

STARFIST: FLASHFIRE

BOOK ELEVEN

DAVID SHERMAN
AND
DAN CRAGG



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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To:

Sergeant W. D. Ehrhart, USMC

Scout/Sniper, First Battalion, First Marines

RVN, 1967–1968

and World-Class Poet

PROLOGUE

A small, black object arced out from the crowd, described a graceful parabola, and burst into great orange flame in the middle of the street. “Steady, men, steady,” the lieutenant murmured from behind the thin line of infantrymen facing the mob. To his men he appeared calm and in control; in reality his legs were about to give way on him.

“Shee-it!” one of the infantrymen exclaimed, grasping his lexan shield more tightly and glancing nervously over his shoulder at the sergeant of the guard, who shook his head silently, gesturing that the man should watch the crowd and not him. The troops had only just been called out to face the unexpected mob of irate citizens. Already the area between the Fort Seymour main gate and the demonstrators, a very short stretch of about one hundred meters, was littered with debris that had been thrown at the soldiers. Now a firebomb! Things were getting serious. That firebomb belied the innocuous messages on the signs carried by the demonstrators, GIVE US INDEPENDENCE!, NO TAXES TO THE CONFEDERATION!, CHANG-STURDEVANT DICTATOR!, and others.

Lieutenant Jacob Ios of Alfa Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Brigade, 3rd Provisional Infantry Division, Confederation Army, was pulling his first tour of duty as officer of the guard at the Fort Seymour depot. Neither he nor his men had received civil-disturbance training, and the only equipment they had for that job were the lexan body shields they were using to protect themselves against thrown objects. Fortunately, none of the crowd’s missiles had yet reached them. He wished that Major General Cazombi’s recommendation to keep the contractor guard force—all men recruited on Ravenette—responsible for the installation’s security, had been followed, but he’d been overruled by General Sorca the tactical commander with overall authority for security. Still, Ios couldn’t help wondering what Cazombi had done to get himself stuck at Fort Seymour.

The sergeant of the guard interrupted his musings. “El Tee, should I have the men unsling the arms?” he whispered.

“Not yet.” Ios made a quick estimate of the crowd’s size and his stomach plummeted right into his boots. There had to be at least three hundred people in it; his guard force was outnumbered ten-to-one.

“If they start coming at us, Lieutenant, we won’t be able to stop them,” the sergeant whispered surreptitiously, he unfastened the retaining strap on his sidearm holster. As if confirming the sergeant’s fears, several men in the crowd ran forward a few paces and tossed more firebombs. The

exploded harmlessly in the street but much closer to the soldiers than the last one.

“*Confederation soldiers! Go home! We do not want you here! Confederation out!*” a woman with a bullhorn began chanting shrilly. Ios couldn’t see the woman. That was ominous, someone leading the mob from behind.

“That’s okay with me!” One of the soldiers grinned and several of his buddies laughed nervously. More and more people in the crowd took up the chant, “*Confederation out!*” until the slogan swelled to a roar. People banged clubs and iron pipes on the pavement as they chanted, beating a steady *Whang! Whang! Whang!* A chunk of paving sailed out from the mob and skittered across the roadway, coming to rest against the knee-high stone wall that flanked the main entrance to Fort Seymour. The wall was the only shelter the soldiers would have if the mob charged them; the iron gates across the entrance, which had never before been closed, were chained shut and two tactical vehicles were drawn up tight behind them in the event the mob tried to break through.

“Climate Six, this is Post One, over,” Ios muttered into the command net, trying very hard to keep his voice even as he spoke. Climate Six was the Fort Seymour staff duty officer’s call sign.

“Post One, this is Climate Six, over.”

“We need immediate reinforcement, over,” Ios said, his voice tensing as more bricks and stones pelted the road. The fires had burned themselves out.

“Ah, Post One, what is your status? I hear shouting but I cannot see your position from here, over.”

Ios suppressed an angry response, “Climate Six, several hundred rioters are approaching my position! We are in danger of being overrun! Request immediate reinforcement!” Stones and bricks hurtled toward Ios. Then another bright orange blossom. “Climate Six, we are being firebombed! repeat, firebombed!”

“Casualties? Over.”

Ios took a breath to steady himself. “None, so far, Climate Six, but we cannot hold unless reinforced immediately! What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Ah, Post One, use proper communications procedure. Use your initiative but hold that gate at all costs. You will be reinforced ASAP. Climate Six out.” The staff duty officer, Lieutenant Colonel Poultney Maracay, who only a few moments ago was happily contemplating his position on the promotion list for Full Colonel, had begun to perspire. “Just where in the hell am I supposed to get reinforcements?” he muttered.

“All the line troops are out on Bataan,” the staff duty NCO replied.

“I know that!” Maracay responded angrily. Both generals Cazombi and Sorca were out at the Peninsula on Pohick Bay, where the division was billeted. The division hadn’t been on Ravenette two weeks yet and already the troops, in the infantryman’s age-old cynical way, had dubbed the Peninsula “Bataan.” It’d take fifteen minutes or more to get a reaction force back to Main Post and by then .

he left the thought hanging. All he had at Main Post were supply specialists and, since it was Saturday afternoon, most of them would be out in town or otherwise incapacitated.

“Sergeant,” he turned to the staff duty NCO, “I’m going down to the main gate and see for myself what that young stud’s got himself into. Inform General—” he thought for a moment. Major General Cazombi was the garrison commander and the senior officer at Fort Seymour but Brigadier General Sorca commanded the infantry division. “—General Sorca and request that he send immediate reinforcements to Main Post. Keep the net open with Lieutenant Ios and keep HQ informed. Jesus, what a mess!” Shaking his head, he strapped on his sidearm as he went through the door. Where do these people come from? He knew there were tensions between the Confederation Congress and Ravenette and its allies, but that was esoteric, trade-relations crap, not the kind of thing to drive people into the streets, much less motivate them to attack a Confederation military post.

Lieutenant Ios and his men were not at that moment worrying about trade relations. The young officer was so rattled that he couldn’t remember if there was a specific command for “unslung arms” so he fell back on the oldest and most reliable method for passing on a command at an officer’s disposal: “Sergeant, have the men unslung arms!” he said crisply while unstrapping his own sidearm. As one, the men dropped their shields and unslung their rifles. “Take up firing positions behind the wall!” Ios ordered over the tactical net. “Do not fire unless I give the command! Steady, men, steady! Show them we mean business! Reinforcements are on the way.” He said it with a confidence he didn’t feel because he knew, as well as the SDO and every man in his tiny guard force, that useful reinforcements were all out on Bataan.

Seeing the soldiers take up firing positions, the mob howled and rushed forward to within fifty meters of the gate. Now rocks, paving stones, bottles, all kinds of junk began raining down on the soldiers. Ios could clearly hear people in the mob shouting for blood. Protected somewhat by their helmets and equipment harnesses, the troops crouched behind the low wall. “Hold on!” Ios shouted into the tactical net, but at that moment a brick smashed into his mouth and he fell to the ground dazed, spitting teeth and blood.

As he lay there in agony Lieutenant Jacob Ios, “Jake” to his friends, heard only dimly the fatal *zi-craaaak* of a pistol shot.

Panting, out of breath, Lieutenant Colonel Maracay, whose fate it was to be there at that time and that place merely through the impersonal agency of the post sergeant major’s duty roster, gasped in horror at the sight in the street before the main gate.

A driver assigned to one of the blocking vehicles looked up at him, face white, eyes staring. “I didn’t fire my weapon,” he managed at last.

From somewhere off to the right, someone yelled, “Hooo-haaaa!” and began laughing hysterically.

“Open the gates,” the colonel said. He stepped out into the street, his now forgotten sidearm dangling uselessly in one hand, and surveyed the carnage. Scores of mangled bodies lay in pools

blood; wounded men and women, even some children, lay moaning in agony. Directly overhead, a sign spanning the gate, incongruously happy and welcoming, announced, FORT SEYMOUR ARMY SUPPLY DEPOT. YOU CALL, WE HAUL.

“Get—get medics!” Maracay screamed into the command net. “Get the fucking medics!” Dimly, he became aware that someone up the street was pointing something at him and instinctively Colonel Maracay raised his pistol, but it was only a man with a vid camera.

CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't late in the evening, but at high latitude on Thorsfinni's World the sun was long down by the time the liberty bus clattered to a stop next to a vacant lot near the center of Bronnysund, the town outside the main gate of Marine Corps Base Camp Major Pete Ellis. The driver levered the door open and thirty Marines clattered off, whooping and hollering in unrestrained glee at their weekend freedom from the restrictions on behavior imposed by the Confederation Marine Corps during duress hours.

Well, most of the restrictions. They were required to maintain a certain level of decorum—at least they were not to commit crimes, or get themselves injured badly enough to miss duty, or go anywhere from which they wouldn't be able to return for morning roll call on the third morning hence. And it was only *most* of them who whooped and hollered; there was a loose knot of eight who were somewhat more restrained. The eight in question were the junior leaders of third platoon, Company L, 34th Fleet Initial Strike Team.

“So where are we going?” Corporal Bohb Taylor, second gun team and most junior of the eight corporals, asked when the other twenty-two Marines had scattered.

Corporal Tim Kerr, first fire team leader, second squad, and the most senior of the eight, simply snorted and turned to lead the way.

Corporal Bill Barber, first gun team leader and not much junior to Kerr, slapped the back of Taylor's head hard enough to knock his soft cover awry, said, “Taylor, sometimes you're so dumb you don't know how you ever got your second stripe.” He turned to follow Kerr.

“Yeah, Taylor. What do you know about the Top that the rest of us don't?” asked Corporal Rachman “Rock” Claypoole, third fire team leader, second squad, and not much senior to Taylor. He followed Barber.

“What do you mean, what do I know about the Top?” Taylor squawked.

“Blackmail!” Corporal Joe Dean, first squad's third fire team leader and also not much senior to Taylor, hooted. “There's no other way you could make corporal!” He laughed raucously.

“Which begs the question of how *you* made corporal,” Corporal Raoul Pasquin, first squad second fire team leader said with a loud laugh.

“Hey!” Dean yelled indignantly.

Corporal Dornhofer, first fire team leader, first squad, not much junior to Kerr, chuckled and shook his head. He and the other corporals fell in with Claypoole.

Taylor had to run a few paces to catch up.

A few blocks and a couple of turns later, Kerr shoved open the door of Big Barb’s, the combination bar, restaurant, ships’ chandlery, hotel, and bordello that was the unofficial headquarters of this platoon, Company L, 34th Fleet Initial Strike Team during liberty hours.

“*Te-e-em!*”

Twin shrieks barely preceded two young women, one blond and fair, the other brunette and swarthy, both beautiful by any standard, who flew across the large common room and flung themselves on the big corporal with enough force to stagger him back a couple of steps.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, Kerr!” Corporal Pasquin shouted into the back of Kerr’s head. He raised his hands and pushed Kerr off his chest.

Corporal Dean helped keep Kerr upright and moving forward. The press of advancing bodies behind them forced Kerr and the others farther into the room.

Kerr barely noticed the hands and bodies holding him up and forcing him forward, he was too distracted by the four arms clinging to his neck, the four breasts pressed into his chest, the two mouths raining kisses on his face. He wrapped an arm around each waist and lifted, to ease the weight on his neck and shoulders.

“Way to go, Kerr!” Corporal Dean said, slapping Kerr on the back as he squeezed past and began looking for a table that would hold them all—and their girls.

“Some people,” Corporal Chan laughed, following Dean.

“Raoul!” shouted another girl, Erika, who sidled through the crowd to take Pasquin’s hand.

Another voice boomed out, “Vat’s all dis commoti’n oud ’ere?” and Big Barb herself waddled out of the office to the rear of the large room and began plowing through the crowd like an icebreaker through pack ice. Freyda Banak wasn’t called “Big Barb” for nothing—she not only weighed more than 150 kilos, she carried her weight lightly when she wanted to move fast. She planted herself in front of Kerr and loudly demanded, “Who you tink you are, Timmy, hogging two a my best girls all yersef?”

Their cheeks still pressed against his, Frieda and Gotta stopped kissing Kerr to look back at their employer. Kerr loosened his hold around their waists and they dropped down a couple of centimeters.

but not all the way to the floor.

“B-but . . .” he began.

“Vot you mean, ‘B-but . . .’? Dere’s no ‘b-butts’ ’ere, Timmy. You led go a dem girls!”

“Big Barb,” Frieda said calmly, “you gave him to us.”

“And we intend to keep him,” Gotta finished just as calmly.

Big Barb glared from one to the other, then planted her hands on her hips and roared out a loud, raucous laugh. “You right, girls,” she said, tears streaming down her face when her laughter eased enough for her to speak.

“Wha’s a madda you, Timmy, lettin’ dem two girls dangle like dat? Hol’ ’em up like a gennleman. Where you been? All we seen o’ Marines fer the pas’ few mont’s is dem base pogues. Dirty-fort FIS yust up ’n take off somewhere wid’out sayin’ noddin’ t’ us and we don’ know when we see you again or if we *ever* see you again.” She quickly looked around and before Kerr could answer, asked, “Where’s Chollie Bass? I vant my Chollie!”

“He’s probably with Katie,” Gotta giggled.

“I don’ care no Katie!” Big Barb boomed. “Chollie don’ need no skinny voman like Katie, he needs a full-size voman!” She thunked a meaty thumb into the center of her own chest.

“I don’t think Charlie thinks Katie is skinny!” Frieda laughed.

“I don’ care vhat Chollie t’inks neider! Zomebody go tell him I’m ’ere pinink away to nodin’ waiting for him!” She turned her attention back to Kerr. “How many a you are dere ’ere donight? make sure you godda good table. Vell? Answer me!”

Kerr hesitated, unsure which of her many questions to answer first. Claypoole stepped into the breach.

“There are eight of us, Big Barb. The corporals.”

“Eight corporals?” She quickly scanned the room. “Vat’s de madda vit Corporal Doyle, why ain’t he ’ere? He gid kilt vhereever it vas you vent?”

“No, no, Big Barb. Doyle’s fine. This is just the team leaders,” Claypoole quickly assured her.

“Chust da team leaders? ’Ow come Doyle ain’t no team leader? He’s a corporal. Corporals suppose t’ be fire team leaders, gun team leaders, so how come he ain’t?”

Claypoole opened his mouth, but couldn’t think of how to explain why a corporal was filling lance corporal’s billet. He looked at Kerr. Yeah, Doyle was in Kerr’s fire team, let him try to explain it.

“Neber mine,” Big Barb said, looking around again. “You Marines make yer own rules, wheddey makes sense or not. Come, I get you gut table. Give you back room. You,” she looked at Kerr “come vit me. You,” she looked at Claypoole, “go gid de orders, bring dem along.” She did her icebreaker impersonation again, drawing Kerr and his happy burden in her wake.

Less than an hour later, the eight Marines and nine young women in the back room were seated around a large, round table digging into a medley of reindeer served “family style.” The table was filled with platters of reindeer—steaks, cutlets, a roast, chops, sausage, even a steaming bowl of stew. Other bowls held several varieties of potatoes, legumes, grains, squashes, and less easily identifiable foodstuffs, most of which were cooked with sauces or gravies. Spices and condiments were spread about, the full range near to hand for everybody.

For a while, all that was heard inside the room was the chewing, sighs, and belches of contented diners; they ignored the hubbub that came muted through the door. At length, most of the platters and bowls were cleared down to bits and crumbs—Marines fresh back from a combat deployment had prodigious appetites.

Dean belched loudly enough to make Carlala, a skinny, busty girl seated next to him hip to haunch jump. “Ahhh,” he sighed, “that was great.”

“A lot better than the reindeer steaks we used to get here,” Dornhofer agreed.

“Very much so,” Kerr added. “What happened?”

“We have a new cook,” Klauda said as she moved from her chair to Dornhofer’s lap.

“She’s a fancy girl,” Erika said, casting a nasty look at Carlala.

“Oh?” Chan said meaningfully. “Then what’s she doing in the kitchen?”

“You’ll see,” Erika said haughtily. “And that’s not the kind of ‘fancy’ I meant.” She darted a look at Dean and made a show of shifting onto Pasquin’s lap.

The hubbub in the main room suddenly grew in volume.

“Oh, wow, look at that!” Lance Corporal “Wolfman” MacIlargie murmured, then let out a woeful whistle.

Lance Corporal Dave “Hammer” Schultz didn’t bother looking to see what had drawn MacIlargie’s admiration; he’d seen her as soon as she stepped through the kitchen door. She was a full-bodied woman in a starched white shirt-jacket, closed all the way to the throat, over black pants. The heels of her black shoes were high enough to lift her a bit above average height. A white cap restrained her mass of lustrous chestnut hair. She held her head high, and her aristocratic face turned neither left nor right as she wended her way between the tables filled with eating and drinking—but mostly drinking.

—Marines. Two kitchen helpers followed her, guiding a covered cart. The woman was old enough to be the underaged mother of the youngest Marines in the room, or the younger aunt—or at least old sister of nearly any of them. But that didn't matter to the Marines.

The woman yelped and spun about with her hand raised to slap whoever had just pinched her bottom. Only to be confronted by four grinning faces, any of which could belong to the offending hand. She dropped her hand, gripped the bottom of her shirt-jacket with both hands, and jerked down. She flung her head high, spun about, and, as regally as possible, stalked off. Guffaws, whistles, and raucous laughter trailed her.

She was pinched twice more and propositioned four times by the time she reached the door to the room where third platoon's corporals were luxuriating in postprandial bliss, and hustled inside to where she fully expected would be relief from the unseemly harrassment she'd undergone in the common room. She barely remembered to leave the door open long enough for the two kitchen helpers to wheel their cart into the room.

"Hey, baby," Pasquin shouted as soon as he saw her, "come on over here! My lap's big enough for two!" He held out a welcoming arm. Erika knuckled him in the ribs, but that only made him laugh.

The woman's palm tingled, and she began to raise a hand—now she *knew* who to slap—but noticed several faces leering at her, and lowered it without striking.

She again adjusted the fall of her shirt-jacket, held her head regally high, and announced, "I am Einna Orafem, the new chef at Big Barb's—"

"Chef? Did she really say 'chef?'" Dean crowed.

Einna Orafem managed to ignore Dean's boorishness and went on as though he hadn't spoken. "I have been given to believe that you—gentlemen—are special patrons of this dining salon."

"Patrons? Dining salon?" Barber hooted.

Once more, Einna Orafem ignored the rudeness of the remark and went on. "I have come to see if the modest repast I prepared for you met with your satisfaction." She looked at the empty platters and serving bowls. "Judging from the state of the table, I take it it has."

There was a brief pause as the Marines translated for each other: "She wants to know if the choicest was any good."

"Hey, babe, that was the best feed I've ever had in this slop chute!" Taylor called out.

"Honey, you can stuff my sausage any day," Chan yelled.

"No, it's *your* sausage that's supposed to stuff her . . ." The rest of whatever Claypoole was saying was cut off by the finger Jente quickly pressed across his lips. Unlike the other young women around the table, Jente wasn't one of "Big Barb's girls." She was from Brystholde, a nearby fishing village from which many young women had come to a blowout party Brigadier Sturgeon threw for his FIS

when they returned from a major deployment against Skinks on the Kingdom of Yahweh and His Saints and Their Apostles. First Sergeant Myer had strongly admonished the Marines of Company that the village women were “nice girls,” and were to be treated the way they’d want their sisters treated. Of course, Top’s warning could not stop Jente from latching onto Claypoole and behaving just like one of Big Barb’s girls—but only with him. Claypoole didn’t realize it yet, but Jente saw him as prime husband material.

“Come and join us when Big Barb lets you off kitchen duty!” Pasquin called to Einna Orafem with his brilliant red face.

“Here is a dessert I prepared specially for you,” the cook managed, waving a wavering hand at the cart.

The helpers opened the cart and joined her in a hasty retreat to the kitchen. But first they had to run the gauntlet of the common room.

“Wazza madda, dolly,” someone shouted, “didn’t they want what you were offering?”

“Yours ain’t good enough for them corporals?” another Marine shouted.

Uproarious laughter broke out at the comments.

“She’s the *cook*,” Schultz growled.

Everybody close enough to hear his growl shut up.

Jente was the only one fastidious enough while gobbling the dessert to really notice what it was.

CHAPTER TWO

“Who in the hell is that idiot with his mouth hanging open?” Madam Chang-Sturdevant asked, coming halfway out of her chair as she stared at the image on the vid screen.

“Um, that, Madam President, is ah, the Fort Seymour staff duty officer, that is, the officer who was staff duty officer on the day the ah, ‘incident’ occurred,” Huygens Long, the Attorney General, answered, glancing at Marcus Berentus and Admiral Porter for confirmation. “You can see by his badges of rank he’s a lieutenant colonel in the army.”

“That’s correct, ma’am,” Porter said. “Mr. Long’s investigation is not complete yet, so we don’t know all the particulars.”

The camera now took in a ragged line of soldiers standing and crouching behind a low stone wall and then panned a long view of the human carnage that lay in the street in front of them. It zoomed in for close-ups of the bodies and Chang-Sturdevant gasped in horror. “Why did we not know about this immediately after it happened?” she asked. Then: “That’s enough, Marcus, I don’t want to see any more.” She put a hand to her face and bowed her head. “Our soldiers did that?” she gestured at the now blank vid screen.

“Yes, ma’am,” Long answered. “The entire incident was filmed by a crew the demonstration organizers invited to cover it. Our troops were unprepared for what happened, so we have no visual record of what they saw. Then the government of Ravenette immediately released the vid to every news agency in the Confederation,” he shrugged. “Their formal protest did not reach us via diplomatic channels until several days after the film was shown via all the Confederation news outlets. Our military people on Ravenette initiated a preliminary investigation and reported what they found to us through channels. That also took a few days.”

“How many casualties?” Chang-Sturdevant asked in a dull voice.

After a brief pause, Berentus answered, “Well, the only figures we have are from the news media reports, which are based on the information given to them by government sources on Ravenette, but it appears seventy-five were killed outright with about another hundred critically wounded, some of whom will no doubt succumb. Infantry small arms at close range kill thoroughly and without

discrimination.”

Chang-Sturdevant snorted in an exasperation she seldom felt for her old friend. “Marcus sometimes you old war horses really can’t see beyond your toys. There were children among the dead!”

“Yes, ma’am, I am aware of that,” Berentus answered evenly, “and they were supposed to be among the casualties. I’m telling you now, it was a setup. Maybe the organizers didn’t know how the demonstration was going to end but they were prepared to show what did happen. I’m sure our investigation will show that our troops were provoked.”

“What good does that do me now, Marcus? I’ve got to preside over a full session of the Congress in ten minutes. What am I going to tell them? Summers has requested time to address the Congress and you know what a goddamned rabble-rouser that bastard is!” Preston Summers was the head of the delegation from Ravenette and a firebrand known for his support of the secession movement.

“We are conducting a full investigation, ma’am,” Long said. “We’ll soon have all the facts and then you can hold a press conference.”

“All right. I’ll let Summers rave on and tell the other delegations we don’t have all the facts yet but will, soon, very soon. I’ll make it clear that if our people opened fire on these demonstrators without cause someone’ll hang for it. That lieutenant colonel looks like a prime candidate to me right now. Meanwhile, Hugh,” she turned to the Attorney General, “you get the chief of the diplomatic service and you, Marcus, Admiral Porter, be here when this session is finished. I want a full briefing on this mess, as far as anyone can give me one at this time, and then I’ll call a news conference.” She paused and sighed then stood, straightening out her suit jacket. “I am getting too old for this,” she smoothed her hair. “Well,” she brightened, “I now don the face of the Great Humanitarian with the cares of all Human Space on my thin shoulders, or, as the playwright put it, ‘Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more!’ ” and then she walked proudly to the door that led out onto the floor of the Congress Hall.

It was absolutely silent in the Congress Hall as Representative Preston Summers concluded his Crime Against Ravenette speech. Summers was an accomplished orator. Here, before the Confederate Congress, his words rolled off his tongue in Shakespearean tones, but back home, among his colleagues, he talked like a hick because that’s how his colleagues talked; Preston Summers played to his audience. Now he was fully wound up:

“This unprecedented act of mayhem by the Confederation’s hirelings, this crime against Ravenette, is but the most heinous of many, aimed by this government and its supporters against the peace-loving people of my home and our allied worlds! I have expressed my outrage against the unfair practices many times in this hallowed hall and will now mention only the many discriminatory tariffs the member worlds have, at the instigation of the President, imposed on us, the unscrupulous business practices this government has tolerated against the citizens of Ravenette, and the introduction of military forces among our people, the only purpose of which is to further oppress us! And now

culminates in this—this horrid act of murder most foul, murder most bloody! *Murder!*”

Summers paused for effect and it was stupendous. Members shouted “Foul! “We demand an accounting!” and directed other words at President Chang-Sturdevant and her government too harsh to repeat. Sped on its way by Beamspace drones, Summers’s speech, however, would be repeated in every corner of Human Space.

Summers waited for the delegates to quiet down. “Now,” he continued, “our demands! We, the government of Ravenette and our allied worlds, demand the immediate withdrawal of all Confederation armed forces from our territories. Furthermore, we demand the lifting of all trade sanctions imposed by member worlds of this Confederation against the goods and services provided by our peoples. Third, we demand the liquidation of all debts incurred by the member worlds of our Coalition as a result of the unfair tariffs and embargoes imposed on us by the following member worlds: St. Brendan’s—”

“Hold on a bloody damned minute there! Madam President! The floor, the floor, please!” Brooks Kennedy, the representative from St. Brendan’s World, shouted.

Summers rattled on and then: “Furthermore, Madam President, if these demands are not met, we, on behalf of the Coalition of Worlds for which Ravenette speaks with the authority of them all, will formally submit an Act of Secession and withdraw from this Confederation!”

“I demand the floor!” Kennedy shouted. “I’ve heard enough from this blatherskite rogue, Madam President, honorable members! What happened on Ravenette was a tragedy but this damned Coalition of Worlds Summers is so proud of has been looking for just such an incident for months now! All these people want is an excuse to shirk their just debts. That is just what we’ve come to expect from these people, the descendants of louts and incompetents of whom the best anyone can say is that they settled so far away from the rest of us! I say if they want to leave this Confederation, good! It’d be worth it to give up their debts to get rid of them all! Good riddance to bad rubbish!”

“Is the honorable member from St. Brendan’s World saying that we arranged the massacre of our own people?” Summers asked in a deceptively mild voice.

Brooks Kennedy was so worked up by now that he spoke without thinking. “I so accuse you! A proper investigation will reveal that the so-called ‘Crime Against Ravenette’ was planned and fomented by radicals who want only to secede from this Confederation and are willing to sacrifice the lives of their own people to achieve that goal!”

Many believed the cane Preston Summers always carried with him was a prop, that there was nothing at all wrong with his left leg that required its use. Now, before anyone could stop him, he demonstrated what the cane was really meant for by leaping across the aisle that separated him from where Congressman Kennedy sat and bringing it down forcefully on the other man’s upraised arm, breaking it. The blow was clearly heard throughout the chamber. He struck again, this time fracturing Kennedy’s skull and driving him to the floor.

“Sergeant at Arms!” Chang-Sturdevant shouted but already the burly ex-sergeant major of infant

who was the congressional sergeant at arms was bulling his way through the astonished delegates. Grabbing Summers by the collar he threw him to the floor and pinned him there while other members assisted the bleeding Kennedy to his feet. "That's a good gentleman, now," the sergeant at arms whispered, "no more of your violence in this chamber, sir."

"Fuck you—" Summers began but the sergeant at arms finished the sentence with a massive fist to the congressman's jaw. Later a member of the Ravenette delegation who had been standing nearby quietly retrieved Summers' cane. It was returned to him with the following motto inscribed on it: "HIT HIM AGAIN!"

"Order! Order!" Chang-Sturdevant shouted. "Order! Ladies and gentlemen, order, please! This session is now concluded. I will be giving a press conference at sixteen hours." She beckoned to her aides and left the chamber. "Now," she was heard to mutter, "we'll find out just what in the hell is going on."

"I need the most reliable and up-to-date information you can give me on the Ravenette incident and the secession movement in general for this press conference I'm giving in a few hours. Julie, give me a short rundown on the secessionist movement," Chang-Sturdevant turned to Julie Wellington-Humphreys, Chief of the Diplomatic Service since the death of Jon Beardmens.

"The so-called 'Coalition' formed by the dozen worlds in that sector of which Ravenette is the most prominent do have grievances, Madam President, some of which can be addressed, with time and patience. The members refuse to admit the former because they have none of the latter, so our negotiations with them have led nowhere. The main stumbling block to a relationship with any of these worlds is that the people living on them are utterly disagreeable. They are arrogant, self-centered, paranoid who want to believe that the rest of the Confederation is against them. The government of Ravenette has been accepted by the other secessionist worlds as their leader. Those other worlds are, as she counted them off on her fingers, "Cabala, Chilianwala, Embata, Hobcaw, Kambula, Lanno, Mylex, Ruspina, Sagunto, Trinkatat, and Wando."

"Where'd they come up with those names, particularly one like Ravenette?" Admiral Porter, the Chairman of the Combined Chiefs, asked.

Wellington-Humphreys shrugged, "Ravenette takes its name from a native species that somewhat resembles a Terran raven."

" 'Mylex,' " Porter mused, shaking his head, "sounds like a marital aid."

Chang-Sturdevant turned to Huygens Long, her Attorney General. "Hugh, what have you found out about the massacre?"

"That army lieutenant colonel we saw on the vid, Maracay is his name, was not responsible for what happened, ma'am. He was staff duty officer at Fort Seymour and when the vid was shot had only just arrived on the scene, after the shooting had ceased. It was just his unfortunate luck to be caught on

film like that.”

“He is a supply officer, ma’am,” Admiral Porter interjected, “a noncombatant. I dare say, though after this, um exposure, his career is ruined. He is on the promotion list for Full Colonel, but everyone in Human Space will soon have seen him in this vid, we cannot afford to alienate public opinion by promoting the man.”

“Well, then who the hell was in charge?” Chang-Sturdevant asked.

“The officer of the guard, the ranking man on the scene, was a Lieutenant Ios of the 3rd Provisional Infantry Division, the outfit we sent to Ravenette to reinforce the garrison at Fort Seymour,” Long replied. “But he was struck by something the mob threw at the soldiers and became unconscious when the firing began. The soldiers agree, however, that up to the moment he was struck he exercised commendable restraint. Had he not been knocked out, this tragedy might’ve been avoided. We’ve interviewed the soldiers on the guard force and they all agree that someone in the mob fired a pistol at them and they responded.”

Madam Chang-Sturdevant was silent for a moment. “Well they sure ‘responded,’ didn’t they?”

“Ma’am, the government of Ravenette is not cooperating with our investigation at all,” Long went on. “They have refused our numerous requests to interview the survivors, and their responses to our queries as to who organized the demonstration have been vague at best. I suggest you emphasize that at your conference. But here’s the bottom line: Thirty of our soldiers, new to duty on Ravenette and they had no way of knowing what was going on, face over three hundred angry demonstrators who are pelting them with junk and tossing firebombs at them. Someone, we think it was someone in the mob, fires a pistol. The guard force, leaderless and each man thinking his own life was in peril, fires back. He shrugged. “That’s it.”

“Are you sure, Hugh?”

“Well—,” Long hesitated, “—my personal opinion at this point is that the soldiers were goaded into firing because the secessionists wanted an incident like this to further justify their secessionist movement, but I do not advise you mention this until our investigation is complete.”

“When will that be?”

“Within days, ma’am. We have people on Ravenette and,” Long nodded at Admiral Porter, “the preliminary investigation by the military was thorough and we’ve had splendid cooperation from them in our own investigation.”

Chang-Sturdevant sighed and leaned back in her chair. She glanced at Marcus Berentus and wished they could enjoy a dish of vanilla ice cream together. Later, perhaps. “Admiral Porter, what is the military strength of this Coalition?”

“Considerable, ma’am. Individually, none of the worlds is a match for our forces but intelligence estimates put the combined strength of all twelve worlds as very respectable. And they have good leaders among their officers, all of whom are graduates of our military academies.” He permitted

himself a quick smile. “If they were to concentrate their forces they would present a very grave threat to us. And I do not need to point out that just now our own forces are very widely dispersed.”

“Mmm, yes, and you all know why. We reinforced Fort Seymour, as we have many other posts on the fringes of Human Space, as a tripwire,” Chang-Sturdevant said. She did not bother to explain why because they all knew why: Skinks.

“If we were to tell the Coalition why we reinforced Seymour they would not believe us, not now. Moreover, the word about the alien threat would then be out and widespread panic would ensue everywhere,” Marcus Berentus offered.

“So here we are,” Chang-Sturdevant said. “We must have a garrison on Ravenette, but we can’t tell the people who live there the real reason for that—hell’s bells, the soldiers themselves out there don’t even know why!—and our best efforts to keep the Coalition from declaring secession have so far failed. If we withdraw and leave those worlds in the dark as to the real threat to humanity that lies somewhere beyond their little slice of the galaxy, we leave the door open to invasion. We cannot allow that to happen.” She paused for a moment and then asked, “Who’s in charge out there at Fort Seymour anyway?”

“Um, the infantry division commander is a Brigadier General Sorca, ma’am, and the garrison commander is a Major General Alistair Cazombi.”

“Cazombi, Cazombi. Where have I heard that name before?” Chang-Sturdevant turned to Marcus Berentus.

“He was involved in the Avionian affair.”

“Oh, yes, yes. Well, a brigadier has one star and a major general has two. Why isn’t Cazombi in charge?” she turned to Admiral Porter.

Porter shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, ma’am, General Cazombi is a personnel specialist of sorts, and Brigadier Sorca is a combat soldier, so Cazombi is in charge of the fort and Sorca is responsible for tactical matters.”

“You sent a ‘personnel specialist’ and a general officer at that to be in charge of a supply depot?” Chang-Sturdevant glanced questioningly at Porter and then Berentus. The latter made a wry face which to her indicated there was more to the story than Porter was willing to let on, and they would discuss it later. “Well,” she went on quickly, “I’ll never understand how you military men arrange these things. Julie,” she turned back to Wellington-Humphreys, “I want every possible effort made to appease the Coalition short of withdrawal of our forces from Ravenette. Get their people together with the Ministry of Commerce, with anyone else you feel has a say in relations with these people, and offer them the moon if they want it. I want these negotiations to be conducted at the highest level. You’ll lead them but I want the Commerce Minister himself to be in on the negotiations, the initial ones anyway. Do not leave this to underlings. I’ll talk to the minister shortly, then you contact him and together assemble a team of experts. I will announce today that we’re prepared to offer handsome reparations for the killed and wounded on Ravenette. I want everything done that can be done to keep

these people in the Confederation of Human Worlds. But withdrawal of our forces is not negotiable and I want the Coalition to understand that we will fight to keep them there.

“One more thing. Admiral Porter, Mrs. Wellington-Humphreys, I want to know why it took so damned long for me to find out about what happened on Ravenette. Goddamnit, do you realize how embarrassing this has been to me, to find out about this through the news media? Both of you order a top-down review of your reporting procedures and fix them so that this never happens again.”

“Ma’am,” Admiral Porter leaned forward, “we support you. But if it comes to war with the secessionists, where will we get the forces to fight them?”

Madam Chang-Sturdevant leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. “We’ll find them, Admiral; we must. All right, everyone, let’s get to it. Marcus, would you stay behind for a moment? I have something to discuss with you.”

After the others had left she turned to Berentus. “Marcus, what’s the story on this General Cazombi?”

Berentus smiled. “He was punished by the Chiefs, sent to Ravenette to get him out of the way and put an end to his career. It was unjust, it was unfair, but I do not interfere with assignment policy when the Chiefs make it.”

“That’s as it should be, Marcus. Well, what did he do to get sent to Fort Seymour?”

Berentus shrugged. “He was the C1, the personnel officer for the Combined Chiefs, an assignment that always leads to a third star. You remember the Avionian incident? You may remember the lawsuit brought against a Marine officer for things he and his men did at the time? It was brought by the chief scientist at Avionian Station.”

“Yes. She died, I recall.”

“Yes. Well, Cazombi volunteered to appear as a witness for the accused, a Captain Conrado of the 34th FIST. Cazombi was dead set against ever bringing that officer to trial in the first place and he expressed, in no uncertain terms, his disappointment with the Chiefs for not doing everything they could to avoid it. And he has also been very much against the quarantine we’ve imposed on 34th FIST. His view is that if we can trust Marines to put their lives on the line for us we should be able to trust them to keep quiet about the Skinks instead of holding them prisoner on Thorsfinni’s World. Other Chiefs agree with him, particularly the Commandant, but their views have been expressed, um, a bit more discreetly than Cazombi’s. His nickname, you know, is ‘Cazombi the Zombie’ because his demeanor is usually ice cold, even in the most desperate situations. He has quite a distinguished combat record. Well, uncharacteristically, more than once he let loose in meetings with the Chiefs and now he’s out of grace with them.”

Chang-Sturdevant shook her head. “Marcus, sometimes your military leaders treat good men like shit. I’m so sick of this goddamned Old Boy’s Club attitude! Keep your eye on this Cazombi guy, will you? I don’t mean that to keep him in line, but he’s on the hot seat out there now and that’s just when we need officers who aren’t afraid to speak their minds.” She smiled. “I know it’s bad policy for you

to interfere with the inner workings of the military services, but by Buddha's hairy backside, if the
Cazombi fellow shows initiative out there, I sure as hell will!"

"Ma'am, one more thing. Admiral Porter's question, about where we'll get the forces if the
Coalition imposes war on us, is valid. We are stretched thin."

For the first time that day Chang-Sturdevant laughed outright with good humor. "Marcus, I've said
it before and I'll say it again: If it positively, absolutely must be destroyed overnight, call in the
Marines."

CHAPTER THREE

You had to give Einna Orafem credit for having guts. Sure, she stayed in the kitchen for the next several days, and went to and from work through the back door in order to avoid the Marines in the common room, but the following Sixth Day, when Big Barb told her there was a party that required special care, Einna again braved the common room to personally describe the evening's specials to Big Barb's favored party. Fortunately, it was early enough in the evening that none of the Marines were too drunk, so her passage through the common room was marked by only a few catcalls and whistles.

"Good evening, sir and madam," Einna said when she reached the table and stood erect, head high, one hand laid across the other's up-turned palm. Talulah, one of the girls on serving duty, hovered behind her shoulder. "I am Einna Orafem, the chef . . . here." She couldn't quite bring herself to say "Big Barb's," the very name was a come-down from the *haute cuisine* restaurants in which she had expected to practice her culinary artistry. "Proprietress Banak has requested that I make your dining this evening a truly memorable experience."

Ensign Charlie Bass leaned back in his chair and looked, mouth agape, at Einna. He closed his mouth with an audible *click*, swallowed, and began to say, "You already ha . . ."

But Katie smoothly cut him off. "Thank you—Miss Orafem? I am Katrina Katanya—Katie to my friends—and this is Charlie Bass, Ensign, Confederation Marine Corps." She placed a loving hand on Bass's forearm. "We are delighted to meet you."

Einna smiled. Finally, a person of breeding. And the man with Katrina, despite his loutish display of surprise when she introduced herself, was an ensign, an officer; therefore, by very definition, a gentleman. It would be a pleasure preparing a fine repast for this lovely couple. She mentally cataloged the ingredients she had on hand—other than those oh-so-proletarian reindeer steaks the enlisted boors ordered in endless succession. Her talents were being wasted there, she knew.

"I can offer you a fine kwangduk Wellington . . ."

Bass interrupted her with, "North or south end?" He exchanged an understanding glance with Talulah, who feigned gagging at the mention of kwangduk.

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