Then what caused the alert?* He thought. He peered around the space nearby, but saw nothing but a few distant stars, and a mysterious growing blackness in the starscape.

“Thor,” one of his pilots called, “I’m reading an incoming bogey, but I can’t see anything on my threat scanner.”

Seconds later, the ships’ scanners announced urgently, “Danger, unknown object approaching.”

Thor’s scanner automatically switched its threat detection to *Unknown*, and a huge blip appeared on the scanner moving at incredible speed directly for his squadron’s position.



With the controls of Regent One mysteriously refusing to reset, Traveler remained unaware of the approaching danger. His ship was eerily silent and dead. Somehow he felt a greater danger and looked up from his fruitless efforts to get his stricken ship restarted. He saw the horror-struck expressions reflected on the faces of his comrades and looked toward where they had focused their attention. The empty space between the stars resolved into the huge form of an asteroid as it hurtled directly at him and his squadron. As the realization of his doom swept over him, Traveler uttered quietly, “Oh, Diane, I’m so sorry. God, please help her.”

The seven men of the proud Regent Squadron watched for a split-second in horror as the black hole in the starscape resolved into an enormous rogue asteroid just before it struck them. The explosion of their sleek ships as they impacted on the asteroid’s surface was muted in the vacuum of space. The asteroid swept on and was lost in the chaos of space leaving a cloud of debris from the stricken squadron. The scattering cloud of dust and debris slowly drifted away.

Ten thousand meters from the crash site, a stealthy one-man spy ship powered up and headed back for Draconian space. It had recorded the incident on its vid system.



Later, the CSA Cruiser, *Hornet*, arrived on the scene. Her captain became worried when all Com traffic from Regent Squadron stopped suddenly just prior to his arrival. As his ship exited hyperspace, the *Hornet's* captain wondered if his ship might have missed the Regent's squadron. Perhaps the squadron had moved on, maybe Traveler had repaired the problem with the ship's FTL drive and continued on to rendezvous with the fleet, or perhaps the *Hornet* had dropped out of twilight space at the wrong location. His crew double-checked all options until one of the cruiser's scanner technicians reported that the nearby debris field contained materials and components from CSA ships.

A terrible pall hung over the *Hornet*. The captain performed thorough scans of the area and confirmed the tragic accident. The recovery crew brought aboard a piece of the royal blue fighter hull plating displaying part of the well known Ravenhold coat of arms, the only evidence of Traveler's sad demise. The *Hornet's* captain initiated the call to Fleet HQ, and soon all of the Commonwealth Star Alliance mourned the loss of Traveler Ravenhold.



Within Draconian space, an enormous ship sailed, unmanned, toward a distant sun where it would disappear without a trace. After a decade of planning, the project to eliminate the hated Ravenhold Regent had finally succeeded. The enormous ship was an ore miner used for mining asteroids. Its conversion served one purpose, to grab the huge, carefully selected asteroid and drive it at the highest possible speed toward a target. Usually these mining ships lumbered slowly to maintain safety around the huge asteroids they mined.

From within the Draconian Empire border, the giant ore miner had released the asteroid at unbelievable speed. The asteroid sailed on, unnoticed, to the targeted coordinates based upon the intelligence of the Traveler's flight plan from a Draconian agent within the Regent's staff. Back in the CSA, another agent of the Empire had sabotaged the Traveler's fighter. Those agents would die in 'accidents' before the day was over. The tiny ship's pilot, who had observed and recorded the event, escaped back to the Draconian Empire safely.

The carefully planned timing of the asteroid's launch and the breakdown the Traveler's FTL drive succeeded beyond all expectations. The attentive pilots of Regent Squadron were all distracted with Traveler's dilemma. No one noticed the huge asteroid as it hurtled silently toward the stalled ships until it was too late.

After ten years of planning, the Draconians had achieved the perfect assassination of the hated Ravenhold Regent. Now began the second phase of their plan to overthrow the CSA government, a plan encompassing another decade of patient undermining of confidence in the Regent's young wife, Diane, using their carefully groomed media sources.

The Draconians' only mistake was in greatly underestimating the abilities of the woman with whom they planned to contend. Their plan, like the assassination of her husband, was almost perfect.



Chapter Two

Earlier in the morning that same day. . .

A large black dragon with a strange flowing mane of silver-white hair descended upon the peaceful town. The dragon spewed flames down onto the thatched roofs of the huts. The townsfolk raced around screaming in terror as smaller black dragons swooped in and grabbed them on the run and flew away. Some of the dragons fought over their screaming victims, and some ate the villagers and swept in for more.

The grass roofs and wooden huts caught fire easily. Soon wildfires swept through the town. The fearful townsfolk fled from their burning homes. The air above the town filled with thick black smoke. The dragons attacked without mercy, leaving everything in ruins.

A raven dropped from the sky and attacked the large black dragon. The raven attacked the deadly dragon fearlessly. It dipped and evaded the dragon's deadly claws and blasts of flame with uncanny agility. High above the battle chaos, the raven's mate

sat guarding her lone egg. Her mate's unexpected attack was giving the terror-filled townsfolk time to escape.

The mother raven saw a lone dragon circling high above the battle. Her quick eye spotted the circling dragon drop a large stone from its claws toward the battle and her mate. Frantically, the raven screamed her warning, but her mate did not hear her call over the den of battle, and the stone struck him with an explosion of ebony feathers and dashed him to the ground. The female raven waited for her mate to rouse himself and return, but the dragons screamed in victory and methodically continued their decimation of the helpless townsfolk.

The mother raven saw the ruined landscape of the formerly peaceful valley that now reeked with plumes of smoke. Suddenly, her view was obscured when the huge black dragon with the silvery mane flapped its mighty wings, and hovered in front of her hiding place. The evil eyes of the dragon glowed orange and its breast seemed to flicker with flame a moment before the raven was blasted with the incredible heat of its fiery breath. The mother raven bowed her head over the nest to protect her unborn chick as she felt her feathers scorch from her body in overwhelming agony.

Diane Ravenhold awoke with a violent start from her nightmare and looked over to see her husband, Traveler, lying peacefully beside her. The light from Tranquility's moon gleamed off his curly black hair and contrasted with the white satin pillow case. Taking a deep breath, she forced her racing pulse to slow and wiped her perspiring brow with a tissue. She seldom had nightmares and none she could remember with such vivid and realistic quality.

Diane slipped from her bedside to the thick carpeted floor. Feeling deeply disturbed by the dream and a strong spirit of fear that held her in its grip, she knelt shivering beside her bed. She wanted to pray, but couldn't clear the pain and confusion from her mind.

A moment later she felt Traveler's strong arm around her shoulders. "It was the nightmare again. Wasn't it, darling?"

Diane nodded.

Traveler hugged her as she trembled. "That's the third time?" he asked.

She nodded again, and her silent tears drenched his cheek and neck. Traveler held her for a few moments and helped her back into the large, soft bed.

He covered her, kissed her cheek tenderly, and snuggled under the covers, spoon fashion. The disturbing dream was quickly vanishing from her sleepy mind. With a sigh of relief, Diane nestled back against Traveler and drifted into a dreamless sleep.



Diane Ravenhold delayed her parting from Traveler with unusual trepidation in the morning. She clung to him as he was leaving early for his day with the fleet. Traveler noticed his young wife's worried expression. "What is it, darling?"

Diane hugged him close. "I wish you weren't going today, dear. Can't you delay your trip for just one day?"

Traveler held his lovely wife at arm's length, looking into her green eyes and caressing her brunette hair. He shook his head with a reassuring smile, and said, "The military has a set schedule, darling. We don't want to disappoint them after all their hard work in getting ready for me."

She nodded resignedly.

Traveler changed the subject, "What's your itinerary today?"

"I'm visiting Miss Xiu at Gladstone Primary School."

"Miss Xiu," he mused as if reminiscing. "She's the best teacher I've ever had. She made the lessons come alive. Until I met Miss Xiu, father was sure I would never finish school. She taught me the joy of learning."

Diane looked up at her husband in amazement. She and her staff had interviewed hundreds of applicants and reviewed thousands of documents as they researched the candidates for her Lifetime Achievement award for the best teachers in the CSA. "I knew you attended her school, but it never dawned on me that she was your teacher," she stated.

Traveler observed that his wife was relaxing a little from her worry about his trip. She was as tall as he when not wearing her high heels. It was a little awkward, but he kissed her. "With all your research, I don't know how you could've missed it. I'll tell you

this, I couldn't agree with your choice more. Miss Xiu is a gifted teacher who has devoted her life to making children into students of life."

"I'm glad you agree, Traveler," she replied. "You know, everyone assumes you actually run my projects." Diane grinned at her husband.

"I know," he admitted. "I could never focus on the level of detail that you do, Diane. I hope you don't mind me getting the credit. You know I try to correct that impression, but for some reason, no one believes me."

"It's not your fault, darling. It's a problem I've had all my life. Everyone assumes I'm the typical shallow model without a brain. It's a ruse I've learned to cultivate. It disarms people and causes many to underestimate me."

"How come I never felt that way about you?"

"When you and I met, I wasn't interested in influencing you in any way."

Traveler smiled as he remembered seeing the CSA's senior senator's stunning daughter for the first time. He instantly determined to marry her, and she deflected every attempt to engage her in conversation.

Traveler was ten years older than Diane, and she knew of his reputation as a playboy. Traveler knew the political value of being the most eligible bachelor in the CSA. However, when he saw Diane, he somehow knew she was right for him. His challenge was she didn't jump at the chance to accept his interest. This resistance on Diane's part made her more endearing to him. Traveler looked into her eyes again and said, "You were quite short with me."

"Your reputation had preceded you."

"It's a reputation not of my doing. I assure you."

"A fact I've learned much to my chagrin," Diane said. "Between the paparazzi and the vidnews, it's a wonder anyone ever gets the truth about public figures. Now I'm Traveler's live-in bimbo by some and a goddess by others. Neither of which is true, but I prefer the goddess to the bimbo." Diane smiled at her husband.

Traveler nodded, and said, "So what changed your mind about me? You never did say."

"I had my staff investigate you and found all those tales of your many conquests were all developed by your detractors."

Traveler looked at her with astonishment.

“Details, darling,” Diane said. “It’s all about the details.”

He shook his head.

“I also realized you never treated me as if I were a trophy. You were genuinely interested in me. Until I came to that realization, I never gave marriage serious consideration. You never gave up and here we are.”

“I love you, Diane.” Traveler said as he kissed her.

They embraced, and Diane pulled him close. She rested her head on his shoulder and moaned softly with pleasure. “I love you, Traveler.” Diane replied as she held his hand, reluctant to let her husband go.

Traveler smiled encouragingly and headed out of their bedroom. Diane noted his chiefs-of-staff and security waiting in the hallway before the thick oak door closed.



The short shuttle flight from the white alabaster marble Ravenhold Palace to the red brick Gladstone School took Diane slightly off the main sky-traffic lanes over Harmony. Streams of every sort of shuttle flowed in layers crisscrossing the sky over Harmony in dizzying patterns.

The morning sun sparkled off the shiny metal of the traffic. The towering buildings with their connecting walks stretched like huge trees into the azure blue morning sky. This was rush hour. The city was a beehive of activity. The focus of the city was the giant six-sided, star-shaped structure of the CSA Senate. The center of the giant star was the senate chamber, where the political business of the Commonwealth took place. The main traffic lanes through Harmony ended at each point of the star. A wide circular plaza with fountains and pools surrounded the building.

To Diane, Harmony seemed the epitome of architectural beauty and symmetry. A thousand years of urban planning never failed to impress every visitor for the first time. Diane always found the cityscape fantastic, yet disconcerting somehow. Within the palace compound, Diane found a respite from the constant political machinations of Harmony with Traveler.



Chapter Three

The little gray-haired teacher, Miss Xiu, smiled and bowed as the graceful and beautiful wife of the Regent swept into her classroom. Diane smiled and shook hands with Miss Xiu's students. The teacher and her students immediately adored Traveler's young wife. The fifth graders reflected their strong attraction for the Regent's beautiful wife in their eyes. Every girl wanted to be as graceful and lovely as her and every boy wanted to be as lucky as Traveler to have a wife like Diane.

As Traveler's wife, Diane was extremely popular in the CSA. She was well-spoken and took on projects to help those who were in need or suffering. Her projects resulted in positive results, and not the usual bureaucratic nightmare that made a good idea implemented by governments into a morass of red-tape.

Gladstone Primary School was awash in Diane's security detail and the media people who trailed her every move. However, Diane had insisted the detail remain outside of the classroom during classes. Diane provided a network newsvid feed from her private professional vid team.

Miss Xiu's reputation for excellence in education was evidenced in the great number of exceptional students who had come under her tutelage. For over fifty years Miss Xiu's teaching had generated students who kept their eagerness to learn throughout the rest of their lives.

Miss Xiu studied each of the candidates for her class before selecting the next year's students. Her classes were highly sought by parents wanting the best teacher for their children. She chose not only the best academically, but those who showed great potential, but who hadn't achieved that potential. Miss Xiu looked at these idling superior intellects as a mission for her personal touch. As she had done for Traveler, when he was a boy, she did for many others including a number of children in the room.

Diane Ravenhold watched the diminutive teacher as she moved among her students encouraging, cheering, and gently correcting. Once the lesson began the students were engrossed in the presentation, and forgot about their important visitor. Diane Ravenhold smiled and listened, as she remembered her own lessons on those

same subjects many years before. She had to agree with Traveler's assessment that Miss Xiu had the knack of making the lessons come alive and challenging the imaginations of her students.

Miss Xiu's classroom was laid out differently from most. She had a ring of stools around a low dais from which she taught while standing. Each ten or eleven-year-old student sat perched on a stool. Diane sat in the middle of the circle watching Miss Xiu with as much interest as the students. A few held their datapads indifferently as the students' eyes were riveted on the little teacher.

"Today, class, we will have a review," Miss Xiu stated. The students looked around eagerly, in hopes she would call upon them so that they might demonstrate their knowledge of the subjects of the review. Miss Xiu pursed her lips and asked, "Who can tell us the name of the first CSA Regent?" All the students waved their hands excitedly. "Eric?" she said, nodding at a smaller, blond-haired boy with bright blue eyes.

"Victor Ravenhold," Eric stated proudly. He looked at Miss Xiu to see if she was pleased.

"Very good, Eric," Miss Xiu said and led the class in applause.

Miss Xiu turned away indicating a change in subject and pointed at a willowy, tall black-haired girl with brown eyes. "Susan," she said, "tell us how humanity came to the stars."

Susan took a deep breath and nodded, "In the late twenty-second century, the first long-range sleeper ship, the *Ark*, left Old-Earth. The *Ark* landed on Tranquility over a hundred years later."

Miss Xiu nodded and clapped her tiny hands, "Excellent." She turned to another group and asked, "What watershed event in Old Earth's history is considered to be responsible for mankind's move to this quadrant?" She nodded at a red-headed boy with ears that stuck out from his head, freckles and a smile with a tooth missing. "Alfred?" She asked.

Alfred thought for a moment, then he answered, "The discovery of evidence of the origin of the universe on Old Earth in the Twenty-first Century A.D."

Miss Xiu gazed at the precocious youth whose smiling eyes indicated he knew he had only given part of the answer. "Alfred?" she asked again, looking sternly at him.

The carrot-haired boy grinned impishly and continued, "This produced a radical revision of the understanding of the Earth's origin by the scientific community. The shift in the foundation of scientific thought resulted in a sweeping re-alignment that birthed the new Age of Enlightenment on Ancient Earth."

Diane looked at Alfred with amazement. She tried to remember when her tutor had taught her this history of Old Earth, and reasoned that she must have been about this age. Diane also noted Miss Xiu's slight nod at her star pupil.

"And what was the ultimate result of this time of scientific enlightenment, Alfred." Miss Xiu stated, cutting off many eager hands that waved wildly to gain her attention. Diane figured this game of mental jousting between teacher and student had gone on before, with Miss Xiu drawing out Alfred's perfect, but short answers.

Alfred grinned impishly. He closed his eyes, frowned in concentration, and said, "There were two major events that resulted from this brief time of scientific advancement that exceeded all that had gone before in the history of mankind's development. The first, and most important, was a the Great Oppression in which a few evil and powerful people attempted to enslave humanity, first through the corrupted media and politicians, then by brute force through terrorism and persecution."

Miss Xiu and her students nodded as Alfred used his fingers to tick off the important points. She'd taken great pains to make sure each one knew this critical nexus in history that brought about their own existence in this distant star system from Old Earth.

Alfred closed his eyes and concentrated as he continued his answer, "The second was that a few of the oppressed people developed long-range space travel and abandoned the Old Earth in the mega-ship, the *Ark*, for this quadrant. They brought along plant and animal specimens with thousands of fleeing people weeks before the Rebellion grew to the great Third World War that unleashed a nuclear holocaust upon those who remained." Alfred opened his eyes with a triumphant expression.

Miss Xiu beamed at him, and said, "Very well, Alfred." She turned her little body once again and faced Diane, "Perhaps you would be kind enough explain to us again how that great ship, the *Ark*, was able to cross the vast expanse of space with so many aboard, madam Regent."

Diane smiled and answered, "Well, I hope I get this right. It has been many years since I studied this subject." She cocked her head as she tried to remember the answer and said, "The *Ark* was the most advanced ship ever designed. Some say the Age of Enlightenment came just in time to save a remnant of humanity from the holocaust that all but destroyed the Old Earth and brought about its Second Dark Age.

"Like the ancient Pilgrims who left the European continent for the New World seeking religious freedom, the refugees on the *Ark* fled from the Earth and witnessed at a great distance its terrible burning as the warlords fought over the scorched remains.

"With the nightmarish vision of the Earth's struggle still fresh in their minds, the people of the *Ark* entered their slumber chambers and traveled the vast distance in a state of suspended animation, along with their precious cargo of fertilized plant seeds and animal ovum."

Diane felt the flow of the answer welling from her childhood memories and continued, "Upon its arrival in this sector, the *Ark* awoke her sleeping crew who began the process of rousing the refugees and preparing the plants and animals for their new home. Within a year, they arrived here on *Tranquility*, to begin life anew." Diane looked around at Miss Xiu's students, who were listening raptly.

"Exactly," the little teacher said with an encouraging smile, clapping along with the class.

A small cherub-faced girl with curly strawberry-blonde hair raised her hand.

"Zoe?" Miss Xiu said, recognizing her pupil.

"If all of the people on the *Ark* were good people fleeing evil, where did the Draconians and raiders come from?" Zoe asked.

"That's a good question, Zoe. Madam Regent?" Miss Xiu asked when her glance at the younger woman indicated Diane's wife knew the answer.

Diane looked around at the students and said, "Not everyone was, as you said 'good,' Zoe. Some were refugees, and the children of refugees who had yet to make their own decision about how they lived their lives. Although there is no evidence of such, it's believed that some aggressive contingent from Old Earth escaped at the last minute and followed the refugees to their new home.

“We believe it was from one or all of these factions that founded the Draconian Empire. There are always people who choose to do bad things. Some people have trouble deciding between good and evil. The Draconians duped many into rebelling against the new leaders of Tranquility. Many of these misguided people joined the Draconians against the newly formed Commonwealth.”

Miss Xiu thanked Diane, and moved her pupils back to the study carols to begin their math exercise.

Diane thought Miss Xiu’s energy was amazing. She flitted around the classroom with the energy of a woman half her age, and far more than Diane had witnessed from any teacher in her experience. The classroom seemed to come alive around her as Miss Xiu guided her young students through the adventure of learning as if they were seeking treasure. Diane glanced at her datapad with surprise to find her time with Miss Xiu quickly coming to an end.



The auditorium of Gladstone Primary School was packed to capacity for Diane’s address. Every student was eager to see Traveler’s beautiful wife in person. To many, Diane seemed like a beautiful princess in a fairy tale. The media lined the walls of the auditorium with their vidcams. Diane Ravenhold walked out onto the platform in a royal blue dress with a simple platinum tiara in her hair. Diane stood at a podium on the stage addressing the crowded auditorium of Gladstone Primary School. Her image appeared behind her on the giant vid screen as she addressed the faculty, students and honored guests. The orchestra pit was filled with reporters, as was the narrow aisle at the back of the auditorium.

She continued her comments about Miss Xiu, “As I speak to you today, on the vid screen above me, are the pictures of the men and women who have been Miss Xiu’s students. Her uniquely powerful teaching style has been an incredible influence on all our lives.” Pictures of senators, media talents, leaders in every field, and, finally, Traveler’s image played over her head as she spoke.

“Getting an education is important. Becoming a student of life is more important, but being teachable is the most important of all. In rare occasions we meet someone

who can unlock the key to the joy of learning within us. A person who helps us link knowledge, with understanding, and wisdom. Knowledge is the truth, understanding is the application of truth, and wisdom is the appropriate application of truth based upon a greater knowledge and understanding.”

Diane walked over to Miss Xiu, who was seated on the stage and whose short legs kept her tiny feet from reaching the floor. Diane placed her hand on the teacher’s shoulder. “Consider the treasure we’ve received from one who understands these principals and has made it her life mission to unlock within her students their ability to realize their potential. It is for this reason that I present to Miss Xiu the Lifetime Achievement for Teaching Award.”

The audience applauded enthusiastically as Diane brought a solid platinum statue from the podium. The statue depicted Miss Xiu leaning over the back of a seated student giving direction. The foot high statue was heavy, and the little teacher beamed as she held it on her lap.

Miss Xiu stood and walked to the podium and stood on a stool to address the school. As her comments started, Diane, who had taken a seat, heard the low rumble of what sounded like large transports landing nearby. The audio tech had to increase the public address volume to overcome the almost constant roar that continued through Miss Xiu’s comments.



The applause from the auditorium flooded out into the hall that smelled of germicidal cleaner used in almost every school in the quadrant. Diane Ravenhold was prepared for the rush of the paparazzi and her security staff, but the hallway was empty except for a tall, thin, middle aged man with silver-white hair and goatee and gold symbol of Caduceus, a winged staff entwined by two serpents. She recognized the Ravenhold family physician, Dr. Flemming.

Beside him was a man of obvious military bearing wearing a dress-white uniform. Diane knew enough about military insignia to know the man was a high ranking admiral in the CSA Navy. He was a short, barrel-chested man with bushy gray eyebrows and thick iron-gray hair. His hat was under his left arm, and he had a look of a man on

official Navy business. The access to the hallway was blocked by armed Marines, and Diane could still hear the low throb of a military transport standing by in the schoolyard.

Diane looked into Dr. Flemming's eyes and saw an expression of deep sadness. The admiral's expression was one of set stone, as a man looks when doing something when he is asked to do something especially painful.

Duty. Diane thought abstractly, *He is doing his duty, but what duty?* The sound of rushing wind filled the hall and the edges of her sight turned black, she felt her heart thumping in her chest and her legs felt rubbery. She sat down on the hard floor, and the noise of rushing wind grew louder like a great storm. The two men were walking toward her in slow motion now. And then they were framed in blackness. As her vision shrank, Diane Ravenhold heard the maniacal laughing cry of the huge black dragon that had haunted her dreams. "Oh, Traveler," she sighed as she slumped, unconscious to the floor.



Chapter Four

The stout admiral dashed forward to catch Diane a moment before her head hit the hard white terrazzo floor. He looked at Dr. Flemming, "She knew? You heard her, too, didn't you doc?"

The doctor nodded, "I tried to tell the cabinet, she is the most perceptive woman I've ever met. Traveler mentioned she'd been having terrible premonitions, and that I should keep an eye on her," Dr Flemming said, as he scanned her with his mediscanner. Diane was overdue for her annual physical, but her busy schedule had kept her away from him. He performed the scan and then stopped at her abdomen. Running the scan again, he stopped and shook his head sadly.

"She's pregnant then, doc?" the admiral asked.

Dr. Flemming looked his companion in disbelief that turned quickly to an icy professionalism.

"Sorry, doc, it's just something I've learned to detect in women. They have a certain glow, and I can usually tell."

Dr. Flemming felt in his medi-kit for an ammonia ampoule. "Please keep your glowing comments to yourself. The poor woman will have enough to deal with for the next few days. I shall discuss her medical issues with her privately at a more appropriate time. Not a word, Admiral Graham."

The admiral nodded.

"Say it." The skinny doctor ordered looking into the powerful man's eyes with determination.

"I promise to say nothing about it, doctor."

Dr. Flemming nodded with satisfaction and ordered, "Now carry her to the teacher's lounge across the hall. Our next job needs to be done in privacy and with tact. Do you want to tell her or shall I?"

"It's my duty, doctor," Admiral Graham said. "You'd better watch over her while I do it."

Dr. Flemming nodded again and broke the ammonia ampoule under Diane's nose after they had settled her on a couch. In a moment, she coughed and her eyes opened.



A feeling of profound sadness swept over Diane Ravenhold as she looked into the eyes of the assistant to the Navy Chief-of-Staff. Her lip trembled, and she tried to control the flood of emotions.

The admiral watched Diane Ravenhold's attempt at bravery and stated quietly, "Ma'am, I am Admiral Thomas Graham, adjutant to the Navy Chief-of-Staff. It is my sad duty to inform you that as of zero-ten-hundred this morning, your husband, Traveler, was killed with his entire Regent Squadron in a terrible accident as he traveled to his scheduled meeting with the fleet protecting Freedom Sector. I wish to express to you the Navy's and my deep personal condolences, Madam Regent."

He waited for her to digest his tragic news. But she merely sniffed back a tear, and brushed an errant lock of hair from her face.

When she said nothing, he continued officially, "Diane Ravenhold, as the surviving Ravenhold, it is my duty to inform you that if you accept the duty, the title of

Regent of the Commonwealth Star Alliance falls to you. Should you produce a Ravenhold heir that child would ascend to the Regency upon reaching the age of twenty-one.”

She looked the admiral in the eye and said, “Thank you for your truthfulness, Admiral Graham.” Diane paused for a second to think, *God, give me strength and wisdom*. “Doctor Flemming, thank you for your kindness too.”

She remembered the times she and Traveler had spoken of this eventuality. She’d always dismissed the thought as impossible, and she couldn’t believe it was happening now. Obliquely, she remembered the Regency paralleled a monarchy. One-hundred years ago, the heroic Victor Ravenhold, her dead husband’s several great-grandfather, had been appointed Regent by popular acclaim. The CSA Senate eventually confirmed the Regency with a permanent change in the Constitution.

Diane quickly reviewed the possibilities, and stated firmly, “It is with a sense of duty and honor that I accept the Regency.” She thought for a moment, wiping away the last of her tears with a deep breath. “I assume the Chief Justice of the CSA Supreme Court is waiting to swear me in as Regent?”

The sound of numerous grav-copters and shuttles landing around the school surrounded them. Heavy boot steps echoed up the hall and Diane knew her husband’s security contingent had arrived and were now stationed outside the teacher’s lounge.

There was a loud conversation in the hall and Diane heard, “You will get out of the way at once, young man, or I will tell your father that you were naughty.”

Diane smiled in spite of her pain and waved to Admiral Graham. He mumbled something into his sleeve, and tiny, gray-haired Miss Xiu rushed into the room with an expression of deep sadness. “They just announced the tragic news, Diane. I am so sorry. The Commonwealth Star Alliance has lost a great man.” Miss Xiu enfolded the taller woman in a warm embrace and Diane could no longer hold back the torrent of tears.

Dr. Flemming and Admiral Graham stepped into the hall to make arrangements for Diane’s transport and immediate swearing in giving the young Regent a moment to grieve privately.

Miss Xiu wept silently with Diane. When Diane had finally composed herself, Miss Xiu offered her a makeup kit. Diane dialed in her personal settings, and held it over her smudged face. The mirror on the kit reflected the kit's function as it remade her face in seconds. She felt the cool bursts of air as the kit applied makeup in just the right amounts.

"Better, my dear?" Miss Xiu said, as she had to thousands of students in her lifetime.

Diane nodded bravely.

Miss Xiu picked up Diane's datapad and entered her personal access information. "You may call me anytime, day or night, Madam Regent."

"Thank you, Miss Xiu. It's time for me to go. Please tell the faculty and students how wonderful it was for me to share this day with them."

Diane Ravenhold stood and straightened her suit. With her shoulders back and her head up, she walked out into the hall to face the crowd she'd expected earlier. Only now they were like crazed sharks yelling questions she considered obscene in this time of her deep remorse. Surrounded by her burly security team, Diane walked with great control and grace out to her executive shuttle. The military grav-copters were already hovering in the air surrounding her shuttle.



Diane rode to the palace complex with Dr. Flemming seated beside her and Admiral Graham sitting across from her in Diane's armored luxury shuttle. The sleek black craft was surrounded by armed military transports. The emergency swearing in was done on the trip back to Diane's palace compound with Dr. Flemming and Admiral Graham as witnesses.

Diane's face was set against her loss. Her stony expression seemed to impress the admiral. He had never seen the late Regent's wife in any setting other than public venues in which she appeared to be an attractive fashion model on Traveler's arm. She'd always had an appropriate comment or kind word that endeared her to everyone who met her, but Traveler's leadership had eclipsed all but her evident beauty.

With an expression of intense concentration, Diane looked into Admiral Graham's eyes and ordered simply, "Tell me."

"Madam Regent," the admiral began, "our preliminary reports indicate Traveler's personal fighter, Regent One, had multiple system failures in route to Freedom Sector at ten-hundred hours this morning. He and Regent Squadron dropped out of Twilight Space about one hour from their destination. While they were trying to get Regent One re-started, the CSA Navy immediately dispatched the cruiser *Hornet* to assist Traveler.

"Upon arrival at the scene, the *Hornet* found only a few bits of debris from the ships of Regent Squadron. The investigation indicates a rogue asteroid, sailed through the area, struck the idling squadron, and swept on out of the sector." He paused to let Diane absorb the information.

Diane's green eyes were bright with the new information while her own premonition ran continuously in her mind. When Admiral Graham mentioned the huge asteroid slamming into Regent Squadron, Diane saw the image of the dragon dropping the huge stone on the raven, and she knew that this part of the dream related to Traveler's death. She leaned forward and turned to look at both men and asked in a quiet, even tone, "You stated this was an 'accident'?"

"Yes, Regent." Admiral Graham said in his deep voice.

"Are you *sure* it was an accident, Admiral?"

Now it was Admiral Graham's turn to be surprised. He'd expected sobbing or crying, anything, but the calm, determined, business nature. "Yes, Madam Regent, could it be anything else?"

Diane leaned back in her plush seat and mused over the information. The male raven in her dream was Traveler. That would mean she was the female raven. The dragons were their enemies, and it was simple to draw the line of reasoning from the dragon to the Draconians. The terrible image of the huge dragon queen destroying her almost overwhelmed her stern mental defenses. Then she remembered the tiny chick in the raven's nest. She sat up straight, and looked at Dr. Flemming and asked, "Am I pregnant?"

The sudden question was so unexpected that the doctor responded before he could stop himself, "Yes, but—"

“Doctor Flemming,” Diane cut the flustered physician off, “you and the Admiral must understand that there are forces at work here of which you are unaware. I am just beginning to comprehend the gravity of what is happening.”

Diane turned to the Admiral and stated, “I can assure you, sir, my husband’s death was not an accident. At this time, you shall keep my comments between us. When we have settled the important matters that demand our immediate attention, you and I will go further into this matter in detail.”

“Yes, Madam Regent,” the Admiral found himself responding automatically to her use of authority.

“I do not want anyone to know that I am not accepting the results of the investigation, do you both understand?”

They nodded obediently.

She looked at both men sternly, and they were amazed at her strength of purpose. Diane’s eyes were hard and her mouth was set. “After the matters before us are resolved, gentlemen, I shall look into this investigation personally. You, Admiral, shall be my chief investigator. I command that you make sure all evidence is safeguarded and take control of it immediately in my name. I shall grant you special credentials in this matter. No one will have authority over you, except me.” She took his datapad and entered her personal information. “You may call me at any time.”

The shuttle landed on the lawn of the Ravenhold Palace. The hatch opened and she stepped out between her two CSA Marine guards in their dress uniforms. The palace staff was lined up, already dressed in mourning black. Many sobbed and looked down as she passed, but Diane walked gracefully through the crowd and smiled bravely as she entered the palace.



Chapter Five

Regent Diane Ravenhold lay in bed hugging her husband’s pillow to her body. She was afraid to go to sleep, and worried that she would have the nightmare once more. As she thought about the dream, she felt an odd touch within her mind, and

suddenly realized how she could learn the truth about her terrible vision. Diane summoned her steward and asked that he bring the chaplain of the Brotherhood who remained on-call within the palace.

In a few minutes, a sleepy-eyed monk with a homely looking face, stringy gray-streaked hair and twisted teeth rushed into her sitting room behind the old Ravenhold family servant. "This is Brother John, Madam Regent," the steward announced and seemed to disappear.

Diane stood beside the huge granite fireplace with a roaring fire against the late night chill. She wrapped her arms around herself wearing a pink satin robe and dainty slippers. "Please sit, Brother John," She offered, pointing to the chair.

"How may I serve you, Madam Regent?" the sleepy-eyed monk asked.

A palace server came in wearing her pajamas and robe, evidently sent by the chief steward, with a tray of hot tea, and Diane sat down beside the monk and waited until the server left the sitting room.

"Brother John, recently I've been plagued with the same nightmare three times, and I remember it now as if I'd lived it. The last time I had the dream was the night before Traveler died. I believe the dream is an important portent of things to come, and tonight it came to me that you might help me understand its meaning."

Brother John suddenly looked alert. He may have expected the mourning widow to request his service for solace in her loss, but Diane's request seemed to intrigue the humble monk. He sat up on the edge of his seat and said softly, "Please, relate your dream, Madam Regent."

Diane closed her eyes as she related her dream in detail to Brother John. He nodded from time to time as if noting a point in his mind. When she finished, he smiled and said, "I appreciate that you considered me worthy of this honor to help you. I'd like a moment to meditate before I give you my response, Madam Regent."

Diane nodded her assent, and Brother John sat quietly for a few moments as if waiting for something. He nodded his bowed head slightly from time to time as if listening. Diane sipped her steaming tea patiently.

Brother John looked up at last. “You already know who the ravens are, Madam Regent. The male raven was Traveler, the female is you, and the chick must be your unborn child. The huge dragon is the leader of the Draconian Empire.”

“The Tyrant,” Diane said, nodding as she recalled the brutal Draconian Emperor, the nemesis of the Ravenholds for generations.

Brother John shook his head uncertainly, “I don’t think so, Madam Regent. You referred to the dragon as a ‘she’ in your narrative. Whether you meant to or not, you’ve indicated the dragon leader in your dream is not the man known as the Tyrant.”

Diane shook her head in confusion, but she didn’t have time to press the issue. She determined to give the matter of a Draconian other than the Tyrant as the true leader of the Empire more thought in the future.

Brother John continued, “The stone represents the asteroid, and you already understand this was not an accident, but the dream indicates it was a carefully planned assassination.”

“I must ask you to say nothing about this to anyone,” Diane stated.

“You may rest assured, Madam Regent, anything we discuss will remain your secret.”

Diane looked appreciative.

Brother John continued, “That only leaves us with the obvious attack by the Draconians upon the CSA, represented by the hoard of dragons attacking the fleeing refugees and innocent victims.”

“Yes, this gives me great fear for our future, Brother John.”

“I offer you this word of encouragement.” Brother John said, “In the ancient scriptures, God commanded Joshua, who was taking over the leadership of the Hebrew nation after Moses’ death, to be strong and very courageous. The Lord honors faith and courage in the leaders He has chosen, and I believe He has chosen you, Madam Regent. He has prepared you for the terrible time ahead. The dream was given to you three times, meaning its content was very important and would happen soon. The fact that the third dream came on the eve of your husband’s death is not a coincidence.”

“I thank you for your wisdom and encouragement, Brother John,” she said gravely as she stood, indicating the interview was over.

“I will be praying for you, Madam Regent.”

“I thank you for your faithfulness, Brother John.” She shook his hand and the steward appeared at the door to show the man out.

Diane returned to her bed once more. She was weary, but no longer worried by the unknown factors of her terrible dream.



As Diane slept, she had another vision. She saw a cute black-haired infant followed by a series of images of the child growing up. She saw him as an adorable toddler, a young sad-eyed boy, a pre-teen with a serious expression, a handsome, dark-eyed late teenager, an attractive young adult who looked amazingly like her dear, late husband, Traveler. Then, she saw a series of glimpses of the same man as he aged into an elegant looking, gray-haired man. Diane saw him surrounded by various people, but she noticed the consistent presence of several strangers, and she realized these were his close supporters.

Then her vision moved on to the familiar entrance of Ravenhold Industries. She saw glimpses of a number of projects that were unfamiliar. She stood before a computer, and she could tell she was having a conversation with the machine. In another building within the huge complex, teams of engineers worked on the plans for a new starship. Then she saw glimpses of amazing weaponry and armor for the strange new ship.

Diane envisioned a fantastic new ship that changed over time from an elegant yacht to a super-battleship.

During all this, Diane felt no fear, just curiosity and great interest. She knew this was an answer to her dilemma. Diane focused on her dream trying to remember all the fleeting details.

Diane’s vision included ships bearing the dragon emblem of the Draconian Empire descending upon Tranquility. There was a great armada with hoards of enemy soldiers. Her vision expanded, and she saw the similar events happening on most of the great worlds in the CSA. She was appalled at the thousands of ships and tens-o-thousands of soldiers the Draconians must be amassing even now.

She wondered what had happened to the vaunted CSA Navy. In a flash, she saw the remnants of her Navy valiantly holding the line against the hoard of attacking ships. Her vision showed her their effort was useless. There were simply too many attacking enemy ships. The Navy ships were quickly enveloped and most destroyed. The loss of her Navy, and all the valiant people who had tried to protect the CSA greatly saddened Diane. However, her vision swept on, leaving her no time to mourn.

In flashes, Diane's vision showed her the Draconians attacking the worlds of the CSA and murdering the helpless CSA citizens without reason or mercy. Buildings were bombed and defenseless ships were shot down for sport. She saw the complete dominance of the CSA, and its enslavement. Her heart sank as she realized the attackers had used the vast resources of wealth and technology against the CSA.

The dream ended in series of chaotic flashes of images of horrific violence. The images were so disturbing that Diane tried not to think of them. The death and destruction to her precious CSA was overwhelming.

Diane's mind was numbed, but from that numbness, a plan began to form. She could not permit the destruction of her people and her family to happen on her watch. Remembering Brother John's words of encouragement, Diane knew that she must stop them. Somehow, she had to use the brief images of her vision to stop the Draconians before they gained a foothold.

As her vision had forced her to see the hopeless and helpless fate of the CSA, she began to ask how this could happen? Questions whirled through her awakening mind like a storm. How could the CSA Intelligence not be aware of the danger? Why hadn't the leaders of the CSA been warned? Why didn't the people fight back against their attackers? How could there be so many Draconian ships and soldiers?

Diane Ravenhold's numbness faded into determination. She focused on the plan in her dream, and the disturbing images faded. She began to see a way out of the horrible future that awaited the CSA. She replayed the dream in her memory and made subtle changes to the current circumstances, and noted the outcome.

When the plan had repeated itself several times with small refinements, Diane awoke, clear-headed and determined to carry out the plan in her dream. She sat down to enter her observations and ideas on her personal datapad.



Chapter Six

It was barely five o'clock in the morning, and Diane's staff stumbled groggily about the palace following her orders to make arrangements as she directed. All, that is, except for the palace kitchen staff, who were delighted to see Diane sitting in her robe and slippers at the end of the table sipping a cup of steaming tea while the bakers rolled sweet-smelling cinnamon buns. The smell of percolating coffee and warming baking ovens helped Diane begin the day with a positive attitude.

Diane's personal assistant, a tall Amazon of a woman who had been a former Marine Gunnery Sergeant, named Billie Masters, hustled in at her first call. Billie was unflappable, and arrived in her workout uniform. Billie hid her short-cut black hair under a worn Marine ball cap. She'd been up performing her exercises, as she did every morning. Billie had worked her way up through the ranks and received a field promotion to Lieutenant after her performance in saving her team during a particularly bloody battle in the Rim. Now she was studying to be an engineer.

"You sent for me, ma'am?" Billie asked. She noted Diane was fully dressed and studied several newsvids. Several Ravenhold Industries project vids that played in silence on the huge wall monitor behind her.

"Yes, Billie," Diane said without looking at her. "I want to see Admiral Graham this morning. Then, set up a visit for me at Ravenhold Industries as soon as possible, I specifically want to speak with these Ravenhold Industry project managers," she said, absently handing Billie a list of names while she continued to scan the file on her datapad. "Finally, set up a meeting with the Navy Chief-of-Staff, Admiral Lee.

"Yes, Ma'am," Billie responded. She waited for more directions, but quickly determined Diane was totally engrossed in whatever she was studying and silently slipped away to carry out her orders.

Diane felt as if she had to rush, but she knew she must keep her newfound information secret, if she was to succeed. The Draconians could not discover her plan, or they would surely launch their attack on the CSA before she was ready. She must

maintain her carefully groomed image of innocence and naïveté in order to save as many of her people as possible.

Diane's datapad beeped, and a message from Billie told her Admiral Graham would arrive in twenty minutes. She looked at herself in the mirror, and decided she had just enough time to finish her makeup. She pressed a button and several attendants arrived to assist her.



As Tranquility's rising sun streamed bright morning light across the land, an armed Navy transport landed in the wide flag-stoned inner courtyard of the Ravenhold Palace. Two Marine guards disembarked to guard the shuttle's gangway while two gray-haired men in sparkling blue dress uniforms hustled into the palace side entrance. The Marines took up easy guard positions around the transport while they waited for their important passengers.

Billie met the two senior military men and escorted them into Diane's private sitting room. Diane sat at a small table set with a silver coffee service.

"Admiral's Lee and Graham, Madam Regent." Billie announced as she closed the door on the conference. Diane stood at her gold French-provincial chair, and smiled sweetly.

Admiral Graham offered an explanation for both men arriving unexpectedly, "Madam Regent, the Admiral and I were having breakfast when your summons arrived, and we took the initiative to ride together. I hope we didn't upset your plans."

"Not at all gentlemen," Diane said. "This will work out nicely. I have little time, so let's get down to it. Please, have some coffee." Diane had the ability to put people at ease when they spoke with her. She noticed neither man looked nervous in presence.

The Admirals waited until Diane sat and followed suit. Both men poured a cup of coffee as ordered, but neither drank.

Diane sat with her hands in her lap looking into both men's eyes, and she considered whether she could trust them with her thoughts. These were career military men who had both served the CSA with honor and valor for many years. Determining to reveal her plans, she nodded and began, "Admiral Lee, I want to thank you and Admiral

Graham for your long service of duty to the CSA. My husband has spoken highly of you both. I have a service that I require of you both that will challenge all our capacity to perform." She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts and both men leaned forward.

"You may think this odd, but I need an update on the Draconian situation."

The admirals looked uneasily at each other. Admiral Lee cleared his throat nervously. "Well, madam Regent, ah, yes. . ."

"What Admiral Lee means to say, ma'am, is that the situation is dire. We've tried to keep a lid on it while Traveler worked behind the scenes to gain renewed support for defense. So far every initiative met with defeat as if someone had orchestrated the opposition and the media against us."

Diane began to see the picture develop in her mind. Traveler had spoken of his concern about military funding, and she knew he was concerned. "What about the Draconians?" she said not allowing their comments to deter her.

"Our force projections suggest they are building their fleet an alarming rate, ma'am." Admiral Lee found his voice. "We are seeing numbers from our intelligence community of over ten-to-one."

"Ten-to--" She gasped.

"*Conservatively*, they outnumber us ten-to-one. Most estimates double that."

"What if we. . . what if *I* got the support we needed to build our fleet?" Diane had no idea how she would do it, but there simply had to be something she could do. The sad expressions in their eyes showed through their brave smiles, and she understood the depth of the situation. She closed her eyes, envisioning the dragons in her dream attacking the helpless villagers without hindrance.

"Ma'am, the senior staff are preparing a briefing for you on this matter after the funeral." He paused looking embarrassed. "Our greatest concern now is avoiding anything that would precipitate an attack before we can develop a reasonable defense."

"How did this happen?" Diane said through clinched teeth, "How could we let them get so far ahead of us."

"Once we realized the magnitude of the build-up, our agents discovered the Draconians have literally harvested whole worlds, used every mineral, and enslaved

millions, leaving only dead husks of planets and abandoned star systems for more than twenty years," Admiral Lee explained.

Admiral Graham continued, "They've built an armada and stored the ships in secret locations while they bred crews from slaves."

"Monstrous," Diane uttered.

"They are clearly committed to this strategy, madam Regent," Lee grumbled.

They sat silently while she digested the facts and how they fit into her understanding of the situation. "Gentlemen, I had a strong reason to believe the Draconians planned a massive attack on the CSA." She paused again to gage their reactions. Both men watched her intently. "I have no doubt my husband was assassinated as a precursor to this attack," she said flatly. "I am developing a plan to mitigate the effects of this attack, and I need your help."

Both men were going to respond, their expressions full of surprise. She also read intense intrigue on their faces, but she held up her hands while she continued, "Before we proceed, allow me to explain what I expect from the Draconians. I realize you both have invested time and energy in building our magnificent Navy. I share your pride in it. However, we now know we have no way of stopping the massive armadas and armies the Draconians have been secretly amassed for years."

Admiral Lee objected, "Don't count the Navy out yet, ma'am. I can assure you we'll make them pay dearly for crossing our border."

"I have no doubt about that, Admiral. In fact, we're counting on the Navy to do all they can when the time comes. We must now plan how to salvage as much as possible of it, and of the CSA."

Both admirals looked surprised. They glanced at each other amazed at her intensity.

Diane's expression assured them she was deadly serious. "Admirals, this morning I am appointing Admiral Graham to head up a new secret intelligence group we will call the Commonwealth Clandestine Operations or CCO. This is a black ops group over which I, and I alone, will have control. Other than you two, no one but those I choose will be aware of its existence.

“Admiral Lee, I realize you expected Admiral Graham to replace you when you retire. Now I must ask you to lay aside those retirement plans. You and I will work to make the Navy as powerful as we can to prepare for the day of the Draconian’s attack.

“Gentlemen, someday soon I may share with you how I know these things. I know how radical they must seem to you. I can assure you that this is not the ravings of an overwrought, mourning wife. I have a clear understanding of what we face, and I am sure, if we act quickly, we can save our precious CSA.” Diane bowed her head. Then she hunched her shoulders as if shaking off a chill, and continued, “We may save the CSA, but it will never be the same again.” Diane paled and closed her eyes. When she opened them, both Admirals were standing close by.

“Is there anything we can do, ma’am?” The wizened Admiral Lee with this white hair asked.

She looked into his eyes and said, “Please don’t think I’m crazy. I need you both, or all is lost.”

Diane’s plea touched both men. They glanced at each other and nodded, “I can assure you that you have our support, Ma’am,” Admiral Lee stated in his rich baritone. “We agree with your conclusions. We’ve been sharing our own concerns about the increased attacks along the border with newer and more powerful ships. We had planned to ask for your support for increased defense funding in the budget. In recent years our budget has been cut to the bone, and we are barely able to replace our worn-out ships and equipment, let alone develop new.”

She nodded and wiped a tear from her eye. “Please sit. I’m all right, now. I need more than your obedience. I could never direct all the issues over which you both are responsible. I need you as counselors.” Diane began to outline her plan. As she spoke, the plan seemed to flow from her of its own accord. She explained how they must build the CSA fleet in secret. Every credit must be shepherded to the task. If, at any time, the Draconians suspected their plan to counter the coming invasion, they would surely attack before her plan’s completion and all would be lost.

They discussed how they would do everything that could be done, but the best they could hope for would be to slow the advantage of the Draconian military build-up. She explained how she would use all her influence in the Senate to get them more funding.

She stated that she would commit her family's huge personal fortune to assist with the development and production of new technologies to further strengthen the military.

Both men seemed amazed at her plan's breadth and detail. Her comments agreed with their own experiences. It was as if she'd somehow seen into their minds and learned their darkest secrets. Secrets they couldn't afford to mention outside of the Navy's strategic planning meetings. By the end of the meeting, their lives had a new direction. For these battle hardened soldiers, the Regent's comments were a breath of fresh air.

Diane stood and took their hands in hers as they stood. "Gentlemen, it gives me hope that two men such as you are on my side. I ask that you both keep your eyes open for men and women who can help us. However, again I admonish you that no one must know about the plan. If it's ever exposed that we know the truth, I've no doubt the CSA would be doomed. As it is, we barely have enough time to save some remnant of our great Commonwealth before the Draconian attack."

The men left the palace with grave expressions, deep in thought about the strange meeting with their new Regent.



Chapter Seven

Regent Diane Ravenhold closed the connection on her vid terminal, and the worried image of her father's face faded from the screen. The senior senator of the CSA had briefed his daughter on the most pressing political issues facing her and an overview of her cabinet's political aspirations. In their twenty minutes of conversation, Diane Ravenhold, became painfully aware of the fact that she would have little time to adjust to assuming the reins of power from her late husband. She and Traveler seldom spoke of politics, except when he was exasperated with his opposition.

Later, her staff laid before her the choices for her husband's burial and funeral procession. It was a difficult morning filled with pain and despair. The process of making Traveler's funeral arrangements forced Diane to realize the full meaning of her husband's death.

Diane would never see her heart's desire again. She could not utter a word of goodbye or look upon his strong face. Then she thought of Traveler's child growing within her. The precious remnant of the dearest man was her dearest thought now. Her memory drifted back to the terrible black dragon who sought her demise and she realized she, too, would sacrifice everything for the child she and Traveler had made.

Closing the datapad with her notes for Traveler's last arrangements with a stifled sigh and a tear, she patted the notepad gently as if it were his cold hand. Then she turned to her next assignment. If anyone had watched that magical transformation from deeply grieving young widow to powerful and stern leader of the greatest power in the quadrant, they would have been in awe. Gone were the tears and sadness and in their place was an expression of focus and strength Diane now mustered for the task before her.



Diane's cabinet gathered in the Cabinet Room of the Palace. The large exotic wood table gleamed in the subdued lighting that lit the table and those seated around it and left the remainder of the room in darkness.

Diane sat quietly while the Minister of Commerce droned on about an issue she'd lost the train of thought on ten minutes previously. When she realized her idle mind was beginning to dwell on the loss of her dear Traveler, she smiled sweetly and was about to interrupt. However the Minister of Defense, a bushy eye-browed CSA Army General with enough medals to cover his broad chest spoke, "That's all very interesting Manny, but Diane is tired. Isn't this something we can discuss later? For now, we need only note we attest to the proper succession of the Regency. The Minister of Justice has reported that the oath of office was given according to law. I move—"

"I am sure the oath was given with due process, General." The Minister of State interrupted quietly. His oily voice irritated Diane instantly. She had rarely seen the man. He was a tall, slender man with silver-white hair and black eyes who dressed all in black. His clothes were impeccably fitted to his thin body. "Majesty," he stated in an eloquent baritone voice, "in this time of your loss, may I suggest we turn to our neighbors, the Draconians, to assist us—"

There were gasps from the ministers around the table. That anyone would dare to mention the Ravenhold's arch enemies at this time of bereavement was unthinkable.

Diane looked at the man with an expression that belied her rising anger. Long ago, her father had taught her how to control her emotions and expressions as a part of high state-craft. She could control the natural ability of her body to show embarrassment or, as now, rage. Only she knew the truth of the Draconian's role in her husband's assassination.

She stood at her chair and the ministers fell silent. "I am sure the Minister of State had the best of intentions in his untimely suggestion." There was a snort of swallowed laughter from the old general and several of the ministers covered their grins. No one liked the smarmy Minister of State, and all wondered why Traveler had appointed him. Diane knew it was because the only person the Draconians would agree to meet with was Mr. Vasuki. Something about his forced smile made her feel slimy. Her husband's agents had hinted the man was a Draconian agent, but there was never any evidence of a link to the Draconians.

Diane continued, "This period of change has been hard on us all. Ladies and gentlemen, I am very tired. I'm sure you have important business to attend to, but you must forgive me if I ask that you focus on the only agenda item before us. I have to make the arrangements to bury my husband." She sat down and sighed to herself.

The general didn't hesitate, "I move we accept that the form of the oath was given and received in accordance with our law."

"Second," another minister said shortly.

The Cabinet secretary asked, "All in favor?"

The ministers stated, "Aye."

"Opposed?"

There was no response, but Diane noted Mr. Vasuki had not voted for her.

Diane stood once again, and smiled at her ministers in her practiced look of a brainless, smiling starlet. The Minister of State seemed unsure about how to take her under-handed slight. He peered at her through his narrowed eyes.

“Ministers,” Diane said, “please forgive me if I leave immediately. I’m terribly tired and have much to do. Thank you for your honorable service to my husband. I am sure I can count on your wise council in the months and years ahead.”

Diane left the table disappearing out of the bright lights.

The ministers sat in quiet contemplation. They seemed confused. The new Regent had seemed gentle, but her sudden takeover of the situation that had languished for almost an hour with endless drivel from several members who loved to the sound of their own voices left them dazed and confused.

The cabinet members left the room without comment. Some had heard that the late Regent had the room bugged. Last to go was the old general. He levered himself out of the plush, green velvet arm-chair and turned. A shadow moved behind his chair and the old general smiled, “You were right, Admiral. She’s going to turn them on their ear. She really twisted Vasuki’s nose, and he wasn’t sure if she did it on purpose.”

Admiral Graham emerged from the dark and shook the old general’s hand. “I told you, sir. You haven’t seen anything yet. Vasuki better watch his step, because I guarantee she’s watching it. I’d be surprised if she didn’t have him tailed as we speak.”

The old general chuckled, and his big belly heaved merrily. “This job just got a lot more interesting. Traveler never paid much attention to the cabinet. We rarely met, and when we did he always had some emergency call him away after one hour. He was pretty good at it, but you could almost set your clock by the emergency. The good thing was everyone knew the serious business had to be addressed in the first hour.”

The two military men wandered out of the palace discussing the future of the CSA.



With the funeral of the late Regent, life in the CSA came to a halt several days later. The vidnews was full of stories of Traveler and his popular reign as Regent. The pundits theorized and postulated how the late Regent’s young wife would handle the reigns of leadership. They showed vids of Diane at Traveler’s side on vacations and in photo-ops looking very much like a trophy wife.

The unkind comments of the media did not endear them, however, to people who felt deeply about the Ravenholds and the especially popular Diane, who represented a fairytale princess to most people. The media's constant questioning of her responses and predictions of her next action angered the people of the CSA until the net was filled with the buzz of their anger, and the media was forced to back-off.

In all of this, she remained aloof from the negativity, further reinforcing the opinion of the people that the media were a bunch of callous brutes insensitive to Diane's time of mourning.

She noted how the same talking heads of the media who had idolized her dead husband picked at her like carrion crows. Not a novice to politics, she understood the media fed itself by trying to prey on the tragedies of others, and, failing that, they would attempt to destroy the victim. For the most part, the young Regent ignored them and performed her duty as she understood it.

Now, finally, it was done. The terrible ordeal of interring the only item that could represent her late husband's remains was over. The fragment of Traveler's ship was imbedded on the lid of his empty, polished cherry casket. The long miles of the funeral procession, the endless stream of mourners, and the long eulogies had drained her spirit.

Through the sad day, Diane took solace with her memories of the genuine mourning she shared with the populace. As her ancient black carriage drove by with its six gleaming black horses, the people doffed their hats. Women curtsied and men bowed behind the miles of military men and women standing in the dress uniforms in perfect, long lines. As the carriage approached, people threw flowers into the street before the horses. The muffled drums and the long lines of mourners dressed in black emphasized the solemnity that the people placed on their shared loss.



That night, as Diane sat on the edge of her bed, the relaxing draft prescribed by Dr. Flemming made her limbs and eyelids heavy. She lay back across the white embroidered bedspread. Her black mourning dress contrasted sharply with it. She

moaned softly a simple, plaintive cry, “Oh God, please help me.” Then she ran her slender hand over her and Traveler’s bed, and closed her tear-reddened eyes.

A few minutes later, Dr. Flemming entered her bedroom and waited while two attendants finished removing the black dress from her limp form and covered her gently. He took her pulse and scanned her body with his medi-scanner.

The soft voice of Admiral Graham spoke from behind the doctor, “I trust everything is all right, doctor?”

“How did you get in here, Admiral?” the doctor asked deflecting the question.

“I have my ways.”

“I understand you announced your retirement today, Admiral.”

“I had a better offer, Doctor.”

“I thought you were in line to replace the General on the cabinet.”

“As I said, doctor, I had a better offer.”

The doctor stood almost a foot taller than the broad-chested admiral. He realized for the first time Graham was not wearing his uniform, but a non-descript gray suit. The doctor’s expression of confusion brought an instant smile to Graham’s face.

“She appointed me head over a special clandestine group for her own purposes.” Graham stated indicating the sleeping Regent.

“Good, she needs to surround herself with people she can trust,” Dr. Flemming stated with an air of approval as he completed his efficient examination of the sleeping Regent. He nodded to himself with satisfaction, and Graham released a sigh.

“She should sleep until the late tomorrow morning, Graham. We must let her rest without interruption. She’s been pushing herself far too hard. I’ll speak with the staff to let us know when she awakes.”

“Thank you, Dr. Flemming.” Graham looked at Diane and gently brushed the coverlet with a thick finger, turned and left, followed by the doctor.



Chapter Eight

The unmarked transport shuttle made its final approach to the Ravenhold Industries compound. Diane only knew her chief of security by his title. She'd never heard him called anything else. The "Chief" had crammed as many security agents on the shuttle as possible. He'd objected to her traveling incognito and without escort ships, but Diane insisted. "I'm sorry, Chief," she'd said looking genuinely upset. "But this must be done my way. No one must know what I am doing. There will be many such trips in the future. I suggest you develop a plan for me to make them without anyone knowing."

The Chief was a stocky middle-aged man with a short, military haircut. He had bushy eyebrows over his deep-set eyes. His arms and legs were like oak branches. He stood in front of Diane with his ham-like hands on his hips blocking her path into the shuttle. Since he stood on the ramp, his eyes were on the level with the much taller woman. He looked her over without any indication of fear in facing the most powerful person in the quadrant for a moment, then nodded his acquiescence.

The Chief pointed a thick finger at her as if he were scolding his daughter and said, "I promised Traveler I'd always take care of you, young lady. You have to promise me you won't die on my watch."

His face crumpled into a scowl that reminded Diane of a dwarf in a fairy tale. She giggled and nodded.

A bright smile exploded over his face, and he sighed, "Well then, I guess we can go." He turned to lead the way into the shuttle, sniffing as if he detected something rotten aboard. He led the way to the forward compartment, and Diane hugged him as she entered. His rugged face blushed red at the closeness.

"Thank-you, Chief," Diane said quietly as she took her seat. She straightened her black business suit's jacket and skirt as she buckled her seatbelt.

Diane didn't notice the impish grin that came over the Chief's face as he turned away – it seemed he had a sudden revelation to help him take care of his wayward ward. The Chief made a quick entry into his datapad while the shuttle departed.



Diane Ravenhold gazed out the shuttle's porthole window at the sprawling Ravenhold Industry complex as her shuttle approached. Traveler had promised to bring her here, but they never had the time. She'd heard there was much more of it in secret bunkers beneath the planet's surface.

The Ravenhold Industries complex was the home base of the giant organization. The company was the leader in high-tech advancement in communications, computers, ships, and weapons. The company's products were a significant part of everyday life in the quadrant.

The roof of a wide building split open at the peak as the two separate halves slid apart revealing a landing zone within. The shuttle glided down to a gentle thump. Its engines wound down, and the gangway lowered. The roof over them closed and the huge hanger was pitch-black, except for the shuttle's landing lights and the glow from its interior. Diane's security detail stood still at a taunt readiness. No one aboard the shuttle had ever been to the Ravenhold complex.

Diane leaned forward to stand, but the Chief's heavy hand held her still in her plush royal blue seat. Row after row of lights came on around the shuttle when the roof had fully closed. Diane could now see the vast dimensions of the cavernous underground hangar bay. It could easily house several large battleships. The security detail moved out and Diane followed. Four guards took positions around Diane's shuttle. The Chief and three other burly men accompanied her on the tour.

At the far end of the hangar bay, the lights of a vehicle appeared, and the low whine of grav-motors grew as the strange car approached rapidly. As it neared, Diane realized it was a special people mover. Several people dressed in white lab coveralls rode the grav-mover. Only the driver was dressed in blue coveralls. The vehicle circled around toward the exit and stopped near the gangway.

A small man jumped out of the seat and came forward with a friendly smile on his face. "Hello. Welcome to Ravenhold Industries. I'm Phil McLandon, the complex' Chief of Operations. It's an honor to have you visiting us, Madam Regent." Phil said, as he waited for the security detail to part so that he could shake Diane's hand.

"Phillip, thank-you for meeting with me on such short notice," Diane said as they shook hands.

“Please, everyone here calls me Phil. I haven’t heard Phillip since my mother used to scold me at home,” he said with a smile.

Phil was barely five feet tall. His bald head was abnormally large with a band of curly black hair around the sides. He had dark brown eyes that twinkled as if he were on the verge of bursting into laughter. He wore a perfectly tonsured black goatee that came to sharp points at the mustache and beard ends.

Diane noted that Phil wasn’t an imposing man, but there was no doubt about his confidence and control in this situation. She reasoned he was one of those rare people that had the ability to bring people together to get more out of them than they could do separately. Diane liked Phil instantly, and she knew the other members of his team shared her affection for little man who exuded energy like a human dynamo.

“We have so much we want to show you, Madam Regent. I hope you’ve set aside enough time. It’s been a long time since your late husband, Traveler, came to visit. Why don’t we get started?” Phil led the way to the grav-mover and introduced Diane to his team leads as they passed.

“Madam Regent,” Phil said, “Permit me to introduce you to Ricky Lyle, our engineer in charge of ship design.”

Diane shook Ricky’s hand. “Ricky,” she said. She had the knack of remembering people’s faces and names. She looked into Ricky’s eyes and smiled.

The tall young man beamed as they met. Ricky, like everyone else in the introductions was immediately impressed with the young Regent’s powerful presence. She didn’t merely move through the hand-shakes, immediately erasing the faces and names, but paid close attention and seemed to be evaluating each of the Ravenhold staff with her piercing gaze, like a general evaluating her field commanders. Ricky was six feet four inches tall with black hair. He had a pleasant but serious face and deep set brown eyes. He looked to be the youngest of the engineers.

Phil continued moving down the line of engineers. He pointed out Tim Spencer who was in charge of Advanced Electronics. Tim was a man of middle age and medium height with a ruggedly handsome face and peaceful outward appearance. His eyes were green and his blondish hair streaked with light gray.

Finally, she met Larry Painter, the Weapons Development team lead. Larry was middle-aged, five feet nine inches tall with thinning, curly blond hair, and blue eyes. He seemed to share Phil's facial expression of being on the verge of some comedic comment.

Ray Rider oversaw the mysterious group labeled "Auxiliary Systems." Of all the team, Diane thought Ray seemed the most serious. He was a tall, thin man with dark brown eyes that shown with intensity, and collar-length black hair combed flat to his over-large head. He had a few days beard growth and seemed slightly unkempt. She had the idea that Ray had left his pet projects moments before her arrival.

The entourage boarded the grav-mover and headed back toward the hangar bay entrance to the rest of the compound. As they rode down the wide corridor that exited the hangar bay, Diane took time to look at her new acquaintances. Some of there faces looked vaguely familiar, but she knew she'd seen none of them prior to this visit. She searched her memory, and realized she'd seen these faces in her vision.



The morning wore on as the group moved from building to building and through the various departments during the tour. They passed through buildings with lab-techs in white coats working on various projects. Some of the buildings smelled of acrid chemicals and solvents. Some contained strange new weapons in stages of development. A building contained a disturbing array of bio-mechanical arms and legs Phil explained were for amputees.

The last building was strangely dim and silent. It was filled with electronic devices, and harbored an enormous computer core at the center. The terminals and monitors displayed a dizzying display of colorful graphics. The scene presented Diane with a sense of Déjà vu.

Diane wanted to spend more time at the complex, but she reminded herself of her purpose and grew anxious to finish the tour quickly.



Chapter Nine

Diane enjoyed her luncheon of tasty seafood soup and a fresh mixed fruit and vegetable salad with a light dressing provided by the proud Ravenhold Industries kitchen staff. She noticed that several of the men seemed to prefer something more substantial for lunch. When they finished and the lunch cleared away, Diane sat at the end of the long glass table and addressed the engineers with her plan.

“Gentlemen,” she began, “I’m here on a very specific mission today. Although I appreciate the tour, that is not my purpose. What I am about to tell you is strictly confidential. I believe the future of the CSA rests on what we begin here today.”

Diane watched the engineers’ expressions as they had settled back into the comfortable chairs with polite smiles seemingly ready to hear gentle platitudes about the wonders of Ravenhold Industries. Her introductory comments made them set up to the table with expressions of intense interest.

Diane continued, “Ravenhold Industries has been the leader in technology in the quadrant for more than a century. Today we embark on a new top-secret mission with the promise of developing technology far beyond anything we’ve ever dreamed. Much of what we do will be so secret that no one will know until years from now what we’ve accomplished. After today, as a group, you may not speak of the individual projects on which you are working. Any project resulting from this meeting will be designated as triple black top-secret.

“As an added security precaution, we will sub-divide the project elements so that no one group has any idea what the final product is. I cannot emphasize enough how important this is to the CSA and to each of you personally. History will say the work we begin here today will rival the work of Victor Ravenhold in the development of the Twilight Drives during the Raider Wars.”

Diane paused to watch the engineer’s reactions.

Each man sat back as she paused and looked down to consider her comments. No doubt, when they came to work today, each of the engineers were excited about the VIP visit, but they couldn't anticipate the life-changing path on which she was about to take them.

Diane went on, "Because of the sensitive nature of my plan, I must ask each of you to say nothing to anyone about our meeting this afternoon. I must also ask you to either commit your lives and talents to me and the CSA now or excuse yourselves. The plan will continue, but you will not participate. No one will think less of you if you choose not to participate.

"To be honest, I expect you to work harder, with less recognition, and time off than you've had in all your illustrious careers. There's a very good possibility that no one will ever know your accomplishments. But know this gentlemen, if your dream was to do something important with your life, you are being offered that opportunity now."

Diane stood up, and all the men seemed dazed for a moment, then they scrambled to stand. Their heavy wooden chairs scraped on the ceramic tile floor of the conference room.

"I'll give you ten minutes to consider my offer. I want to take a few minutes to freshen up. When I return, I'll expect your answers." She turned and left the room.

Diane dried her hands in the pristine restroom. She studied her image in the wide mirror. Her pregnancy was not showing yet. She still looked like a model. Walking out to the balcony that overlooked the stories tall atrium at the Ravenhold Industries Visitor Center, she observed a tour shuttle departing from the Ravenhold Museum of Technology as another shuttle landed in its vacated parking spot. This area was far from the secret entrance through which she arrived.

As Diane watched, a red speeder roared over the nearby trees and skidded sideways through the landing zone. Terrified tourists dashed out of the careening speeder's way. Without slowing down, the speeder's landing gear deployed and squealed on the pavement with a shower of sparks. Thruster jets shot blasts in a quick series around the vehicle, it slewed around one-hundred-eighty degrees and slid backwards into the parking space nearest the entrance to Ravenhold Industries.

Diane and everyone in the landing area gawked as the gleaming red gull-wing door on the speeder's driver side opened and a fabulous looking Amazon of a woman stepped out. With six inch spiked heels, and black leather mini-skirt that accented her mile-long legs and a tight-fitting, low-cut black leather top that barely held her considerable figure and pointed out her narrow waist, every man in sight stood in awe.

Her short, shiny black hair and heavy make-up with dark glasses made her look like some kind of bad-girl starlet.

Diane sighed, realizing she'd been holding her breath through the crazy landing and the appearance of the amazing woman. With a shock, she realized the young Amazon was her own personal assistant, Billie Masters. Diane shook her head in amazement as Billie strutted through the layers of security guards and receptionists and headed directly for her as she stood on the balcony.

Without waiting for a response to her arrival, Billie offered, "Hi Boss, the Chief called me and said I'm officially your body-guard and we are to be 'incognito.' At least, I think that's what he said. I'm not sure he knows what the word means." Billie joked. "I figured no one would recognize me in this outfit. I must say, those auto-make-up thingies are really neat. How do I look?"

Diane stood breathless. Billie stood a foot taller than herself. Diane smiled as she realized the younger woman had never tried to use make-up. She responded, "It's very attractive, Billie. I've never used the darker tones, but they seem to go well with your hair and clothes."

"You really like it?" Billie asked, spinning around proudly showing off her new outfit. "It's not too much then? Good. Well, where is this shindig?"

Diane considered what effect two powerful, attractive women would have on the team of egghead engineers awaiting her return. She realized there was nothing she could do about it now.

"Billie, I've never seen you like—" Diane's words failed her.

Billie continued the thought perfectly. "Like this?" Billie asked hold out her hands with her significant bust thrust out.

Diane nodded amazed, but still couldn't articulate her surprise at the startling change in her normally serious assistant.

"Well, the Chief didn't want anyone to know who we were. No one has ever seen me like this, and I've always wanted people to think I'm pretty. Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Uh, yes, uh, of course, Billie. But we must be careful not to overdo it." Diane offered, hoping Billie would tone down her enthusiasm.

“Oh, I get it ma’am. Yeah the two of us would be way too much for any man.”

Billie giggled.

Diane found the thought of an almost seven foot tall Amazon giggling rather disturbing.

She focused her thoughts back to how the poor engineers would react to her and Billie. Her in-depth background checks on the Ravenhold Industries team indicated Ray had been married several times, and was recently divorced. Ricky was single, but Larry and Tim both had families. Phil was the only confirmed bachelor. His background indicated Phil was a workaholic. She decided she’d have to watch Billie with Ray. Diane pulled a wafer thin datapad from her skirt pocket, reviewed her notes, and saw their ten minutes were up.



After Diane excused herself for the powder room, Ray Rider was the first of the stunned engineers to respond. “How could the media be so wrong about her?” he asked. “Everyone says she’s just another pretty face. They say that Traveler must’ve married her for her looks. I’m starting to doubt my rumor sources,” he said with a grin.

“Drop it, Ray.” Ricky said protectively. He knew Ray tended to be a woman-chaser. “We don’t have time to talk about that now. Anyone who knew Traveler knows he’d never marry a woman that wasn’t able to keep up with his high-powered, fast-paced life. She’d have to match his intellect as well as his energy level.” Ricky had spent many hours with the late Regent while they worked together customizing his personal fighter, Regent One. Ricky had taken Traveler's death especially hard.

Phil asked, “What do you think she’s up to?”

“Whatever it is, it’s big,” Tim commented. “I’m guessing Ravenhold Industries is about to take a left turn into the surreal, but I admit I’m intrigued.”

Larry stated emphatically, “We each need to decide what we intend to do about Diane’s offer. I know what I’m going to do. I’m in.” He looked around at his peers who nodded in agreement.

Phil stood up. Sensing the team’s consensus, he resumed his role as leader, “Gentlemen, it seems we’ve been offered an opportunity to perform some special

service for the CSA and Diane. I can now see that the questions she asked during our tour all had a purpose. In the short time we were together, she's interviewed us and determined our level of commitment. If our little visit is any indication, I'd say Diane knew our answers before she arrived." He sat down heavily. Each of the team just began to appreciate the powerful intellect and magnetism of the young woman who was their Regent.



Chapter Ten

Regent Diane Ravenhold walked into the conference room exactly ten minutes after leaving. The four men stood quietly until she and Billie settled into their seats. The men had mystified expressions as they watched the beautiful Regent trailed by a fabulous Amazon.

After they took their seats, Diane introduced her assistant. "Gentlemen, this is my personal assistant, Billie Masters. Billie worked her way through the ranks of the military and received a commission before I drafted her as my assistant. She is currently working on her degree in engineering. Billie, these gentlemen all hold multiple degrees in their respective engineering fields. I'm sure they'll be happy to assist you in your pursuits."

Billie had removed her dark glasses, and she smiled at each of the men.

All of the men gawked at Billie, but Ray watched her as if he were selecting a fine wine from a rack of rare vintages. Diane's keen gaze caught a brief exchange of glances between the two.

Phil, who was the least affected by Billie's stunning appearance, said, "Madam Regent, I speak for all of us here and all our teams when I say that we will be honored to serve you and the CSA without reservation."

Diane smiled, and let out a quiet sigh. "You cannot know what your loyalty means to me, gentlemen. I shall not forget it." Diane nodded to Ricky who stood, and pressed a button on the wall control panel. The curtains around the glass-walled conference room closed, as the polarized glass shifted from clear to opaque. The lights

dimmed and a large vid monitor swiveled out of the ceiling. When the system came on, Diane coded in an access key to her datapad and a presentation appeared as she continued her discussion with the Ravenhold engineers.

“Gentlemen, I’ll make this as brief as possible. We’ll be meeting individually later to discuss your future roles in my plan. It is essential that none of you know what the other is doing. I’ll rely on Phil to work with each of you to make sure you have what you need.”

“Well then,” Phil interrupted, as if he’d read her plan, “The first thing we need to do to make sure our plan remains secret is to de-centralize Ravenhold Industries into its individual elements. We’ll move them to remote locations, preferably secret.”

Diane’s surprise at Phil’s quick grasp of her thoughts, continued as the team began to work through the details by building on her foundational thoughts.

Larry added, “Next, our headquarters here will remain only as pseudo-front.”

Phil grinned and said, “Well, not totally. My office will still be here.”

There was a chuckle from the group.

Ricky stated, “Third, each project must be sub-divided so that no one knows what the completed projects are, except for the lead-designers.”

Tim agreed and said, “Lastly, we must develop a new ultra-secret Com network so that we may communicate.”

Diane nodded and said, “In order to keep anyone from connecting us during the course of our endeavor, I will stay away from any aspect of Ravenhold Industries operations. Rest assured I shall be in contact with Phil on a regular basis.”

She continued, “I fully expect this plan to take more than ten years. I’m arranging for each of you and your teams’ relocation. The process of relocation will take place a few families at a time over the course of the next year. I’m acquiring housing for you in your new locations. I’ve appropriated abandoned military bases which you can use for your new locations. New support staffs of CSA military for those facilities are already preparing for your arrival. Each person assigned to the new project will be sent a special notification of a promotion. After you’ve selected your new teams, my staff will take care of all the details for relocation.”

Phil shook his head in disbelief. “Madam Regent—”

“No, sir,” she said. “From now on, when any of you address me, please call me simply ‘ma’am’. I don’t want anyone who might overhear your conversation to know that you are addressing me.”

“Right, then,” Phil agreed. “As I was saying, ma’am, it seems you’ve given this some thought.” He looked around as if lost. He sought for words that didn’t come to mind.

“I have,” Diane responded. “Now, I’ll explain the motivation that drives me.” She paused to consider how much she should trust to these relative strangers. But her need out-weighed her fears.

“I have no choice but to trust you with my deepest secret. My duty and the need of the CSA exceeds my need for privacy. I believe the Draconians are developing a plan to attack and enslave the CSA.”

The gathering gasped at this revelation.

“Oh, not right away, gentlemen. I believe they’ve been developing their plan for domination of the quadrant for some time. It’s my hope, our vigilance and secrecy grants us the time we need to counter the Draconians. We must work together to develop a counter-plan to overcome their plot. You and a few others will be working with me to accomplish my plan to save the CSA when the attack comes.”

“You have evidence of this plot, I take it?” Ray asked.

“I admit I have only my own observations and sense of dread. An investigation is underway. It is my opinion that my late husband’s death was not an accident, but an assassination.”

“What?” Ray exclaimed.

“I know it sounds fantastic,” Diane explained. “I can’t explain it, but I’ve known since before Traveler’s death that something bad was about to happen. Now I have a sense of dread for our Commonwealth. I cannot let a concern regarding any personal embarrassment about my beliefs overcome my sense of duty. If my belief is right and I have the power to act and do nothing, I will be responsible for the deaths for millions of CSA citizens. I couldn’t bear that failure of my duty. I ask each of you to try to understand and do all you can to help me save our Commonwealth.”

The people in the room sat in stunned silence at Diane's heartfelt plea. The idea of a direct attack of the Draconian Empire was unthinkable. There had been peace and prosperity in the CSA for a hundred years. Here, far from the Rim worlds, where the CSA military struggled against the constant incursions into the Commonwealth, the safe citizens had grown complacent.

Billie sat stiffly beside Diane. She was a veteran of years of Rim service. She seemed to dread Diane's prediction more than the others. Billie sat with her hands in her lap, and Diane reached over to pat them gently. Billie relaxed then. She'd been holding her breath.

Billie looked at Diane with a look of terrible determination at the realization of the pain her Regent had born quietly and alone. When she spoke, it was the voice of a soldier, of one determined to fight a bitter enemy. Tears welled up in her dark eyes as she stated, "I vow to follow you, ma'am. I pledge my life to you, and to your plan as I vowed to serve the CSA."

"Thank-you, Billie," Diane said with a smile. She watched the engineers around the plush conference room for their responses.

Ricky looked thoughtful. She knew he would consider her plan carefully, but if he made a commitment, it would be without reservation.

Ray seemed to be considering her words, but his glances back at Billie seemed to indicate Billie's words had affected him almost as powerfully as Diane's.

Tim sat leaning forward with his arms on the table, as if he wanted to speak. He was watching Diane carefully, and seemed to be looking for the truth behind her words.

As usual, Larry spoke first. "Surely we can defeat the Draconians as easily as we have for the last century, ma'am. I mean, of course we'll do as you ask, but this seems so. . . extreme."

Phil tapped a finger on the glass table, as a sign he'd used to get his team's attention. He stated, "Each of us has had misgivings in recent years about the increase in Draconian attacks in the Rim sectors."

With a nod, Ricky added, "It also seems the pirate and raider attacks are increasing. There has always been speculation about a direct connection between the Draconians, pirates, and raiders."

Ray finally pried his eyes off Billie and agreed, “Yes, but worse still are the constant cuts to military budgets. Every year we hear of bases being abandoned and ships being moth-balled because of insufficient funds. To take Diane’s plan further still, it’s highly likely there are Draconian spies in high places in our own government who are working against us.”

Ray paused for moment as another thought seemed to come to mind, “We’ve always wondered where our generous budgets come from.” He looked at Diane and said, “I’d guess the Ravenholds have supported our efforts from their personal fortune for years.”

Diane dipped her head. She was impressed at the depth of Ray’s observation. Although he seemed to be paying little attention to the discussion, his comments illustrated Ray’s deep consideration of the issues.

Larry exclaimed, “Someone’s working against our military? That’s treason.”

Tim said quietly, “Yes, it is. But would we be any better if we failed to help the CSA? I’m honored that she considered us worthy of her trust, and I won’t betray it. I agree with Billie, ma’am, I vow my life and work to your cause.”

Diane looked around the table and each person nodded in turn, speaking their pledge. She felt as if a load that she’d carried since Traveler’s death had shifted and lightened somehow. “I thank you all. I appreciate your allegiance. Now, we must get to work. I’ll remain here and speak with each of you individually before I leave. Please return to your offices, and act as if nothing has happened. I’ll contact you by datapad, when it’s your turn. Phil, please remain behind. I’ll speak with you first.”



The little man stood as Diane dismissed his team. The realization of what had taken place began to dawn on him for the first time. His life had changed forever. From now on, Ravenhold Industries would be at war with the Draconian Empire, and he would be leading the charge – so to speak. He’d never considered himself a brave man. Sure, he was a leader, but never a fighter. Never. . . ?

Diane watched the little engineer struggling with the situation. “Why don’t you sit here beside me, Phil?”

Phil sat stiffly erect.

“Do you understand your role in my plan?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m to coordinate the activities of the various projects, and make sure they have what they need.”

“Yes, Phil. You must encourage, plead, and bully these people to accomplish our plans as quickly as possible. They must do their best work. Every day we save may save thousands of lives.”

“It seems you have something in mind for us to do, Madam Regent.”

“I believe Ravenhold Industries is currently working on a project to develop artificial intelligence?” Diane asked.

Phil was startled by the question, and said, “Why, yes, ma’am.”

“I need a new type of ship that has artificial intelligence that can adapt and grow. It must have the best armor and weapons, and the best Com system. I know we don’t have enough time to build the most powerful ship in the quadrant before the attack, but we have enough time to build one that’s design includes development from a yacht to the most powerful battleship in history. I want the ship to have access to and control over the Ravenhold Technology failsafe technology. It must be able to disable any other ship’s failsafe.

“Next we must build new planetary defense systems. Beam weapons that can cut through battleships like a hot knife through warm butter.”

Phil jerked his datapad out of his lab coat pocket and started entering her points.

She continued, “We need to develop a new e-suit. A suit fit for a commando. We must outfit our soldiers with the finest weaponry and armor possible. The suit will require new power sources. Power sources small enough to fit in the palm of a glove or boot heel.”

Diane watched Phil as he nodded with each concept. She knew he wanted to interrupt with questions, but she knew she had to get all of her points in. She’d answer his questions afterwards.

Phil looked up as she paused. Diane had a far away expression on her face, as if she was seeing the fantastic items in her list. He wrote, "Get DR's thots." on his datapad.

Now Diane took a breath and continued as if Phil weren't there, "We must build special upgrades for our existing ships that enable them to stall or even survive the coming Draconian attack. If we managed to develop processes that tripled weapon and shield power, it wouldn't be too much. We'll add these upgrades to the Navy in secret as routine maintenance updates that will activate during the coming holocaust.

"We need a new communication ability to enable secret transmissions to our team over vast distances." She paused again and turned to look into Phil's eyes as if she could read his thoughts.

She said, "Lastly, Phil, I believe when you begin this process, your teams will discover even greater inventions that have waited on the edge of our imaginations for years. The CSA has grown complacent with our prosperity. Likewise, our scientists and inventors have ridden on the coattails of the imagination of our founder, Victor Ravenhold. It's time to forge forward into new venues unimagined by our enemies."

Phil had tried to take notes as Diane spoke, but her stunning ideas forced him to lay his datapad on the table and listen. As she spoke, it was as if he could see the very concepts she mentioned come to life in his mind. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood up. When she paused, he simply said, "I understand, ma'am."

"I'll ask you to remain while I speak to each of your team members. I have nothing further to add, but I think, by the time I leave, I'll have fueled the fires of your imaginations to far surpass my inability to express my wishes," she stated.

Phil asked quietly, "If I may ask, how did you come by these ideas?"

"You'll think me odd, Phil, but I've seen all of this in my dreams. I've seen them work, and they are truly magnificent. I believe they have the power, when used by the right people, to help save a remnant of the CSA from our enemies."

"I agree, Diane. That ship concept sounds intriguing. Let's get Ricky back in here to discuss it with him. I'm sure he'll have questions for you."

During the remainder of the afternoon, Diane laid out her thoughts to each of the Ravenhold engineers. They asked her many questions. It was evident she'd captured

their imaginations as well as their hearts. They each wanted her to describe what she'd seen in her dreams, but she could only provide brief glimpses with an assurance that she felt these things were doable. She also communicated that she was confident they could accomplish these things in the little time they had remaining before the dreaded attack.

When they met one last time together before she left, Diane looked around the table and said, "I have a question which might seem strange." She waited as she got the engineers attention. "I know we've been told when Victor Ravenhold invented the security protocols that protected his technology, he embedded within it the ability to shut it down if it was pirated or the CSA was attacked. I'd like to know how that works. Perhaps you could work on that for me?"

The men looked at each other in surprise. If her heartfelt plea had captured their hearts, her question lit the spark of imagination within their minds. Diane's question had suddenly opened the door to the solutions in her vision. By using Victor Ravenhold's genius as a starting point, they could each launch out to find a viable solution to achieve her fantastic plan.

A moment of silence fell, before the team all started discussing the possibilities at once, leaving Diane and Billie listening in wonder as some of the best minds in the CSA offered point and counter-point.

Before she left, Phil was working on how to carry out the plan to sub-divide the work for secrecy. Diane left knowing her plan was now in the hands of people who could accomplish it.



Chapter Eleven

Meanwhile, near the CSA Naval Academy on Tranquility, a young woman stood alone in the dark alley behind the canteen. The old canteen had been a favorite of the cadets from the CSA Naval academy a few blocks away for generations. She stood barely five feet tall, with long black hair and almond-shaped eyes. As was her habit, she wore a black *gi*, a loose-fitting wrap-around

top, buckled at the waist with an odd chain sash, and similarly loose fitting black pants. Her tabi boots looked like comfortable slippers with the big toe separated from the rest.

She came to the canteen at an invitation she'd received on her datapad from her classmates. The note indicated they were gathering for one last time to celebrate their graduation from the Academy. Now she stood in the dimly lit and empty alley and a feeling of caution swept over her. She glanced at the datapad message again, "Miya, meet us at the canteen at 2400." It was signed, simply, "The Gang."

She had arrived at the canteen at midnight, anxious to be with her friends one last time before everyone left for their various duty assignments after graduation. She'd grown close to a few of her classmates during their time together.

It had been a stressful day. While preparing to leave the Academy and her few friends, Miya realized everyone had received their orders except her. Had someone made a mistake? With the graduation preparations underway, she couldn't get help from her normal counselors. After receiving the invitation to meet, she'd quickly decided to leave her worries behind and join her friends for one last bash.

When she arrived, she found the old canteen strangely empty. Her quick eye noted there were only two patrons, and neither of these were the normal crowd. She also noticed a stranger behind the bar. The cheery old man who'd tended bar at the canteen for years had been replaced by a tall, pock-marked faced stranger. Something about the man bothered Miya, but her eagerness to see her friends out-weighed her natural cautiousness.

"I'm here to meet some friends." Miya said over the loud music playing from the ancient jukebox in the corner. The barkeep continued wiping a glass with a bar-towel and nodded to the door at the back of the canteen. Miya slipped out the back door into the alley, and heard the door lock click behind her.

Now Miya stood alone, and her innate sense of warning erased all the emotions of the day. Gone were her fears of her unknown future, the yearning to

see her friends once again, and the fatigue of the long day. Her senses suddenly told her she was in trouble.

Miya suddenly remembered the notice she'd seen that the canteen would be closed after graduation. As her mind cleared of the emotions, she realized her friends would all be gone from the campus by now. Then she felt embarrassment at her easy deception into this high-risk situation.

She looked around the unfamiliar alley, scanning the area for possible escape routes, hideouts, and any spot that might give her a tactical advantage. She walked twenty meters down the alley and heard the door to the canteen slam behind her at the same time that several large silhouettes spread-out across the far end of the alley.

Miya's sense of dread grew when she heard a nasty chuckle from one of the people behind her in the alley. She'd seen this same charade played out numerous times on her homeworld, the Raider-controlled planet of Perdition. She'd witnessed gangs of raiders chasing and baiting their victims before robbing and killing them.

Miya's fear turned to anger, as she realized that she'd never gotten caught in such an easy ruse as a child. She'd permitted herself to become complacent in the seeming safety of the Academy and the easy life on Tranquility.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the dim forms of the two patrons and the tall barkeep from the canteen. The three figures at the far end of the alley didn't seem to be moving toward her. They evidently were there to stop her escape.

Miya stood still in the shadows where two adjoining buildings met unevenly, trying to determine why anyone would be tracking her. She lifted the hood from the back of her custom-made *gi*, covering her head, and slid the mask down over her nose and mouth. From a pocket, she slipped on her black gloves. Except for a slit around her dark eyes, Miya was covered in black.

"Where'd she go?" one of her pursuers asked.

"Check everywhere, she's got to be around somewhere." A short man on the far side of the alley ordered.

The tall barkeep said, "The Boss said we had to bring her in, unhurt if possible."

"I don't know why the Boss sent so many men for this little girl."

"He said something about her life on Perdition," the barkeep said.

"Perdition?" the small man asked. "She came from Perdition?"

Miya's mind flashed back to Perdition. Could one of the Raider Bosses have a vendetta against her? She didn't think anyone here knew her past. Surely, no one could have followed her here, halfway across the quadrant from that stinking world.

Her hand automatically went to her belt, which was a deadly weapon disguised as the sash, called a *Kyoketsu-shogei*, a knife attached to one end of a two meter long high-tensile steel chain, at the other was a matching steel ring that formed a belt buckle with the knife. The weapon served as a belt or sash, and Miya kept it on her at all times.

Then Miya noticed a meter long piece of pipe leaning against the wall next to her. This would make a perfect *hanbo*, a weapon that could be non-lethal. Miya didn't want to get involved in any criminal investigation on the day she planned to leave the Academy.

She weighed the pipe in her hands as the three men came closer to her hiding place. She spun it several times slowly, keeping the weapon silent. Next to her, along the wall, was a jumble of bags containing garbage from the canteen. Miya stooped among the smelly garbage and lowered her head. Huddled in the alley, Miya appeared to be another garbage bag.

One of her pursuers walked by Miya's hiding spot without noticing her. They weren't trying to be quiet. She heard another man shuffle by. He gagged at the odor of rotting food and quickly dodged away from the stench.

Miya was reminded of the stench of Perdition where the murdered dead rotted where they fell amongst the garbage that filled the streets.

Her first pursuer was in the darkest spot in the middle of the alley, and turned on a hand-held light. "I can't see a thing. Where'd she go?"

"Shut up and keep looking."

A large set of mud-stained shoes stopped directly in front of Miya. She held still, but prepared to spring into attack.

“Man, this really stinks,” the voice connected to the muddy boots exclaimed.

“Well, don’t stand there and smell it, you idiot.”

“Who are you calling an idiot, Willy?”

“The name’s Bill,” the other man huffed.

The feet moved away. “*Are these fools ever going to get going?*” Miya thought.

All three men were ten meters away using hand-held lights, looking in the nooks and crannies.

Miya rose smoothly and moved back to the dead-end at the canteen. Climbing like a squirrel, she quickly scampered up the corner to the low roof. She flipped over the eave and glided across the rooftops like a wraith.



Chapter Twelve

A spy-drone hovered silently, high above the alley. Its control team watched and recorded the incident from a shuttle parked nearby.

“Amazing,” an agent said, as the picture on his monitor switched from night-vision to infrared. “Even in Infra-Red, she’s hard to see. Her odd clothing must have some heat-dispersing capabilities.” Sitting among the hot, rotting garbage, Miya was undetectable. The spy drone’s crew watched Miya step toward the wall with the unidentifiable heat source of the garbage bags and simply disappear.

At either end of the alley, the bright heat signatures of the six men were plainly evident. With the chase team less than ten meters away, the woman seemed to move among them like a ghost. Three men milled around the open end of the alley, the other three walked by her without noticing.

The drone's control team had orders not to assist the pursuers or hinder the target in any way. They were there to observe and record the event.

When Miya flitted away over the rooftops, a voice came over the Com, "Tell the teams to wrap it up. They're done for the night."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you put the note on Miss Musashi's apartment's door?" the voice on the Com asked the drone tech.

"Yes, sir, I did it right after she left for the meeting in the canteen."

"Good, now, clean up, pick me up, and take me back to her barracks."

"We'll be there in five minutes, sir."



The recruiter sat back in the leather chair in the Academy Commandant's office. The vid of Miya's escape replayed silently on the large monitor.

"I told you the girl was good," the Commandant said with pride.

"She is indeed, sir. We'll owe you for this."

"Just take good care of her," the Commandant said shaking a finger at his important visitor. "You know at first, I thought we might have some problem with the girl, because of her background. However, I've never had a cadet more voracious to learn about everything, certainly none that tried harder, or performed better. Considering Miya was already well-trained when she arrived, she never let her incredible skills overcome her wish to learn and improve."

The Commandant thought for a moment and said, "Miya never speaks of her life on Perdicion. Others might have misbehaved and used such a background as an excuse."

"It couldn't have been pleasant, sir," the recruiter agreed.

"It's a miracle she survived," the Commandant commented.

"Well, thanks again, sir. She's everything you promised," the recruiter observed. "Are you sure she's as lethal as you indicated in your brief? I'm almost sorry my men didn't trap her. They'll be angry that I had them wear all that hot armor beneath their clothes for nothing."

“Trust me. They wouldn’t have enjoyed trapping her. Early, during her first year with us, one of the larger cadets bullied her mercilessly. When I spoke to her about it to see if she wanted me to intervene, Miya told me not to concern myself. Later, I learned the big bully had reportedly fallen down several flights of stairs, and was lucky to survive. At least that’s what he said. However, I noticed he never bullied Miya again, and they were fast friends after that. He was almost like a big brother to her,” the Commandant explained.

“Hmmm.”

“Yes, indeed.”

They sat silently for a moment, and watched the vid replay.

“I’ve got it,” the visitor exclaimed, leaning forward to watch Miya move stealthily over the roof tops.

“What?”

“I know what Miya reminds me of.”

“What?” the Commandant asked intrigued.

“A *ninja*,” the recruiter stated.

“You mean like in the folktales of ancient oriental assassins, *ninja*?”

“Exactly.”

“That explains it,” the Commandant uttered, slapping his knee as he sat back, nodding as if a mystery had been solved in his mind.

The other man tilted his head questioningly.

“She’s got two swords and practices with them constantly.”

“Swords?”

“Yes, two of them. She’s quite adept at using them simultaneously,” the Commandant said, closing his eyes as he remembered watching one of Miya’s amazing workouts.

“Swords,” his visitor grinned, “perfect.”



Chapter Thirteen

Miya heard the shuttle land in the empty Academy barrack's parking lot. She listened as the engines wound down. She heard one set of heavy footsteps echoing up the single flight of steps, then down the long hall toward her billet. Since she was the only one in the building, the visitor had to be for her.

Miya had discovered the note attached to her door when she returned. It said, "I wish to speak to you about your future assignment. I'll be here at 0130."

The note was signed "Tom Ford, Recruiter, CCO."

There was a knock at the thin wooden door to Miya's dorm room.

"Miss Musashi?" a voice asked from the hall. "I'm Tom Ford, I believe you got my note. I'd like to speak with you about a position in my agency."

Miya sat silently for a moment.

"Miss Musashi, I know you are in there. By now you realize tonight's exercise was a test," the voice explained. "A test you passed with flying colors, incidentally."

There was no answer. While the man spoke, Miya got up from her bed and moved silently to the window, still clad in her black ninja outfit.

"Miss Musashi, I promise we meant no harm to you in any way. Please, may I come in? I really don't want to carry on an interview from out here in the hall," Ford said.

A low feminine voice came from directly behind Ford, "It's fortunate you didn't lose any men tonight, Mr. Ford."

Ford jumped, but feeling a sharp point at his back, he resisted his urge to turn and face his assailant.

"Credentials," Miya stated flatly. Her business-like tone clearly indicated her intent to the perspiring recruiter.

Ford slowly moved his left hand inside his coat pocket and felt a slight increase in pressure at his spine. He lifted the small credential packet over his shoulder and displayed an official looking card of an agency Miya was unaware. She only glimpsed it for a second before he flipped it shut, returning it to his pocket.

“Commonwealth Clandestine Operations,” Miya quoted. “Never heard of it,” she said, unimpressed.

“We’re new. We are top secret. If you don’t mind, we can speak—”

“Downstairs in the cadet’s lounge,” Miya interrupted. “I have no where to sit, and allow no men in my room . . . ever.”

Ford led the way back down stairs. After they sat facing each other across a low table in the stained and worn overstuffed chairs of the cadet’s lounge, Ford breathed a sigh of relief.

Miya lowered her hood and pulled her legs up under her, looking at ease like a big black cat in the chair.

“Please tell me about your proposition, Mr. Ford, and why you think I could help your new agency.” Miya said.

“First, if you don’t mind,” Ford began, “please tell me why you think I would’ve lost men, Miss Musashi.”

“Miya, please call me Miya,” she said.

Ford nodded.

Miya continued, “From the comments your men made, it was evident they had some tie to my past on Perdition. On Perdition, my life was a struggle for survival every moment. The slightest mistake would mean death, or, worse, slavery. Although I made the mistake of responding to your invitation, which we’ll talk about later, your men were sloppy. You should be glad that I wished to avoid any investigation into their deaths. And . . .” Miya paused for emphasis.

“And?” Ford prompted hopefully.

“And I’ve found it is more important to avoid detection than to exact retribution. The men were harmless, and injuries to them, or worse, were unneeded. I achieved my goal of escape to safety.”

“Excellent, but you remained here. I’m sure you intended to flee, did you not?”

Miya nodded. “Your note piqued my interest. I knew I hadn’t received my orders, unlike everyone else here, and hoped tonight was some strange test.”

Miya waved her hand to indicate she was right. "I've answered your questions. Now, tell me what I can do for you."

Ford thought he was on the brink of something important. The young woman before him seemed totally at ease, but he felt that she could easily incapacitate or even kill him in an instant. She was attractive with almond-shaped, almost black eyes, waist-length shiny black hair. He'd seen she wore black gloves, a black *gi*, and strange black shoes. Her hands were tucked into the billowing sleeves of her garment, and he was sure she had some nasty surprises hidden there.

"I have so many questions, Miya," Ford began. "Your Commandant sent your name to our agency as a candidate for our new task force. Your credentials are impressive. Tonight's exercise went very well. The CCO is working on a special project that is critical to the protection of the CSA." Ford smiled, as if he'd made an important point.

"That's important to me, because?" Miya asked.

Ford was shocked. "I thought you were at the Academy—"

"The Academy provided an excellent extension of my education, Mr. Ford. Some dear friends assisted me by recommending me to this institution. Until I came here, I knew almost nothing about the CSA. Now, I say again, tell me what I can do for you, or I must end this interview." Miya's voice was all business.

Ford sat back, thinking hard. He'd no idea that Miya wouldn't jump at the opportunity. "I'd like you to consider becoming an agent for the CCO. We'll continue your training, and your impressive skills will fit into our needs perfectly. We'll provide you with a salary commensurate with your skills, a new background, and I can guarantee you won't be bored."

"I take it, since I received no other orders or offers, the CCO blocked my applications to the other institutions?" Miya stated with an arched eyebrow.

"Ah, yes," Ford said, looking a little embarrassed.

"All right, I'll come along. If I refuse, you'd probably try to coerce me, and I'd have to do something painful to you. I can't help think you mean well. I sense no evil intent from you. Toward me, at least," Miya grinned and the atmosphere

relaxed dramatically. She continued, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ford, but I'm a little on edge from your test. What do we do next?"

Miya felt relieved to know she was receiving an excellent offer for future employment that perfectly suited her abilities and interests. Now the relief swept over her as she listened to Ford drone on about the arrangements to get to the CCO. When she considered how finding the *ninja-to* swords on Perdition had changed her life, Miya wondered what other adventures fate had in store for her.



Chapter Fourteen

Across the quadrant in a distant Rim sector, a special CSA Navy courier fighter sailed in twilight space with unusual cargo. A CSA Black Ops Commander had squeezed into the tiny cockpit with the pilot. To make matters worse the Commander was a large, powerfully built man.

A warning tone sounded in the cabin.

"That sounds like an emergency beacon, pilot," the big Commander stated.

"That's right, Commander Truelove."

"Standing orders are for all ships to respond to any emergency beacon, Lieutenant," the Commander reminded.

"No can do, sir. My orders are to get you to the *Traveler* as quick as possible."

"Standing orders super-cede your orders, Lieutenant. How'd you like it if someone bypassed your emergency beacon someday?"

Without further discussion, the Lieutenant tapped the twilight drive control, and the ship dropped out of twilight space. Off in the distance, several exploding Draconian ships surrounded a smoking CSA missile-cruiser. The fight was over, and none of the ships looked operational. From his own battle experience, the Commander knew it had been a horrific battle.

The Commander stated, "You're right, Lieutenant, we can't stop to help these people, except to call in support from Fleet Ops. Wind up the twilight drive, while I'll make a report on this situation. Let's get back on the road."

“Aye, sir,” the young Lieutenant agreed. The tiny ship disappeared in a flash.



An ensign aboard the new Phoenix class CSA super-frigate, *Traveler*, named in honor of the late Commonwealth Star Alliance Regent, George “Traveler” Ravenhold, led the new arrival down to the Captain’s day room from the entry port. It was evident the stranger was an officer from his bearing. He was a large, powerfully-built man dressed in a black Special Ops combat uniform with no sign of rank or unit insignia.

The Marine guard on duty saluted smartly, knocked on the Captain’s door as he opened it, and announced their arrival. The stranger entered the day room without comment and closed the hatch behind him. However, not before the quick-eyed ensign spied the ship’s senior staff sitting around the Captain’s conference table.

After the hatch closed, the Captain looked up at the newcomer. “Good, we’re all here. Commander James Truelove,” the Captain said, indicating the newcomer, “I’m Captain William Johnson of the *Traveler*, and I want you to meet my senior staff.” He shook hands with the bigger man, and noted the strength of Truelove’s grip.

Captain Johnson introduced the XO and the Chiefs of Intelligence, Tactical, Navigation, and Communications. Each officer had played a role in preparing the mission brief for Commander Truelove’s mission.

“Truelove, we’re ordered to brief you for your next mission executing in—” the Captain paused to look at the time, “—fifty-nine minutes.”

Captain Johnson indicated the graphic of the sector on the Vid monitor, and explained, “A local border world, New Harvest, recently colonized by CSA, is under attack from rebel elements. No one knows where these rebels came from, or who’s supporting them. The rebels have butchered almost one-third of the colonists in the last month. The CSA’s sent in three separate Special Ops teams to resolve the problem. The rebels decimated all three units. Their SO field commanders were included in the casualties. There now remain only enough Special Ops members on the planet for one under-strength team.

“I asked our Intel and Com officers to provide you with a report of the local situation. On the Vid, you can see our latest Intel assessments, while I give you the

overview. We've loaded your exact mission orders and a complete file of our Intel onto your datapad with a set of map overlays for the area of operation on the planet. Essentially your orders are to evaluate the situation, take command of the surviving Special Ops forces, and resolve the problem."

Truelove nodded as he followed Captain Johnson's mission briefing.

Captain Johnson said, "The *Traveler* is assigned as recon for the fleet blockading the Draconian Empire ships operating in the next system. At least one Draconian ship slipped through the blockade recently, and Fleet Operations re-tasked every available ship to this sector. We can't provide support for you or your mission. We'll divert from our course to join with the fleet just long enough to launch you down to the planet surface in a life-pod. Our engineers assure me, Truelove, they can get you within one click of your mission's planned insertion point. I apologize for the lack of support, but these are my orders."

"I understand, sir," Truelove replied emotionlessly.

"Here's the current situation." The screen showed a map of the colony settlements and the general direction of the rebel attacks. The colonists fled to the largest settlement, Jimtown. Truelove's insertion point would be a hidden spot in the hills behind and above the main settlement.

"Are the colonists or Special Forces in the field aware of my insertion, sir?" he asked.

The captain looked at the Com chief, who responded, "I'm sorry, Commander, we're unable to establish a secure sub-space Com link. We fear local Com traffic is being monitored by the rebels."

Truelove knew a problem with secret insertions into hot combat zones was that many casualties were due to friendly fire from defenders not expecting the help.

"If we haven't had Com traffic with the colonists, sir, how do we know the situation on the ground?"

Captain Johnson seemed impressed. These were all discussions his staff mulled over before the Commander arrived. The consensus among the *Traveler*'s officers determined this was a suicide mission. The Captain rose from his seat, looking Truelove directly in the eye and replied, "As I'm sure you are aware, Commander, each Special

Ops team leader carried an implant that's monitored from orbit by an Intel Comsat and relayed through sub-space to CSA HQ. We heard the commanders as they directed their teams. We also monitored them as the insurgents captured, tortured, and killed them." The cabin was silent for a moment. Anticipating Truelove's next request, Captain Johnson said, "The former Special Ops team commanders' Com files are also included in your mission file."

Truelove stood silent in thought. Then he replied with practiced calmness, "Captain, I want to thank you and your team for their excellent work in helping me prepare for my mission. I believe I fully understand the situation on the ground as we know it, and expect to perform my duties to achieve success."

Captain Johnson watched Truelove closely. He'd expected anger or fear as a response, knowing his own thoughts on the no-win situation. *How could anyone hope to protect a bunch of settlers with almost no men against such vicious attacks?*

"May I assume you'll be monitoring my implant as well, sir?" Truelove asked.

"You may," said Captain Johnson.

"If the need calls, I'd appreciate you getting a personal message to my parents, sir, if it's not too much trouble," Truelove said.

"I'll land the *Traveler* on their front lawn if I have to, son," Captain Johnson promised.

"Oh, please don't, sir. Dad just had the front lawn reseeded." James said with a wry grin.

Everyone laughed, breaking the tension in the room. "By the Lord, son, we won't let you go without sharing a toast for luck."

Captain Johnson's steward arrived magically with a tray of shot glasses. The officers stood silently after clicking their glasses together awaiting their Captain's toast.

"To the Commonwealth Star Alliance, confusion and death to her enemies." Captain Johnson offered.

The men responded with pride, "To the CSA."

They looked at Truelove expectantly to see if he would honor the toast in return.

Truelove raised his glass and said, "To the *Traveler* and her valiant crew. May they find success and safety in their travels."

“To the *Traveler*,” the men said in unison, drained their glasses, and filed out.

“Truelove, we’ll wait to the last possible second to release your life-pod. I wish we could give you a shuttle or even a fighter, but my orders are firm. I’m afraid the CSA doesn’t think there’s much chance of getting their precious hardware back.”

“I’m sure they have their reasons, sir,” Truelove said with conviction.

“I’m also ordered to inform you that you’re free to make any decisions you deem necessary on the ground. Your orders include your appointment as the provisional governor, provided you survive. Good luck, Governor Truelove.” the Captain said, opening the cabin door differentially for the brave Special Ops Commander.

The ensign stood at attention beside the marine guard. He led the stranger to the life-pod assigned to the mission. Helping the officer stow his equipment and get strapped into the tiny space, he nodded and said, “Good luck, sir.” He’d never forget the stoic face of the man as he dogged down the life-pod hatch. He keyed the com panel on the wall, and said, “Ensign Barnes to the bridge.”

“Go ahead, Ensign,” the Captain’s response returned immediately.

If Captain Johnson is on the Com this man must be important, he thought. Then he said, “All ready down here, sir.”

“Tell the officer, the launch will be activated in five minutes, ensign,” Captain Johnson ordered watching a mission countdown timer on the bridge monitor turn to 5:00 and continued counting downward.

“Aye, sir,” the Ensign replied.

He leaned over the hatch blast-glass bubble and gave a ‘five’ signal with his hand. The big man gave him a thumb’s up, nodded this thanks, then settled back, studying his datapad like he was watching the Vid news while riding a public transit shuttle to work.



On the Traveler’s bridge

“What do you think, sir?” The XO asked Captain Johnson, as five minutes later the life-pod shot away toward the distant planet of New Harvest.

“You know, Marcus, when I heard of this kooky plan, I thought some poor sucker is being assigned a one-way trip to hell. But a few minutes with Truelove, and I think there might be a chance.”

“Me too, sir, I just wish we could stay and help. Those recordings made me angry.”

“No kidding,” the Com officer responded. “A few well coordinated ion cannon shots would settle their hash.”

“Sir,” the Intel chief said as he approached Captain Johnson sitting in the command chair, “I just reviewed an in-depth background check on Truelove. He has an impressive list of commendations and awards for amazing mission successes. I think if anyone can do it, he can.”

“Well, if he succeeds, he should get another one. Prepare the ship to return to FTL on my mark.”

Klaxons sounded through the ship as the crew went to Action Stations in preparation for the jump to twilight space.

The Nav officer reported proudly, “Life-pod touchdown, sir. We hit the mark dead-on, and our long-range scan indicates no damage. His implant indicates Truelove’s life signs are strong.”

“We’ve done all we can for a good man,” Captain Johnson said under his breath.

Moments later the tactical station lit up green, indicating all stations were ready. The Tactics officer reported, “The Board shows green in all aspects, sir. The ship is FTL ready.”

“Engage FTL,” Captain Johnson ordered.

The *Traveler* disappeared into a bright twilight space wormhole.



Chapter Fifteen

Truelove crawled out of the dying life-pod. His landing hadn’t been too rough. He was glad the hatch was unobstructed. He knew of rare instances of life-pods landing on their hatch and trapping the hapless occupants within inches of safety.

He covered the pod with its black parachute and weighed it down with rocks. A few branches and some tall weeds added along with a few handfuls of the plentiful dust completed the pod's camouflage. Picking up his gear, he glanced at his wrist-mounted datapad to get his bearings and headed toward the heights overlooking the settlement of Jimtown.

During the descent to the planet's surface, Truelove reviewed every scrap of information in the mission file. He listened to the terrible screams of the dying Special Ops commanders on their final recording as they were tortured. He steeled his mind to complete his mission. He would end this, and he would end it now. Someone would pay and pay dearly for his comrades' unnecessary torture and death.

Truelove knew of the secret frequency used by Special Ops on these types of missions. He selected the frequency on his wrist-mounted datapad, hoping to contact some of the remaining Special Ops team members. Employing the secret code they used in silent situations, Truelove clicked his molar microphone twice. He waited a few seconds and was pleased when a triple click response returned in his aural implant. He clicked twice again, indicating he'd received them, but he said nothing and switched off his mic. The Special Ops team on the planet was aware that a new Special Ops commander was on the ground. He hoped by having the secret warning that they wouldn't shoot him if he showed up on their doorstep. His second transmission, relayed they were to keep his presence secret. If he weren't going to keep his presence secret, he would have reported to them verbally.

Truelove thought the temperature of New Harvest was hot for his taste. The terrain was dry and the vegetation looked dormant. Then Truelove remembered he'd read the growing season on New Harvest was during the mild winter season. The hot summer season left the land scorched and dead looking.

Lying amid the rocks on the point overlooking the town, Truelove used his goggles set on night vision (NV) to scan the area. The Special Ops men weren't visible, as he'd expected. A few local police stood at the entrance to the town. The rebels stripped several warehouses of the corrugated siding to build a barrier along the exposed sides of the settlement. Since the town butted up against the cliff on which he lay, he could easily repel down into it, if he chose to do so. Something about the

situation struck Commander Truelove as odd. Not interested in being the rebels' fourth Special Ops victim, he wanted to observe the situation to see if he could gather any additional information before forming his plan of action.

Most of the lights were off in Jimtown reducing the chance of someone being a target at night. He noticed a small light blinking within a chain-link fence-enclosed compound near the town entrance. Truelove used his NV goggles to zoom in on it. Five dark figures huddled in the security compound. Two policemen stood guarding its gate. *I see the local cops captured some prisoners.* Truelove thought.

Watching the flashing light, Truelove recognized a secret CSA military code and spelled P-R-I-S-O-N-E-R-S. He had a sinking feeling when he realized that his surviving Special Ops team members were the prisoners. Turning on his molar mic, he clicked twice and shut down. The signal from the compound stopped, and no one detected it. *At least I don't have to worry about friendly fire,* he thought. *It doesn't look like there are any friendlies.*

Truelove considered what he knew now. *Option One, either the town has joined the rebels or Option Two, the rebels have already overcome the town and are posing as settlers to trap any unsuspecting outside help. Since rebels usually kill or brutalize everyone in a town, it's unlikely that option one is in play, and since rebels use hit-and-run tactics and don't like to stay in one area long, it's unlikely that this group were rebels. In fact, the colony was only recently established, and the chance of a rebel faction developing is highly unlikely.*

Therefore, the attacking force is from some outside influence posing as rebels. What happened to the settlers remained a mystery for now, but Truelove held out hope. *Since the Special Ops team is alive, then perhaps the settlers are also prisoners in some other hidden location.*

He switched his goggles to Infrared (IR). Several heat sources in town lit up. However, a large warehouse directly under his position glowed with a large clump of red. *There they are,* he thought, satisfied his deductions fit the facts. *Now where is this 'rebel' base?* He asked himself. No other building showed the residual heat of occupation, except a house by the front gate used by the guards. The rest of the town is abandoned.

Switching his goggles back to NV, he started a standard scanning pattern, trying to locate the rebel base of operation. After ten minutes, he detected an unusual glow over a distant dune in an area his datapad map indicated as uninhabited. He crept back from the cliff edge for cover and slipped his Gilley suit up to cover his head and his datapad.

The Gilley suit was an important part of the equipment used by Special Forces for more than a thousand years. Gamekeepers and poachers from old Earth's ancient British Isles used the original Gilley suits to remain hidden while hunting and spying on game.

The suit Truelove owned was the acme of the evolution of the suit. His ghillie suit was one of a few prototype "Chameleon" suits. The Ravenhold Industries Mark 1 Chameleon Ghillie effectively blocked detection by infrared sensors and weapons, absorbing most types of known sensor or scanner energy. The suit also translated colors and shapes within its environment across the surface of the suit to blend in. Its irregular shape and soft edges made spotting its wearer when motionless virtually impossible.

The suit required a source of power, and used a small ion power pack. It also absorbed power from any source of radiation increasing its time of use in the field. Best of all, the suit absorbed most of the energy from small arms energy weapons. It deflected the energy bolt throughout the suit, then absorbed most of the energy. Only concentrated fire by numerous small weapons on a single point or a single hit from a heavy weapon overloaded and defeated the suit's built-in defenses.

The lightweight flexible ceramic fiber of the Chameleon Ghillie was also resistant to projectiles. Truelove appreciated the opportunity to test the new suit on this mission.

Looking at his detailed terrain map on his datapad, he pinpointed the location of the glow in the dunes on his reference datapad map. The area contained the only valley large enough to serve as a hidden base. Most of the terrain nearby was far too rough to serve for anything but a small camp for a few men. The datapad's topographical map indicated an access through a long narrow and winding canyon connected to the main road between the settlements. Although someone might be able to traverse the rough

terrain on foot with great difficulty, ground vehicles must use the winding canyon access.

He selected a special high band frequency and recorded his findings for the sub-space SatCom broadcast back to Fleet HQ. He included a rough outline of his plan and signed off.

New Haven's thirty-six hour planetary day gave him six hours of night remaining to get his plan in motion.



Truelove hid a cache of his equipment and spare weapons. He took his silenced Special Ops sniper rifle, a silenced assault pistol, and some mines. He headed down a dim game trail off the side of the cliff toward the hidden canyon entrance of the supposed rebel base.

An hour later, he was lying behind the rocks across from the canyon entrance. As he crawled silently to his vantage point, he noticed a movement in the darkness. His NV goggles showed two guards. His sniper rifle coughed twice, and the guards slumped over dead where they sat. Looking around, he took care approaching their position. Finding no other guards, he sat the men up and supported them. The guards' bodies appeared as if still on duty. As he moved their bodies, Truelove noticed they wore a generic gray uniform, but their military boots attracted his attention. Looking at the boot soles he noted the "DE" logo and recognized the guards wore Draconian Empire's standard issue boots.

So, the Draconians are involved, he considered, as he reviewed how this new information impacted his plan. *For some reason, the Draconians didn't attack the colony outright.* Truelove knew of the CSA blockade of the Draconians in the nearby sector. *Perhaps the CSA blockade stranded a Draconian raiding party on New Harvest. They might fear discovery by the settlers, forcing them to act aggressively to mask their objective. Because of the blockade, the attackers couldn't expect support from their forces.* He didn't have time to consider more, but he was sure something else had precipitated the incident.

Working swiftly, he set up two mines near the entrance of the canyon beside the steep, sandstone walls. Six of the mines he stagger-planted along the narrow canyon walls, setting their yield to maximum, and the last two he planted in a narrow overhang of the unsteady rock canyon sides. The whole trap covered perhaps fifteen hundred meters of the curving canyon passage that folded back on itself.

In the middle of the trap, he set the trigger to activate upon sensing any vehicle. The mines at the ends should trap anyone entering the canyon from either end by the collapsing rock, and those in the middle should destroy anyone left alive. *I just have to make sure they don't trap me.* James reasoned. He set the mine trigger to *Remote* to control the trap's detonation from his datapad. Hoping for the best, he quietly proceeded down the dark canyon toward the strange lights in the valley beyond. Feeling fatigued from a day that began long before his arrival on the planet, James appreciated the refreshing breeze. With a moonless night, the pitch-black canyon provided the perfect cover for his mission.

The dim glow from the site steadily increased as he approached. He heard the muted sound of machines operating in the clear night air. Occasionally, flickers of light on the canyon walls reminded him of something familiar.

He noted a guard post positioned at the end of the canyon where it opened into the valley beyond. His datapad map indicated he should be approaching a low hidden saddle in the rock wall that ran between the canyon and the valley that should permit access to the valley before he reached the camp guards. Finding the narrow track up to the saddle, he crept up until he could see inside. Setting the mine trap and sneaking through the long winding canyon on foot had taken an hour. Four hours remained before dawn, and he felt the pressure of his plan's time limit.



Chapter Sixteen

The sight in the valley beyond the saddle astounded Truelove. There, at the end of a long gouge in the valley floor, lay a Firedrake class Draconian destroyer. The ship had crashed on New Harvest after suffering damage during its escape from the

blockade. The colonists were a threat to its security, and its Marine contingent, called “Wardogs” had attacked them.

The ship’s hangar bay lay crushed under a few hundred tons of rock from the canyon wall. It couldn’t launch its shuttles or fighters, if any remained undamaged. The flashes of light he’d seen from a distance were the bright arcs from the cutting torches and welders that the Draconian engineers were desperately trying to use to cut the ship free and effect repairs to its broken hull. The rear cargo bay stood open and unguarded.

Eight vehicles sat in the open area around the ship. One was an armored grav-truck typically used by field commanders. Another truck included a mounted heavy machine gun. The six other neatly parked trucks were standard military transports. A few lighting stands illuminated the active work areas. Beside one light an emergency generator roared with another strange machine. Truelove zoomed in and noticed it was a jammer, used to deflect scans from high orbit. No CSA ship would detect the destroyer unless it entered a low orbit then it would have to search the area with intensive scanning beams.

Switching his goggles back to NV, Truelove carefully avoided looking at the blinding bright arcs from the welders. He reconnoitered the area around the wrecked destroyer. Being early in the morning, most of the ship’s crew was asleep. There were two guards at the post covering the valley entrance from the canyon approach. Four guards were stationed around the destroyer’s perimeter. The far side of the craft was wedged tightly against the cliff face. Two crews of engineers were working the night shift. He marked each position with the goggles’ wireless link to his datapad.

Truelove crouched motionlessly as his mind sifted through his observations. Although he didn't realize it, his body tensed as if under a huge strain. In moments, the data swirled in his mind until it coalesced in to stark coherency. He considered the new situation as it presented itself. *A Firedrake Class destroyer carried a compliment of about two-hundred-fifty crew with fifty Wardogs for a total of three hundred.* Looking at the damaged ship, Truelove quickly estimated that roughly twenty percent of the crew would have been casualties from battle damage and the ensuing wreck on New Harvest. *That left two-hundred-ten. If there were twenty Wardogs assigned as guards*

for the settlers, one-hundred-ninety Draconians remained at the wreck site, minus the two he'd already killed at the canyon entrance.

With only four hours left until planetary sunrise, he reasoned the guards would remain on duty. Further, he was sure the ship was the source of the “rebel” problems that originated several weeks ago. Their dull guard routines on this remote and boring planet that posed little threat made their situation seem like a bothersome waste of their time during the night when everyone else was sleeping. None took their guard assignments seriously.

Truelove watched the guards carefully. There was no pattern or timed guard duty, and the guards didn't interact. Each stood, sat or paced a small area covering the ship's perimeter with no overlapping lines of sight. He observed their general lackadaisical attitude and boredom. With care, he could eliminate the guards one-by-one without alarming any of the others. The trick would be doing so without alarming the engineering teams who could see at least two guards at any time. He could easily shoot them all, but his action would surely alert the ship. He couldn't hope to defeat the fully roused ship's crew alone and unprepared. He didn't have time to attack Jimtown and free the rest of the team before morning. He needed to complete his plan under the cover of darkness with its added dimensions of surprise and fear.

He knew the last thing the Draconians would expect would be a direct assault on the powerful destroyer by land. If he could isolate the town guards from their support base, his job to free the settlers and his Spec Ops team would be much easier. From the beginning, his plan had been to attack the base, cutting off the attackers from their support, but a destroyer? Truelove forced his mind to settle down. *This is no longer a Destroyer. It's a marooned crew on a wreck, who desperately fear capture by the CSA. I must play on those fears.*

Finally, Truelove realized he had the key to the thought processes of the enemy commander. *The commander of the Draconian Destroyer refused to face the fact that his ship would never fly again. The evidence was clear, the engineers worked slavishly to save the dead ship more than three weeks after it had crashed. With tons of rock burying the hull, the commander had forced his crew to work round the clock.*

The guards knew the situation was hopeless, but in the Draconian Empire to challenge authority was to ask for a swift and painful death. There was no one who could aide the commander in changing his deluded mind. Delusion, Truelove thought. I must play on his delusion that he still has a space-worthy ship. If the Draconian commander thought he still had a ship, then he would also feel his greatest threat would be from another ship in orbit, not a ground attack. Truelove worked on developing a plan to provide the illusion of an attack on the destroyer by the Navy.

Completing his analysis, he noticed one team of engineers was working on the broken hatch of what should be the ship's main engineering bay. The hatch was open.

Truelove needed to communicate his updated situation to HQ, and perhaps he could get some help as well. He slid back from the edge of his lookout and took cover under his Gilley suit.

Truelove selected the encrypted ComSat frequency on his datapad. Opening the channel, he said in a conversational voice, "This is a message for Traveler Bill. The package you dropped is ready for pickup along with your recently lost fishing bait. Breakfast begins at five, so don't be late. I'm sure your uncle won't mind if you come. Remember to tell dad his bluegrass lawn looks great, all my best, the Governor, out," he said, closing the transmission and recorded his modified plan with the complete situation for a microburst transmission later. Truelove now had about three-and-a-half hours before planetary dawn.



A few minutes later, on board the *Traveler*, the Captain Johnson lay awake on his rack, unable to sleep. Hearing a knock at his door, he grumbled, "Enter."

The Communications Chief hurried into his cabin. "I believe I've an urgent message for you from Commander Truelove, sir. It came in a few minutes ago over the specially encrypted ComSat channel," he said, handing the captain his datapad containing the message.

He watched Captain Johnson read the message through, then read it again slowly. "By the Lord, Truelove's done it." He smiled wryly, shaking his head. Leaping to

his feet, he grabbed the Com set next to his rack. He said excitedly, "Captain to the Bridge."

He waited impatiently for a moment, then heard the reply, "Bridge here, sir."

"Reverse course for New Harvest, maximum speed. Notify all department heads to meet me in my day room in ten minutes. Set the ship to Action Stations," Captain Johnson ordered.

"Action stations, aye, sir," the reply came immediately.

The Action Stations klaxon rang throughout the ship and the crew quickly donned their uniforms and battle gear reporting to their assigned stations.

Ten minutes later the *Traveler's* senior staff met in the Captain Johnson's day room sharing steaming cups of hot coffee served by the steward. When everyone had settled into a chair, Captain Johnson addressed them.

"I just received a secure ComSat message I believe was sent to us from Commander Truelove," he said as a text copy of the message appeared for everyone's benefit on the large view screen. "Tell me what you think of it," he ordered and waited impatiently while they read through it carefully. He knew what the message said, but he wanted clear confirmation from them without his influence.

After the officers reviewed the message, the tactical chief was the first to respond. "It looks like he's found our missing Draconian ship, sir."

"Tell me why you think so, TC," the Captain encouraged, using the initials for his position.

"First, sir, the message is addressed specifically to us as *Traveler* and you as Bill. Then he refers to fishing bait. Where I come from, we use worms mostly. I think the reference to missing bait refers to the ship that slipped through the blockade here recently. A *worm* is also a name for a *dragon*, and we all know the Draconians use dragon names for their ship classes."

Captain Johnson watched his staff as they all nodded, accepting the solution readily. "I agree. Very well," he encouraged.

"It's also, obvious the message comes from Commander Truelove, sir," the Com Chief added.

"Tell us why you think so, CC."

“The references to the *dropped package*, *his father’s lawn*, and *The Governor* are all related to the Commander’s mission briefing. He was the dropped package. We discussed his father’s lawn, and also I know he was made provisional governor of the settlement on New Harvest, having decoded his orders personally.”

“All correct. Anything else?” he asked, noting the consensus of his staff on this point.

“It also looks like he’s in a hurry to get our help, sir,” the Navigation Chief contributed.

“Continue on, NC.”

“Well, he states his plan or *breakfast* will begin at five in the morning, planetary time in his location, and he uses the code word *blue* in *bluegrass* referring to the CSA Navy code for extreme urgency. I’d say the reference to his father’s lawn also means if we’re late, he won’t survive, sir.”

Glancing around the table, the Captain saw they all agreed on the assessment.

Then the XO commented, “If the missing ship is on New Harvest, there’s no way one man or a short-handed Special Ops team can resolve the problem. And the reference to our uncle means CSA Fleet HQ won’t mind if we’re delayed from being on the line in the blockade long enough to bag a Draconian ship.”

They nodded their agreement again while the Intel Chief added, “That means the so-called rebel problem was probably the Draconian ship’s crew and the three Special Ops teams didn’t stand a chance.”

“Everyone agree?” The officers looked at each other, nodding in agreement.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“No? Good. I want your battle plans to support Truelove in Ops in one hour. Get your teams ready. We don’t know for sure, but Intel suggests the blockade-runner was a destroyer. I want boots in the dirt and birds in the air over the op area as soon as we hit planetary orbit. Let’s do it people.”



Chapter Seventeen

Back at the New Harvest crash site, Truelove wasted no time. He slid back down into the entrance canyon and shot the two guards at the valley entrance post with his sniper rifle. Propping them in their places, he looked at their Com units. *No one ever faulted the Draconian Empire for wasting money on good Com instruments.* Truelove smirked. These were simple one channel, local broadcast units with limited range. He noted the Com frequency on his datapad and took a unit along, but turned it to “silent” mode. In this mode it would vibrate, but not make any noise letting him know if there was any Com traffic.

Truelove ghosted along in the deep shadows near the hull as he approached the first perimeter guard. The guard stood relieving himself in the shadow of some wreckage when a silenced energy bullet struck him in the back of his skull. Catching the guard’s body as it fell, the commander hefted the corpse up and hung him by the back of his vest on a jagged edge of wreckage so that the guard looked like he was leaning on the wreck.

The next guard napped sitting on a crate under an engineering team and would never awaken from his unauthorized slumber. The third guard was actually paying attention. Glancing at both teams of welders, he saw they were busily working with the heavy welding hoods in place. He shot the man behind an ear and posed him to stand rigidly with a broken board thrust through his uniform from his collar and down a pants leg.

The fourth man moved around to the point where the bow of the ship had slammed into the rock cliff at the end of the valley. The bored guard found a comfortable place to hide and sleep. Evidently, discipline on board the ship was lax, and no one routinely checked the guards. The fourth guard never moved again.

Avoiding the visual range of the welding team working high on the superstructure, Truelove slipped behind the team working by the access hatch to the destroyer’s engineering bay. Both men died quietly. He posed them, with their welding hoods covering their dead faces. He tied the energized welding cable over the metal railing. The shifting wind blew the electrode against the metal showing a fitful arc as if welding were still going on. He had two hours left.



Inside the Draconian ship, all was quiet. No one stood on guard, and the engineering bay was empty. The lighting was dim. Truelove moved quickly to a nearby console. Realizing he needed to generate panic and play on the fears and assumptions of the ship's commander, he looked around the bay searching for something to suggest an option.

On the deck nearby sat several crates marked "Explosives" for use by the engineers who were trying to free the downed wreck from the tons of rock. He realized this was futile, but they were probably following the orders of the terrified captain. Grabbing a tote bag, he stuffed it full of explosive charges and detonator-timers. He found a locker with several laser-guided, hand-held rocket launchers and added these to his cache by the door.

A wall panel displayed the destroyer's heavy gun status. The forward cannon lay buried beneath tons of rubble during the wreck, and its display was dark on the panel. He quickly jumpered the mid-ship's ion cannon firing contact to the forward cannon. Now, when the mid-ship cannon activated, the wiring diverted the signal to fire to the forward cannon, forcing it to fire into the debris covering the bow of the ship, causing even more damage. The result should be something like firing a gun with the barrel plugged, only on a much larger scale.

Truelove simply cross-phased the aft cannon's main firing circuits, hoping the huge power overload from the firing sequence would burn out the circuits when it discharged. He closed the cannon control panels. Taking a nearby welder and turning it on, he lightly struck an arc between the panel and the securing latches, making it impossible to open quickly with the standard panel access tool. He turned the welder off.

Finally, Truelove pulled the thick ground wire from the main electrical system control panel bus bar lug. Using a pair of heavy wire cutters from a nearby tool pouch, he cut off the exposed metal wire and re-inserted the insulated wire in the grounding lug. Although the wire looked grounded, it served no purpose. There were two safety straps connecting the control boards to the panel housing for backup grounding

purposes. These he simply cut off and put in his pocket to hide any evidence of his sabotage.

Without a ground wire, if an engineer activated any of the console controls, the current for the normal circuit wouldn't have a clear return path and would seek any available path. Any one of the circuits attached to the control panel might activate randomly. He knew finding a problem with a ground was almost impossible. Most engineers looked for a problem with the power wiring, not with the ground.

For a moment, Truelove considered tapping into the Com system to download the core data for study by Special Operations HQ, but he was sure there would be security on the system that would detect his intrusion and activate the ship's alarms. He quickly rejected the thought. *His mission was to save the settlers. The Navy would have to find a way to get its own intelligence.*

Satisfied with his efforts in engineering, Truelove looked down into the dimly lit cargo bay, below and aft. A large anti-ship torpedo lay unsecured on an idle anti-grav cart designed to transport the heavy ordinance around a ship. Using the metal catwalk, he made his way down into the cargo hold. He turned on the anti-grav cart with the heavy torpedo and pushed it back to the edge of the cargo bay until its tail assembly aligned with his planned vantage point in the canyon saddle. Leaving the anti-grav cart operating, he pocketed the key.

He removed the flagged safety pins from the torpedo's warhead and the rocket motor that kept them from arming within the ship. Cutting off the centers of the pins, he re-inserted the ends with their warning labels back into their respective holes. Now the torpedo was armed, but looked safe. The red tip of the rocket motor would be clearly visible from his position on the canyon saddle. The huge torpedo had a clear path into the destroyer's engine room beyond the cargo bay. He had one hour left.



Still seeing no guards, Truelove slipped back outside with his bag of explosives and the shoulder-fired missile launchers. The sky was brightening with false dawn. Soon the ship's crew would be stirring. Hurrying himself, he returned to each guard

position and planted an explosive device set to discharge a few minutes after the start of his attack. No one would know the guards had died before the attack.

Walking quickly to the portable generator and jammer, he switched the jammer to the local Draconian guard Com frequency. He got in the armored command vehicle and quietly drove it to the narrow canyon entrance of the valley near the guard post, hoping it would look like the guards had taken a midnight joy ride. He planned to use the vehicle to escape the area. Truelove walked by the row of transport trucks. Using his great strength, he easily ripped a large side mirror off one of the transports and stuffed in the bag.

Finally, he set charges near several of the ship's gun emplacements and areas where the fleeing Draconians might go for protection from attack. His bag of destruction was empty and dawn was beginning to break when he took his place back among the large boulders strewn on the saddle in the canyon wall. Time was up.



Chapter Eighteen

Taking a deep breath, Truelove activated his molar mic and keyed it to the CSA standard military frequency he was sure the Draconian ship would be monitoring. He set the Draconian Com unit back to normal mode so that he could hear any responses from the Draconian commander if the jammer failed to function properly.

In the open CSA frequency he said excitedly, "Razor flight to *Traveler*, over."

Modulating his voice in a fair imitation of Captain Johnson on board the *Traveler*, he said, "Go ahead, Razor One."

Playing both sides of the conversation, he continued, "Razor One here, Captain. I found our missing bogey and am awaiting your orders."

In seconds, the Draconian destroyer's warning klaxons sounded battle stations. Truelove watched as the Draconians hastily swarmed to their positions, half-asleep and still donning their uniforms. As the huge destroyer's ion cannons activated and swiveled upwards toward their supposed attacker, he continued his act.

“Repeat, Razor One. Repeat your last transmission,” said a voice like Captain Johnson’s.

“Sir, Razor flight has detected the missing bogey on the planet’s surface. What are your orders? Should we wait until the *Traveler* arrives for support?”

“Negative, Razor One,” Captain Johnson’s voice replied. “We’ll not lose that bandit again. Attack at once. I say again, attack at once. *Traveler* will be on station in five minutes.”

“Affirmative, sir, attacking as ordered. Razor flight,” Truelove said to no one, “Tally ho.”

Truelove took one of the missile launchers and pointed it skyward. The sun was rising brightly behind his position. Holding the truck mirror in front of the laser sight, he located the bridge of the destroyer through the launcher’s scope and fired.

“Fox One,” he announced after a few seconds. The missile streaked upward. The blinding rising sun hid the rocket’s flame from the crew on board the destroyer as it launched from the canyon wall only a hundred meters from the ship.

Keeping the laser steady on his target, it took the missile a few seconds longer than usual to lock-on. Only after it had nosed over at the apex of its brief flight could it detect the laser painted target. This only added to the illusion that the attack was coming from some distance, and not the canyon wall a hundred meters away. With the last few pounds of rocket fuel, the warhead slammed against the unshielded armor plating of the destroyer’s bridge overhead. Truelove found the resulting explosion satisfying.



Within the Draconian destroyer’s bridge, panic ensued. The Draconian commander always thought of his bridge crew as incompetent fools. Now he was sure. The bridge electronics showered sparks in all directions as the warhead slammed into the armored overhead and exploded with a terrific crash, deafening them momentarily, and showering them with ceiling panels and loose power cables.

“Report,” he roared, with barely containable panic. “Where are the attacking ships?”

All the bridge officers vainly studied their blinking displays, searching the skies above them for a target. “No targets on my scanner, sir,” the terrified scanner tech replied.

The Draconian commander’s panic and anger at his incompetent officers exploded. In typical Draconian fashion, he pulled out his hand blaster and, shot the scanner operator. He also damaged the scanner display. “What fools,” he exclaimed. “Have every gun fire a searching pattern. Watch for an impact strike and concentrate the fire of all guns on that target,” he ordered. “Perhaps the wily CSA fleet has another new toy with a cloaking device.”

The remaining Draconian bridge crew promptly relayed the orders to the ship’s gun crews, and the resulting barrage was impressive. The two remaining ion cannons swiveled to imaginary targets and prepared to fire within seconds of each other.



Back in his hidden niche in the high canyon’s saddle, Truelove was enjoying his work. He wished he had a witness to the attack so they could tell the story together. It would be hard to top this one. He watched the big guns turn and make their final corrections. “Oh yeah,” he said to himself. “Make sure you get it right boys, and don’t miss.” He laughed aloud in the roaring din of massive gunfire. He noticed how the destroyer reflected the bright glow of the dawn in contrast to the dark blue sky to the west. Brilliant streams of laser fire sprayed like fountains into the heavens.

“Fox Two,” he yelled over the roar of gunfire, firing another missile skyward and using the mirror to target its laser on the smoking bridge armor again. He was concerned the destroyer’s weapons’ fire might interfere with the targeting laser from his missile launcher.

A series of explosions rocked the valley as if a CSA fighter was strafing it. The timed explosives began to fire off and added more chaos to the terrified Draconians’ situation. The former guard positions blew up in rapid sequence, followed closely by several of the smaller gun positions. Men screamed with pain and fear as the relentless attack continued. Equipment, men, and pieces of the ship flew in all directions.

The second main gun crew triggered the mid-ship's cannon, but it didn't fire. Instead, a loud rumble echoed from the buried forward gun and the broken bow of the destroyer. The rumble built to a deafening crescendo as the mid-ship gun captain held down the firing button, not realizing his gun wouldn't fire. Tons of rock that buried the forward gun exploded skyward with huge chunks of the crushed, armor-plated bow.

The massive aft cannon fired next. Twin streams of searing red beams shot into the sky, then an enormous blinding white ball of an electrical arc appeared through the open engineering hatch, followed by a thick cloud of black smoke as the firing circuits fused with the ship's heavy armor. The inside of the engineering bay glowed as bright as the sun for a moment as the weapon's unleashed ion energy sought an escape route. The flaming arc scorched a gaping hole in the circuit panel on the wall and ate through the twelve-inch armor plated hull. The eerie roar of the huge energy arc filled the air, sounding like an enraged wounded dragon screaming for vengeance. Most of the engineering staff inside the bay vaporized instantly, caught within the super white-hot ball of unleashed ion power. The aft main cannon fell silent, locked in its last firing aspect. The twin barrels, which were actually huge electrodes, glowed white-hot. Then they sagged down over the side of the ship in a plume of smoke, melting everything they touched.

Truelove's second missile slammed down on the bridge. The weakened bridge armor failed, leaving the sagging and smoking plating full of cracks but still hanging in place.

Due to Truelove's quick sabotage of the engineering control panel, the destroyer's structural integrity field didn't function as it should to help reinforce the hull plating and ship's structure. When the destroyer's commander ordered the structural integrity field activated, instead of it snapping on to strengthen the ship's structure and armor plating, the ship's Com system blared to life at full volume, playing the Draconian Imperial Anthem sung by an impressive mezzo-soprano. Just as the stunned bridge crew began to recover from the explosion that caused the bridge overhead sag, the insanely loud singing assaulted their senses.

With rocks weighing tons raining from the sky and a few more explosions left to time out, Truelove said, "Fox three," and fired the last missile at the destroyer's hapless

bridge. The streaking missile blazed down through the weakened bridge roof and slammed into the armored deck, detonating among the horrified bridge crew. The bridge blast windows exploded outward as everything within turned to vapor.

Dropping the last spent missile launcher and mirror, Truelove took quick aim through his sniper-rifle's scope at the torpedo's tail that peeked out of the cargo bay entrance. He was grateful that in all of the confusion, no one moved it back to safety. His rifle's energy bolt struck the tip of the torpedo's rocket housing, igniting the huge charge within. He watched as two small anti-ship gun mounts on the aft of the ship blew up with the last of the explosives, followed immediately by a roaring flame from the cargo hold, then a colossal ball of fire as the torpedo struck within the unprotected ship's engine compartment and exploded.



Chapter Nineteen

Ducking behind the huge boulders for protection from the enormous blast, Truelove feared the concussion of the explosion might topple one of the boulders over and crush him. He slid down the far side of the slope back into the dust-filled canyon and quickly removed his Gilley suit. He feared that if anyone saw him in the suit, it would destroy the attack's illusion.

Coughing and wiping his muddy, tear-filled eyes, Truelove rushed back to the waiting command vehicle. Tossing his suit into the vehicle, he jumped in and sped down the canyon, dodging falling rocks and debris. He heard the secondary explosions of the destroyer's destruction. He checked the mine trigger setting on his datapad and noted it was still in the standby mode as he approached the mine trap.

Looking back, he noted several of the remaining transport vehicles following his lead. They were about a quarter mile behind him fleeing for their lives. He accelerated to maximum speed trying to avoid the terrible destruction raining from the exploding destroyer. The dust and debris made seeing almost impossible. As he passed the mine trigger, he re-activated it. Now the race was on. *Could he escape the mine-filled canyon*

before one of the following vehicles triggered the trap? He counted five vehicles in the train of fleeing survivors before the cloud of his vehicle's dust obscured them.

Seeing the opening beyond the canyon, he pressed the grav-truck's accelerator to the floor plate. The engine roared and heavily armored truck shot forward, bounding over the debris from the dying destroyer. As he entered the last shadow of the high canyon walls, the first of the fleeing vehicles reached the trap's trigger in the bend of the canyon behind him. *This is going to hurt*, he thought as he leaned forward trying to urge every bit of speed from the armored truck.

Instantly, there were earth-shattering explosions throughout the canyon. Although the mines weren't nuclear, they were ultra-high explosives. With them set on high yield, Truelove could have destroyed a ten-story building with one mine. The two mines at either end of the canyon trap caused the strong stone canyon walls to collapse.

Visibility in the collapsing canyon dropped to zero. He guided his vehicle along the canyon wall, hoping that no large boulders blocked his path. Chunks of sharp rocks slammed through the heavy armor and cut into Truelove's hip and calf. He felt the sudden shock of the wounds in his leg, but his adrenaline kept him focused on escaping the terrible carnage behind him.

His command truck shot into the clear as if riding on the cloud of dust. The concussion from the blast hit the rear of the vehicle and spun it around crazily as he lost control and slid to a stop facing the entrance to the canyon, but safely clear of the incredible destruction at last. The cloud of dust washed over the armored truck like a wave.

Inside the canyon, the huge explosions tossed and shredded the Draconian's unarmored transport vehicles like toys. The center wall of the canyon where it snaked back on itself completely collapsed, mercilessly burying the few mangled survivors of the nightmarish trap.



Switching to his secure Special Ops channel, Truelove clicked his molar mic twice, indicating *Standby*. The Special Ops team prisoners in the compound watched in

amazement as the enemy base erupted with explosions. The Draconians guarding them ran dismayed from their guardhouse, and, unable to contact their commander for directions, jumped into the remaining grav-trucks and fled in the opposite direction, abandoning their prisoners and the settlers. They feared the approach of a powerful attacking force, and wanted to be somewhere else.

In minutes, Truelove arrived in the dusty and dented Draconian command truck and pulled up to the front of the gate of Jimtown. The truck's over-revved engine whining as it slowly spun down and stopped. Smoke boiled from under the engine compartment. A dusty, bleeding Truelove stepped out of the filthy, debris-strafed vehicle. He picked up his Gilley suit and folded it into its carrying pouch, then he limped over to the five worry worn Special Ops men inside the fence. Since they had all been parts of other teams, he didn't recognize any of them. "Gentlemen," he said after shooting the lock off the gate and opening it, "I'm CSA Commander Truelove, Special Ops. Someone said you boys were having a barbecue. Mind if I join?"

Looking back at the tower of smoke from the burning ship, a tall skinny man stood and drawled, "Welcome, Commander. It's sure good to see you." He offered his hand. "But, sir, if you'll forgive my criticism, it looks like you've got the fire a bit hot."

Truelove looked back, admiring his work with a wide smile, and replied, "Where those fellows are going, that'll seem like a cool breeze."

"Where's the rest of your attacking force, Commander?" another man asked, looking around for his support.

"Why, son, that would be you all. You guys were my secret weapon. My plan was that you would tie up the brains of the outfit over here, while I attacked the rear. And I have to say, you did a fine job." He showed a friendly smile through the caked dirt on his face. Everyone laughed. Then Truelove staggered and slumped to the ground, fainting with a growing pool of blood from his right leg.

"He's hurt." One of the Special Ops men shouted, "Medic."

The only medic in the group stood up with slow deliberation and walked nonchalantly over to the big man. "You heroes are all the same, until you get a nick shaving, then it's, 'Medic, save me,'" he said in a mocking whine. Bending over, he

swiftly split Truelove's pants leg with his combat knife, deftly cleaned the wounds, and dressed them with an auto-bandage on each of the nasty gouges.

He continued speaking as he worked, "Shucks, Steve," he said to his friend, "You should know you can't hurt this guy." Realizing the commander had lost some blood, but the wound wasn't serious, he continued, "Anyone who can do all that by himself must be Superman."

They nodded admiringly as Truelove's eyes fluttered open.



On the bridge of the *Traveler*, Captain Johnson had heard Truelove announce the onset of the attack over the open military frequency. He immediately ordered all scanners and recorders activated. He ordered the ship's Vid screens focused at extreme range on the mighty Draconian destroyer far below on the valley floor. The *Traveler's* fighters shot into space, forming a protective curtain around the ship.

Truelove's mock battle communication took Captain Johnson aback. He heard the command to attack in a voice comparable to his own. The senior staff smiled broadly at Truelove's easy banter as he prepared to assault the destroyer single-handedly. With a sense that something unusual was about to happen, the Captain ordered his crews to standby as they observed the amazing performance of the one-man wrecking crew on the planet far below.

They cheered, oohed, and aahed until the zoomed-in spy cam Vid showed Truelove slumping into the dirt, wounded and bleeding, at the entrance to Jimtown. "Medical shuttle to planet, ASAP." he ordered. "I want that man up here, and I want him here now." Captain Johnson was angry for allowing himself the luxury of watching a battle in which he should have been a part. *However*, he thought in admiration, *What a job. I'll make sure that man gets a medal for this.*

"XO," he continued rattling off orders. "Take a team of Marines down there and secure the settlement.

"Scanners, keep a close watch on that rabble," he said, indicating the fleeing Draconian trucks. "I don't want a single one to get away."

Captain Johnson continued, "Flight, secure the air space over that area and assign a couple of our birds to track the runaways.

"TC," he said, turning to his tactical officer. "Get down to that destroyer with several teams of our people and see if anything is left to save. Secure any prisoners and treat the wounded.

"CC," indicated the Com Chief, "notify Fleet HQ and send a copy of this log and the vid files to them as soon as you can compile it."

The energetic Captain Johnson didn't wait for the string of "Aye, ayes." Thinking a moment, he realized he'd be stuck on the bridge with nothing to do. He looked at his XO and said, "By the Lord, Marcus, I'm going down with you. Have my shuttle readied. I've got to shake that man's hand. Nav, you have the Con."

In minutes, the *Traveler* was disgorging all manner of support craft heading for the planet's surface and the site of the morning's amazing battle. The approaching ships saw the still burning wreck of the Draconian destroyer with angry black smoke pluming high into the planet's usually crystal clear atmosphere.

In less than thirty minutes of hectic combat, Commander James Truelove had placed himself forever in annals of CSA history as *the Firedrake Incident*.



Not The End

Get the complete Sudden Eclipse story at Amazon.com or visit my website at JonHancockBooks.com. Send comments to jon@jonhancockbooks.com.

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More books by Jon Hancock

Deepening Twilight (Star Dynasty Saga Episode Two)

Commander James Truelove and his tiny crew flee from the attacking Draconian Empire's armada and the smoking ruins of the Commonwealth Star Alliance in his ship, Tiara. His mission is to keep the CSA Regent's young son, Nathan, safe while they proceed to a secret destination.

Truelove and his crew find refuge aboard the old tramp starfreighter, the Dove, an ancient tramp starfreighter. Volunteering as the ship's engineer, he must keep the old ship operating while they make their way slowly through the dangerous space passage called the Worm. The arduous voyage is fraught with danger forcing Truelove to rise to each challenge to accomplish his mission. When he discovers the Draconians' brutal answer to their loss of technology, his mission takes a radical turn.

97,468 words, approximately 390 pages

Avenging Storm (Star Dynasty Saga Episode Three)

After Captain James Truelove and Miya capture a secret Draconian base known as the Hydra, they discover the Draconians are enslaving CSA citizens to operate their machinery. They learn of the wide slave trade flourishing within the sector. Before Truelove can continue his mission to his secret destination, he must try to save the slaves, stop the slavers and pirates that plague the area.

Truelove, Miya, Nathan, and Tiara find they face a growing challenge and a deadly enemy they hoped to evade awaiting them beyond the Hydra.

105,526 words, approximately 422 pages

Deception's Tempest (Star Dynasty Episode Four)

James Truelove sails into the Alaska Sector with his new bride, Madison. They seek the first destination in his mission from the late Regent. The honeymoon couple face

exciting new adventures and challenges as they near the border of their enemy, the evil Draconian Empire.

While he continues to build a new force to counter the terrible scourge against the Commonwealth Star Alliance, Truelove discovers the surprising truth about the Draconians. The risks are high, but the reward is the safety of the sector. He faces his greatest threat yet. For the first time, Truelove takes the battle to the enemy's doorstep.
133,630 words, approximately 535 pages

Winds of Change (Star Dynasty Saga Novel Episode Five)

The saga continues as Admiral James Truelove's nephew, Nathan, now a teenager, faces his first adventure. While Tiara completes her exciting upgrades, Truelove, Madison, and Miya search for Nathan when he is lost in the ominous Mohave Sector. Truelove takes the fleet into the sector to find the dead Regent's son.

Nathan Talon, alone for the first time in his life, must use all of his training and knowledge to survive. To make matters worse, the Draconians discover that the Regent's son survived and make an all-out search for the young man. Its an action-packed adventure which brings, Nathan, the Draconians, and Admiral James Truelove together in an epic battle.

88,438 words, approximately 354 pages

ORIGIN

Five thousand years ago, a master hunter stalked the most fearsome beast known to man, the dreaded Leviathan. The world renowned archeologist, Dr. Judith Walker, discovers the fossil of the beast, but the indisputable evidence that disagrees with today's scientific consensus calls her faith in the Theory of Evolution into question.

When news of the fantastic find spreads through the scientific community, Dr. Walker, and her team are thrust into a web of intrigue exposing a global conspiracy to hide evidence of the Earth's true origin. Dr. Walker faces threats on her life, terrorist attacks, and the loss of her professional reputation as she and her team discover earth-shaking evidence sure to impact the popular opinion surrounding the origin of mankind.

An ancient evil seeks to destroy Dr. Walker and her work. Can she survive to tell her story?

99,945 words, approximately 400 pages