

REPUBLIC FALLING

Advent of a New Dawn

By Michael J. Brooks

**Wars of the New Humanity
Book One**



Republic Falling
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Praise for Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

The BookLife Prize

“A satisfying sci-fi thriller, the plot is evenly paced and the conflict is engaging.”

“Action scenes are exciting and enjoyable.”

“The fictional universe . . . features plenty of supporting details and technologies that flesh out the world.”

“The characters are . . . presented with a sufficient complexity and internal conflict to help propel the plot and action satisfactorily.”

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“While the topic of the fight between the upper class and the lower, less privileged is a common topic, very few authors have the skill to tackle it with grace and clarity. Kudos!”

Honorable Mention from the 2022 Hollywood Book Festival

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Glossary

(nonalphabetic order)

Earth Era: the era of humanity before intergalactic migration from Earth

Commonwealth: humanity's star nation consisting of four planets—Eden and satellites One, Two, and Three

Eden: humanity's utopian motherworld inhabited by three-fifths of the human population

Satellite One: humanity's dystopian secondary world inhabited by two-fifths of the human population

Satellites Two and Three: vacant worlds belonging to the Commonwealth, used for military training exercises and mineral excavation

Eden inhabitant/Eden citizen (synonymous terms): human beings living on Eden, whether born on the planet or during Earth Era

Highborn: a moniker referring specifically to human beings born on Eden

Colony inhabitant/colony citizen (synonymous terms): human beings living in the colonies of Satellite One, whether born on the planet or during Earth Era

Commonwealth Defense Force (CDF)/Defense Force (synonymous terms): the Commonwealth's military force

Guardian: a soldier in the Commonwealth Defense Force

Cadet: a Guardian in training

Commonwealth Government/central government (synonymous terms): the governing body of the entire Commonwealth, which includes the Parliament and Chief Executive's Office

Republic of Unified Colonies (RUC): the republic formed by colonies One, Four, and Six after they declared sovereignty from the Commonwealth

The Three-week War: the war initiated and won by the Commonwealth Government to reclaim colonies One, Four, and Six after they declared sovereignty from the Commonwealth

The Coalition of Rebel Factions/the Coalition (synonymous terms): a coalition of rebel factions formed by the remnant fighters of the RUC to continue combating the Commonwealth Government

The Interplanetary Union: the intergalactic alliance consisting of the Commonwealth and planets Ghanrax, Dhalgratt, Varsh'Ru, Zirkran, Rumanoah, and Taramassia

CHAPTER ONE

Armed dissonance: *avertable armed retaliation resulting from long-term solvable friction between two or more disharmonious, uncooperative, or unaccommodating parties, for which the weaker party, feeling imperiled, is usually the retaliator*

—Earth Era lexicon—

Excited chatter and boisterous laughter filled the Academy's auditorium as a gathering of enthused and relieved military graduates waited for their commencement ceremony to begin, surrounded by empty tiers of bleachers. They stood proud in their dashing blue Class-D Uniform, having gone through hell to don such a distinction. With the uniform's

Michael J. Brooks

elegant service jacket, men wore creased pants and glossy black oxford shoes; women wore skirts, stockings, and matte black heels. A single insignia on the jacket's standing collar denoted rank, the crimson hash marks on its sleeves were indicators of lower enlisted status, and the affixed waist-length white cape symbolized righteousness. And righteousness is what a Guardian embodied.

Momentarily, these young cadets would be officially inducted into the Commonwealth Defense Force (CDF), becoming the newest defenders of humanity's intergalactic republic, a republic fraught with homicidal war. Not the least bit interested in joining the preceremonial gabfest, twenty-two-year-old Cadet Randal Scott secluded himself in a lonesome corner. Arms crossed, eyes shut, and chin tilted to his chest, his thoughts were preoccupied with delivering retribution to the traitor for his mother's death and defilement of his family's legacy. The man who raised him, who'd been a decorated serviceman that he had admired, was a disgrace. And his sins could never be atoned for, in Randy's eyes.

Being Linked (cerebrally linked) with his mother as she was atomized from existence, he had inherited a well of mental unsoundness. Psychological experts claimed that if a loved one's passing was inhumane and brutal, being Linked during their demise could cause long-lasting psychic trauma, if psychological treatment was prolonged. The sharing of thoughts, emotions, and memories—through implantation of a nanochip beyond human ingenuity—could only be credited to the Commonwealth's Union-approved trading partner, the Quilgarians. A Link with another human being—upon mutually granted access—expanded rapport-building, empathy, and understanding on levels incapable of actualization during humanity's bygone Earth Era. And such mental communion enabled parents to cultivate deeper bonds with their offspring.

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

Randy's psych evaluation for CDF admission was administered before the murder. No one but him, his aunt, and his closest peer, Cadet Stacie Spencer, knew he was Linked with his mother when she was obliterated. A new psych eval and some therapy would benefit him, but he couldn't risk a mental-health discharge, not until he made the bastard pay.

The skin between Randy's brows crinkled as kind memories of the treacherous one, his father, antagonized his mind. *Why?* he wondered. Thinking about his mother's funeral, the repulsion on his face worsened, twofold.

He'd had the utmost respect for his father, Captain Arson Scott. The man was once a common laborer slaving in the quarries of Colony Four, on mankind's secondary world, a ringed planet designated Satellite One. He later met the woman who would become his wife, Kathleen Warner, and then followed in the footsteps of his father, and his father before him. He abandoned the drudgery of the quarry pits and answered a higher calling, enlisting into the military to assuage his yearning to be of service to humanity and ensure the livelihood of his wife and son. He forged an esteemed military career in the CDF, fighting in the Phazharian and Bhalkran wars and earning the highest commendation awarded, the Commonwealth Meritorious Service Medal.

Randy's admiration of his father motivated him to enlist into the Defense Force. The revered war hero had made his family and compatriots proud. Then, roughly six months ago, he mysteriously went AWOL, disappearing from his command post. Rumors and allegations of Arson Scott joining the terrorist insurgency, which opposes the Commonwealth Government today, circulated throughout Eden and the colonies of Satellite One. Randy later witnessed his father partake in Kathleen's murder, after his disappearance had crushed her, inducing worry, grief, and bouts of

Michael J. Brooks

depression, which Randy experienced in unison through their Link. At times Kathleen would raise her firewalls to spare Randy's mind from being immersed in her personal distress.

Vengeance became Randy's new motivation for enlisting and fueled his drive to persevere through the harshness of Basic Combat Training. Withstanding days on end of intense mental and physical rigors, powering through injury and illness, his yen to see Arson pay gnawed at his conscience. Determined to excel, he graduated from BCT as Warrior Extraordinaire, a recognition of outstanding achievement earned by performing at an exemplary level. Now he stands ready to take the Guardian's Oath, so he can finally quell the outrage burning in his soul by putting an end to Arson Scott, whether it be by death or capture. Preferably the former.

A cherubic female voice drifted into his mind, saying, *Randy, it's me, honey*. Soft and soothing, the voice unmistakably belonged to . . .

Randy's eyes shot open. A luminescent, ghostly mirage of his mother was shimmying in front of him. She was wearing a simple blue dress decorated with lavender flower patterns. It was one of her favorite outfits, Randy recalled.

Leave the past in the past, Randy, Kathleen pled. This vendetta of yours is decaying your soul. Move on.

Randy shut his eyes. *Go away. You're just an apparition conjured by all the pain and trauma recycled by my cerebral implant, just a metaphysical figment of my subconscious spawned by alien tech that got overloaded with an influx of horror. You're the part of me wondering what my mother would say about me hunting down Dad. You're the boy in me crying for her to still be here, even if as some untouchable guardian angel. You are . . . my personal damnation.*

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

Randy, please . . .

Go away! he demanded.

The voice disappeared. Randy realized these recurring manifestations of pain and longing in the image of his mother might be a sign the trauma was indeed driving him mad. Maybe his unconquerable rage and thirst to eradicate his father was another red alert. He decided he'd gladly risk a lifetime of psychological damage if killing his father brought serenity to his tortured soul.

A white-gloved hand clasped Randy's padded shoulder from behind. His eyes flicked open. On reflex, he spun, jerking his shoulder loose.

Smack dab in his face was a smashing blonde woman with sun-kissed skin and the bluest of cobalt eyes, greeting him with a lovely red smile, which exposed her perfect snow-white teeth. She was Stacie Spencer, his peer, confidant, and significant other, and the only other class member to earn the mantle of Warrior Extraordinaire. *<Hey, you okay, Randy?>* the spirited young woman inquired, in a cheery voice, through their Link.

Unrelated persons permitting access to each other's cerebral implant was one of the foremost acts of intimacy among the New Humanity, topping or rivaling a touch, a kiss, or intercourse. Access to a cerebral implant was entry into the mind, a bridge into a wondrous symbiotic experience. That access established an interconnectedness like no other. Proper-consent classes informed people to grant such privilege with extreme discretion. And even with consent given, the granter could elect to safeguard specific feelings or memories, allowing them to lower their boundaries at a comfortable pace.

Stacie's brows quirked in confusion. "Why are you over here brooding?" she asked Randy aloud. "This is what we busted our asses for. Put some pride on that handsome mug of yours, *Mr.*

Gloomy Face.” She playfully bumped her knuckles against his chest.

Though still perturbed, Randy dismissed her concern, in a neutral tone. “I’m fine, Cadet Spencer.” At the moment, there was no exorcising the anger plaguing his mind. Not here. Not in the very same auditorium he stood holding his mother’s hand as a young boy happily watching his father swear to uphold the oath he was now about to take.

“Did you just call me ‘Cadet Spencer’?” Stacie said in a feigned satirical tone, as if he had committed a heinous atrocity. It was a force of habit while in uniform, which he was trying to shake. She fastened one hand to her hip and wagged a digit at him. “You and I are an item now, *remember?*” Her lovable smile widened, and her tone transitioned to perky. “So it’s just ‘Stacie’ from now on, *even* in uniform, got it?” Another energetic fist bump to the chest.

The past refusing to relinquish its stranglehold on Randy’s peace of mind, he replied with a dull, curt, “Yeah, I got it.” At the moment, not even Stacie’s vibrancy could liven him up, as it did so many times.

Stacie folded her arms. Her smile deflated into a counterfeit frown. “Don’t let me have to remind you again, *buster,*” she threatened wryly, joking around to uplift Mr. Gloomy Face’s ho-hum mood.

Randy’s expression remained humorless. “I won’t. But hey, we’d better get back over there.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, at their fellow cadets. “The Master of Ceremony should be here anytime now.” The Master of Ceremony was running late due to unforeseen circumstances but was said to be arriving within the hour. And the hour had just about expired.

Automatic sliding doors hissed open. Heads swiveled and all

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

the lively chatter shrank to a murmur, then went deathly silent. In came a thin, tallish colonel with a weathered face and a ring of shaggy gray cropping his balding scalp, the Master of Ceremony. He was garbed in a colonel's green Class-D Uniform, which had a long tailcoat. The decorations, ribbons, and campaign badges pinned to his chest gave testimony to his work ethic, leadership, and dedication to duty.

Randy and Stacie hurried to join their cohorts.

With gravitas, the colonel walked down the aisle, toward the rostrum, with the sternest of expressions. There was no apology for his tardiness, just a silent stringent expectation that the cadets get in order at his mere presence. And in a fit of excitement, they scrambled into two formations—one to the left of the aisle and the other to the right—as rehearsed. Then they composed themselves, straightening their uniforms.

As Warrior Extraordinaires, Randy and Stacie took their rightful place at the forefront of the class, their status signified by the patch on their left shoulder. The border of the patch was a gold upside-down triangle. "Extraordinaire" was woven in black on each line. Inside the triangle was a fist that had crisscrossing thunderbolts behind it, all gold like the border.

Upon the colonel's approach, Randy and Stacie pivoted and faced each other to make way for him. After he passed, they spun back toward the rostrum, came side-to-side, and steeled their posture—shoulders squared, head straight, eyes focused on the Master of Ceremony.

The colonel walked up a set of short wooden stairs to the top of the rostrum and positioned himself behind a lectern. To his back was a lustrous red tapestry draping the entire wall. The gold embroidery at the center of the tapestry was the Commonwealth's emblem, Eden encircled by three smaller planets—satellites One,

Two, and Three. Satellite One comprised the colonies inhabited by the other two-fifths of humanity. Two and Three were vacant worlds used for military training exercises and mineral excavation.

The Commonwealth was but one member of an alliance of worlds, the Interplanetary Union. The seven races of the Union—Ghanrax, Dhalgratt, Varsh’Ru, Zirkran, Rumanoahan, Taramassian, and human—united to pool resources, defend and support each other. And all Union members were bound by the Union Charter, a system of rules, laws, and regulations.

Ready to initiate the Defense Force’s newest Guardians, the colonel cleared his throat and spoke into the mic. “I applaud each and every one of you for choosing to bear the burden of protecting the New Humanity,” he proudly proclaimed, loudspeakers magnifying his strong, raspy voice. The tableau of cadets stood in attentive silence, locked in the position of attention. “You survived the infernal, insufferable temperatures of Satellite Two.” The pitch of the colonel’s voice rose higher. “You *valiantly* trudged through the arctic wasteland of Satellite Three.”

Stacie winced and squeezed Randy’s hand. He glanced over at her from the corner of his peripheral vision. A transient flashback of her nearly perishing of hypothermia sped through her mind. She remembered Randy being by her side as she was medevacked to the infirmary that day. She remembered later suffering from a severe viral infection and Randy consistently visiting her sickbed during convalescence. A flurry of bonding moments fast-forwarded through her thoughts. Randy had provided unending consolation and encouragement as she endured the misery of BCT.

With an “ahem,” he jolted her out of the past and back to the present.

Realizing she had diverged from ceremonial etiquette, she swallowed past the lump in her throat, let go of Randy’s hand, and

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

snapped back to the position of attention. Then she simply said to him, cerebrally, <Thank you.>

“Everything was done to test your mettle,” the colonel said. He swept the air with theatrical gesticulations of his arms as he spoke. “Everything was done to break you, but you *did not* break!” Excitement siphoning through his veins, the edge of his right fist fell to the lectern’s surface with a *whack* that reverberated throughout the auditorium and shuddered initiates. A three-second pause followed. “And now you join the *mightiest* military force of the Interplanetary Union.” The colonel’s fiery oration made chests swell with pride. “I welcome you to the family known as the Commonwealth Defense Force, a force that helped our allies push back the nefarious Phazharians and defeated the Bhalkrans. The enemy we *now* face, however, comes from within our own republic. They will tell you we are the tyrants. They will try to convince you that their actions are justified. Do not be swayed by their insidious lies, as some have.”

Randy scowled, thinking of his father. Arson’s betrayal made no sense to him. Arson’s father was deemed unworthy of Eden citizenship by the Omni-system, even though he’d devoted twenty years of life to U.S. Military service. It didn’t seem right to Arson. But by becoming a venerable war hero in the CDF, Arson had thrust into the public eye his father’s, and his family’s, years of selfless service during Earth Era. Randy wondered why Arson had chosen to tarnish the Scott family’s legacy. Why? Well, now it was up to him, Randal Scott, to carry the banner of honor.

The colonel lifted a hand. “Repeat after me.” A sea of white-gloved hands rose in unison. “I . . .”

An avalanche of emotion flooded Randy’s mind. “I, Randal Eugene Scott . . .”

Beside him, with moist eyes, “I, Stacie Lyn Spencer . . .”

Michael J. Brooks

The colonel continued. “. . . take this oath with no mental reservation.” Everyone repeated. “And I promise to protect the Commonwealth and its allies from all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Again, the graduates repeated. “Till my final breath or till such time my commitment expires.” Word for word was echoed, verbatim. The colonel clapped a palm against his heart and then punched outward, fist sturdy. The motion was mirrored, with precision and crispness. “Congratulations, you have now officially transitioned from cadets to full-fledged Guardians of the Commonwealth Defense Force. Welcome to the fight.” And with that, Class Alpha 9-5 became the eleventh class this cycle to graduate from BCT and MOS training, this class’ MOS being Land Combatant.

Cheers and hurrahs erupted.

As the colonel left the auditorium, everyone meandered about, shaking hands, hugging, and small-talking. One male Guardian said to another, with a laugh, “Remember when that big-ass hairy monster on Satellite Three attacked our camp? Thing was like a giant four-armed man-ape or something.”

“Yeah,” the other Guardian said, “heard it ripped apart seven Echo Company cadets. Glad we survived the big ugly fucker.”

Emotional from all the trials and tribulations she had triumphed over, Stacie sniffled, and her lashes fluttered, unshed tears of rejoice surfacing.

Randy pulled errant strands of ashy-blond hair from her face and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m gonna go say hello to my aunt. It’s been three months. I know she’d kill me if I left the Academy today without dropping by. So I’ll see you tonight at the banquet, okay?”

After a moment of losing herself in Randy’s caring, intelligent brown eyes and internalizing just how fortunate she was to have

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

him in her life, she reciprocated his kindness by planting a smooch to his cheek. Still collecting herself, her voice cracked. “Later then, handsome.” She sniffled and rubbed away a tear.

Randy pivoted and made his way toward the exit.

Stacie smiled affectionately as she watched him quietly maneuver through gaggles of the celebrants, avoiding the after-ceremony gabfest as well. After his mother was murdered, he became a solemn man who built walls around himself, only allowing a select few within his personal space. And though he was exceptional at everything he strove to succeed at, from academics to sports to soldiering, he never let success go to his head, remaining humble. The kudos and accolades that came with being exceptional were a nonfactor for him. They were the byproduct of hard work and not the motivator for it. Being exceptional was simply a personal standard, a way of life.

Funny, Stacie thought, she and Randy seemed to be a total mismatch. Being such an alpha woman, she was his exact opposite. She loved basking in the limelight. She craved recognition. And usually she bedded with men who were similar to her, the showy types, which seemed to end up being jerks, especially the guy who was her last bedfellow. Randy was a change for her, and she liked him. His high standards of conduct came through in every facet of his life, including his treatment of women. Sometimes he needed to loosen up more, though, trying to be Mr. Straight Arrow all the time. But she’d help him with that, like the night during BCT when she finally cajoled him into a risky sexual escapade. They were lucky they didn’t get caught in their daring act.

He was the yin to her yang and vice versa. She was the remedy to his reclusiveness and he the remedy to her moral laxity and dissoluteness. They complimented each other’s strengths and counteracted each other’s shortcomings. And they satisfied each

Michael J. Brooks

other's sexual needs very well.

Stacie considered herself hitting the jackpot. Tall, trim n' fit, and handsome-faced, Randy had looks that distinguished him, born from good genes. Even looking his worst after a day of BCT—golden-brown hair disheveled and uniform begrimed—didn't detract from his sex appeal. And naked he was even more marvelous, her wet dream.

Halfway to the exit, a brown-skinned Guardian Randy's age swaggered up to him and offered his hand. He was Jarius Ford, aka, given to him by his peers, Mr. Larger Than Life. "Congrats, Randy," the young black man said with exuberance.

Randy clasped Jarius' hand and shook, firmly. "Congrats to you too." Though Randy remained straight-faced, he was glad to see Jarius.

"I saw the placement chart. You, I, and Stacie are gonna be stationed at Colony Four with Charlie Battalion's Lima Company," Jarius said. He sounded pumped, enthusiasm through the roof. "Guess it's no surprise. The training cadre said the majority of our class would probably end up at Four, since shit's so outta control there."

Randy responded with a slight nod and a terse, "Uh-huh." He had connections within the CDF and knew many of the higher-ups, whom had great respect for his family's generations of military and law-enforcement service. These high-ranking allies sympathized with his loss and vowed to support him, any way they could, in his pursuit to restore honor to his namesake and eliminate his father—a man who they, too, felt betrayed by, a man who had embarrassed the CDF. With such a wide sphere of influence, Randy didn't have to leave any aspirations to happenstance or formal request. Colony Four, his father's home colony, was where his father was operating his resistance faction. Randy pulled the necessary strings to make

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

certain he and Stacie would be stationed there at the same company, foregoing his own personal values for the sake of vengeance.

Charlie Battalion's Lima Company HQ was the post Arson had been assigned to command, and Randy thought there might be personnel there who could answer the questions nagging him or knew something he hadn't.

Jarius' eyes shifted to Stacie. She was giggling with a pair of female Guardians. His downcast gaze climbed her well-developed calves up to her backside. "A *fine-looking* woman," he said with pizzazz. "*Whoo-wee*, you sure do know how to pick 'em." He whistled licentiously, ogling the blonde bombshell with lustful eyes. "I heard she's a little on the wild n' dangerous side, though. But I can't understand why an heiress to an empire of wealth and fortune would join the CDF." Baffled, he cocked a brow. "She's a goddamn modern-day princess."

Stacie's family was one of the Eight, nicknamed Eight Elite. They were a clandestine conglomerate of aristocratic families whose power and influence spread wide throughout Eden, reaching even some of the most prominent government officials, and their enterprises were the first of the private sector to expand into intergalactic markets during Earth Era.

"Let's just say she's got her reasons," Randy said. Not being in a social mood, he made short work of the chitchat, excusing himself. "Look, I gotta go. I've got something to take care of."

Jarius slapped a friendly hand to Randy's back. "Yeah, sure. I'll see you tonight at the banquet. And lighten the fuck up, will ya?"

Randy went on. He enjoyed Jarius' brotherhood and was sure he'd go far in his military career. The man had charisma, he was a people person, and many were drawn to his magnetism. And he came just a few metrics short of Warrior Extraordinaire

Michael J. Brooks

qualification. Jarius would make a fine officer someday, Randy figured. He might've even been better suited for the Ambassador Corps, with his type of dynamism. Anyhow, the Land Combatant Corps, the backbone of the CDF, was lucky to have him.

Randy walked out into the corridor. To his left and right were reflective achromatic walls that had glass partitions. Behind them, students sat at desks in high-tech paperless learning environments. The Academy was where onboarding and Phase One of BCT took place, which consisted of two weeks of basic-knowledge classes such as CDF history, weapon mechanics, drill and ceremonies, and customs and courtesies. After completion of Phase One, cadets were shipped offworld for Phase Two, boot camp. The Academy was also where some of the more technical MOS schooling took place: Maintenance, Analysis, Intelligence, Administration.

In a classroom of fifty cadets, a female auburn-haired instructor stood beside a revolving 3-D representation of the CDF's mechanized combatwear, emanating from a cylinder-shaped holo projector. "This is what we call a Shell," she said to her students. Model M-X02 was a dangerous wearable armament comprised of alien smart fibers and gunmetal-gray Kryoplaste armor, and it looked every bit like some cutting-edge superhero battle suit, engineered with slick design aesthetics and a gendered anatomical structure. The M-X02 was a complete contrast from its predecessor, the clunkier unisex M-X01 exoskeleton. The cadets were viewing the M-X02's male variant. "Shells are thought-operated mech suits that take commands via cerebral interface with your nanoimplant. They're fully weaponized with . . ." Her voice faded from earshot as Randy went further down the corridor, soles clacking the tiled floor.

In another roomful of cadets, a brown-haired male instructor was giving a history lesson. "During the most recent war between

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

the Falgoah and Chalderat clans of the Noshkanu province (a Commonwealth protectorate on planet Zelaforia), CDF assistance was requested by Noshkanu's High Council, to put an end to the genocide. Because the Falgoah were the instigators of that conflict, the CDF sided with the Chalderat. After the Falgoah threw in the towel, the Parliament and Chief Executive exiled them, exercising the Commonwealth's privilege over its protectorate." All members of the Union had a single governmental overseer, as the Charter mandated; the Chief Executive was the Commonwealth's. The Parliament was the Commonwealth Government's legislative body. "Their decision undoubtedly preserved life and prevented the jeopardization of our incorporated status."

Randy passed a purple-haired female and dark-haired male exiting a lab. Their implants had just been reformatted for Shell-interface capability. Cringing in discomfort, the male said, "Hope this fucking headache goes away soon."

Randy remembered how that felt.

He made a left into Corridor C, which was permeated with the scent of chemical disinfect. There was a little dome-shaped scrubber golem crisscrossing the floor, burnishing the tiles to a sheen with its rotary buffer. The bot chirped and paused to let Randy by. He proceeded to the end of the corridor and reached classroom C-12. After entering the room, he lounged against the back wall to watch a batch of new military hopefuls receive what would no doubt be an informative orientation, from a woman whose knowledge and experience in military affairs was an extensive archive, his aunt, Merriam Wells.

Merriam noticed him as she took position behind the classroom lectern. She was a rather slim woman with neck-length silver hair. Milestones in genetic enhancement, due to the avant-garde of other species, stretched the human lifespan and counteracted the passage

Michael J. Brooks

of time, allowing a fifty-plus woman such as herself to uphold a well-aged complexion. She looked to be in her early forties and felt just as spry.

The white instructor uniform she wore had a black cape attached to her gold epaulets, symbolizing her status as a Master Instructor.

She acknowledged Randy with a quick smile and a nod. Then she faced her class and put on a serious expression. “Good morning,” she spoke into the mic. A crackle of static came from the loudspeakers. “I am Master Instructor Merriam Wells, and I’ll be giving you a thirty-minute lesson on the history and inner workings of the terrorist organization that threatens the peace and stability of the Commonwealth, the Coalition of Rebel Factions.”

Merriam laid a computer tablet on the lectern’s surface, powered it on, and pressed a red icon onscreen. Behind her, a monitor taking up half the wall flashed to life, mirroring the display on her tablet—a star grid of humanity’s sphere of planets, the Commonwealth. “As you know, it was ten months ago that three of Satellite One’s six colonies started the Independent Movement and unconstitutionally declared sovereignty from the Commonwealth, forming the Republic of Unified Colonies (RUC).” She touched each settlement on her tablet’s screen as she spoke their designations. “Colonies One, Four, and Six.” Red circles flagged the trio of rouge settlements on the wall monitor. “After a three-week military campaign launched by Eden’s Chief Executive and the Parliament, the renegade colonies were recovered and placed under martial law, to eliminate the rebel remnants and prevent further rebellion.

“The rebel remnants who fought for their colonies’ liberation in the Three-week War call themselves the Coalition of Rebel Factions. They believe they’re some last bastion of hope for

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

freedom from the external ordinance of the central government, which they allege to be cruel and autocratic. These underground factions mainly operate inside the occupied colonies.” “Occupied colonies” was a de facto phrase that simply gained traction among the media and became mainstream. Some thought the phrase depicted the Commonwealth negatively. “They carry out guerrilla warfare on government facilities and Defense Force bases. They try to spread their Independent Movement propaganda and Arman Reza’s liberation philosophy to manipulate the gullible into joining their forlorn insurrection.”

Merriam swiped a finger across her tablet’s screen. On the wall monitor, a news article pushed away the graphic of the Commonwealth. The headline read UNAFFILIATED TERRORIST-BOMBERS DETONATE EXPLOSIVES OUTSIDE CDF BASE IN COLONY SIX. A slideshow of articles with similar stories cycled. “Many inhabitants of the occupied colonies have been radicalized and secretly support the Coalition factions, acting as suppliers, financial backers, and even lone-wolf operators. Any civilian could be a secret supporter of the Coalition. These people *think* they’re freedom fighters, but what they are are traitors. They’ve been transformed into radical dissidents, minds hijacked by Reza’s liberation philosophy and this . . . Independent Movement nonsense.

“Reza’s dogma has even now tainted minds here on Eden, breeding a small vocal minority of Independent Movement sympathizers, who believe the central government should’ve rewarded treason and granted independence to the RUC. These . . . *anarchists* have organized riots and formed armed splinter groups that have no Code of Ethics or Rules of Engagement, as the Coalition appears to at least have. This Independent Movement *contagion* is spreading, and we are the cure.” Her tone grew uglier.

Michael J. Brooks

“You will hear the anarchists say the central government was wrong for its aggression. That it should’ve attempted reconciliation first. That it should’ve tried *diplomacy*, as if colonies One, Four, and Six are a sovereign entity to be negotiated with. The delusional halfwits who think such foolishness are wrong.

“After declaring their unofficial sovereignty, the Chief Executive graciously gave the RUC five days to cease and desist their treasonous actions, which, unbeknownst to the central government, included the illegal formation of external planetary partnerships, to acquire armaments for their paramilitaries, as they knew war would be on the horizon. *All* external commerce transactions *must be* authorized by the Union. You see, worlds outside the Union undergo extensive vetting before the Commonwealth, or any Union member for that matter, engages in dealings with them, so that we don’t end up funding governments with nefarious activities. And by Commonwealth law, the central government is the only entity in our republic that can transact with external vetted partners. The central government obtains the resources and then distributes what is necessary to the colonies. That cease and desist was the RUC’s opportunity to avert war, and they didn’t take it.

“Declaring sovereignty is an act of treason as outlined by our constitution, and the government has every right to mobilize the CDF for offensive countermeasures.” She held up a finger, as if to stave off any forthcoming criticism. “And, if I may add, mobilization of troops to dismantle the RUC *did not* violate Article II of the Union Charter.” Her finger went down. “And the government is not required to relay any sort of premobilization warning to defectors, so the five-day cease and desist was an act of benignity. Tell that to the simpletons who contest the government’s civility.”

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

A male cadet raised his hand. “Excuse me, Ma’am.” Merriam’s eyes darted toward him. “If the Commonwealth didn’t violate Article II, as you say, then why was a proper-conduct investigation launched by the Union’s planetary leaders?” he challenged her. “They’ve had major doubts about the validity of our actions and have been reviewing our justification for use of force, for the last six weeks. When the emergency summit happens next week, they’re going to offer their deliberations, and some people believe those deliberations aren’t going to be in our favor.” The Union leaders held quarterly summits yearly, each one hosted by a different Union World. The upcoming emergency summit was to be hosted by the Commonwealth, with Eden being the world of gathering. And it had been two years since the Commonwealth last hosted. “We’re basically going to be on trial. We might suffer a fate similar to the one we gave the Falgoah.”

Merriam countered. “First of all, when a planetary member enacts Article II’s Exception to Force Clause without consulting the other Union leaders, as one has the right to, to defend itself from an abrupt uprising or internal agitators, it is standard procedure for those Union leaders to launch a proper-conduct investigation.” She frowned. “Secondly, no matter what the critics say, we acted within the boundaries of the Exception to Force Clause, and you should believe that beyond a shadow of a doubt,” she said threateningly. The cadet spared himself expulsion, not challenging the Master Instructor any further. “The Commonwealth is always righteous. Now, anyone else have anything to interject?” A twenty-something woman with a green weird hairdo, wearing square spectacles, lifted her hand. Merriam’s eyes spotted the brave soul and glanced at her name tag. “Speak, Cadet Wilmington.”

The lanky, geeky-looking cadet took a bold stance and spoke

her mind. “I lived in Colony One, my birth-colony, before I was granted Eden citizenship through the lottery two years ago. Unfortunately, my parents weren’t so lucky.” Concern for her parents’ well-being lowered her chin. A thought of them passed, and she looked back up, meeting Merriam’s cold grimace. “Just like the other five colonies, conditions there are dire.” The look on her face was one of despair. “Temporary housing units are in states of disrepair, filtration systems are broken, and . . .”

Merriam rolled her eyes and cut off the wordy cadet. “And your point is what?”

“My point is the rebellion happened because the central government kept ignoring the deplorable post-colonization living conditions of the colonies. They failed to respond to inhabitants’ grievances, galvanizing the people of colonies One, Four, and Six. Armed dissonance was bound to occur. So don’t you think the government bears some responsibility for its remiss . . . ?”

Merriam interrupted. “Cadet Wilmington, as Master Instructor, I hereby pronounce you ill-suited for military service. You are being expelled from the Academy. Now remove yourself from my classroom.”

Wilmington’s face blanched. “But . . .”

“Leave,” Merriam demanded in a livid tone.

Tears welled up in Wilmington’s eyes and poured down her cheeks. With her head declined, she rose from her seat and tromped toward the doorway, moaning. Randy, impassive to her predicament, silently watched her pout.

“*Bitch*,” she mumbled, exiting the room.

Merriam quickly tapped a sequence of icons on her tablet’s screen, marking Wilmington’s profile as “disloyal” and alerting Academy Enforcement. They’d pinpoint the signal from the tracer beacon embedded in her name tag and intercept her before she left

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

the building, to question her about her subversive leanings.

“That’s what we get for letting immigrant nadir into the prestige of the Defense Force,” a snooty female voice whispered, from one of the rearmost seats.

“As you can see, anti-government sentiments *will not* be tolerated, and anyone caught listening to Arman Reza’s rhetoric will be culled from our ranks as well,” Merriam let everyone know with ferocity. “Independent Movement sympathizers like Cadet Wilmington become defectors. That’s what we don’t want. Better to nip a problem in the bud now before it grows into a bigger one later.” She recovered from the distraction and went on with her lecture. “You have been selected to not only defend the Commonwealth from foreign threats and protect our allies but to help maintain law and order in the colonies of our great republic, and you should feel proud.” Merriam pressed a purple icon on her tablet’s screen. “But the CDF’s mission reaches far beyond the Commonwealth and the Union. Observe.”

The lights in the room darkened, and a wire-frame holographic projection of planets, moons, and stars spread overhead. It was a conflict grid consisting of the Commonwealth’s fifteen Mission Worlds, located throughout multiple quadrants of the galaxy. They were all Tier 1 civilizations, frail worlds where individual governments became protectorates, ceding to restrictive provisions and sacrificing certain liberties in exchange for military assistance—battling internal and external foes—or for resources.

These stipulatory conditions varied upon government. Some involved a surrender of all external relations, meaning a protectorate could only trade with or sell resources to the Commonwealth. If other worlds were permitted to transact—with the Commonwealth’s blessing—the Commonwealth received a percentage of the profits. For as long as the Commonwealth was

Michael J. Brooks

willing to be involved in a planetary government's affairs, the contract remained in effect. At the contract's expiration, which varied from months to years, it could be renewed, renegotiated, or terminated.

Some races saw the Commonwealth as a noble protector and peacemaker coming to the aid of planetary governments in distress. Others saw the Commonwealth as an imperialist empire taking advantage of the weak to expand its economic and political reach. This sometimes led to upheaval and uprisings among the denizens of protectorates, giving rise to opposition forces that would attempt to pressure, dismantle, or take over governments—through coercion or violence—to cancel the CDF's provisions.

There were Union leaders who began to become concerned about the Commonwealth's—lucrative—intergalactic pacts.

Planetary-impact missions in aid of other worlds' governments kept the CDF busy, in addition to hunting down and battling the intergalactic traffickers, pirates, and planet ravagers who undermined the Commonwealth's safety and security.

Merriam deactivated the projection, and the room's lights brightened. She double-tapped a thumbnail on her home screen, and a vid-pic of Arson Scott, the man once held to high esteem, enlarged on the wall monitor. "This is one of the most-wanted terrorist leaders of the Coalition." In the image, Arson had cropped dark hair, a rugged face, and a deadly expression creasing his brow.

Randy glared at his father with a scathing countenance.

Merriam brought up the war criminal's prior CDF service sketch. On the wall monitor, black text materialized across a blank backdrop. "As you can see, this *convert* isn't someone to take lightly," she said in a severe tone.

The text denoted Arson's military exploits, exploits that demanded respect and would even marvel some of the most

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

seasoned warfighters. After giving the cadets a minute to internalize just how dangerous her brother-in-law could be, Merriam minimized the info and double-tapped another thumbnail. Vid-pic number two took over the wall monitor: Arson looking down the scope of a high-powered rifle, outfitted in CDF battle garb—a black-and-gray camo-pattern uniform with a protective vest and a tactical belt brandishing two handguns.

“Arson Scott is one of the toughest son of a bitches this galaxy’s ever seen,” Merriam warned. “After the Three-week War concluded and martial law in the renegade colonies commenced, he became influenced by the Coalition’s doctrine. He traded sides, divulging CDF secrets, fighting against his own, and becoming one of the chief terrorist leaders of the Coalition of Rebel Factions.” *And he ceased being a dedicated father and loving husband to my younger sister as well,* she added silently.

Randy’s heated glare stayed fixated on the vid-pic of his father. He found himself unable to look away and remembered the harrowing night his mother was murdered by the Coalition . . .

Randy’s red sports cruiser glided down from the night sky. Roof retracted, cool wind ruffled his hair. He landed the fancy flyer between two yellow lines, parking outside a three-storey facility siloed within forested land. The facility was A-1 Defense Solutions, a major defense contractor where his mother was a senior tech engineer. To celebrate her promotion to Chief Tech Engineer tomorrow, he was going to treat her to a meal at her favorite eatery.

He flipped a switch, and the engine purred off. He got out, smoothed back his windswept hair, and approached the building. It was after hours, and it was extremely rare for anyone to be at work

Michael J. Brooks

at this time, especially since today was Commonwealth Appreciation Day, a festive holiday of parades, concerts, plays, and other celebratory events commemorating the inception of humanity's intergalactic republic.

Randy was a bit nervous. There had been a string of attacks on defense contractors by the Coalition. He was worried his mother's might get targeted.

Randy tapped the centerpiece of the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) around his wrist. The electronic band beeped, ringing his mother's.

<Hey, honey, up here,> came Kathleen's voice from inside his mind, after the first two chimes. He looked up and saw her waving at him from one of the tall third-floor windows. Realizing she was in receptivity range of their Link, he canceled the call. <Be down in fifteen minutes,> she said.

"Wait, someone's still in there!" an outraged male voice, somewhere, shouted. "Intel said the building would be vacant tonight!"

Startled, Randy twisted left and right, sneakers scuffing the pavement. His eyes methodically combed the darkness.

<Randy, what's going on out there?> Kathleen asked, voice teeming with worry.

<Not sure,> Randy responded, looking all around. His panicking heart thumped frantically.

Suddenly . . . *FWOOSH!* The third storey went up in a thunderous burst of flames. A flock of birds chirped as they flapped into the night sky's refuge. The second and first floors followed in succession, raucous explosions disintegrating windows into glass shards.

The cruelest of pains assaulted Randy's mind, shivering his entire being. He gripped his head, releasing a gut-wrenching, shrill

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

scream that sounded like it could stretch for miles. The mental torment clawed his psyche until it was in shambles. Speechless, disoriented, and face as pallid as a corpse, it seemed he had momentarily died. Then life returned, color repigmenting his face and breaths heaved in ragged drags.

Lightheaded, tears upwelling, he sank to his knees and retched vomit.

Ash drifted and wild, undulating flames licked the air.

Randy stared at the inferno, shuddering, ears ringing. Intermittent throbs rioted throughout his mind. Words couldn't articulate the agony experienced.

A racket of gunshots stole his attention. Still on his knees, vision filled with tears, he canted his head left, and his jaw hung open in shock. Security personnel were discharging small-arms fire at three male Coalition rebels—geared up in load-carrier vests and tactical equipment, prepared to execute several missions tonight—and one of them was Arson Scott.

“Come on, Commander, we gotta go!” one rebel said to Arson, who looked distraught.

The other rebel unslung his rifle and took aim. “Nothing we can do now!” Muzzle flashing, expended shell casings pinged the pavement.

Together, the two pulled a disturbed Arson into the tree line.

“Where'd they go?” a guard said, sweeping the darkness with the beam of his wrist flash.

The rumbling of a powerful engine shook the forest. Birds skreighed, cawed, and chirped, among rustling leaves. Twigs snapped. A heavily armored flyer emerged from a thicket of trees and climbed into the sky. Propulsion thrusters ignited as the craft zoomed away, taillights disappearing into the dark of night.

Randy stood up, whimpering, with a black hole in his heart that

Michael J. Brooks

would never seal. Years with his mother yet to come had been snatched away in an instant. And his own father had a part in robbing him of that pleasure and mentally scarring him.

“Hey, you okay?” a guard asked Randy, running up to him. Brows knitted in anger, the now motherless son said nothing.

Emergency vehicles screeched onto the scene. Doors clicked open. Muffled chatter blared over radios.

“You okay?” the guard repeated, to Randy.

Firemen hosed the conflagration with wheeled water cannons.

Randy remained silent, smoldering debris and the pungent scent of smoke wafting throughout the howling wind . . .

“I’m going to break here for ten minutes,” Merriam said to her students. “You may stay or leave the classroom.” At a fast pace, she went toward her nephew, heels clicking the floor. Heads followed her as she and Randy stepped outside the doorway.

Some students got up to leave; others sifted through learning modules in their desks’ info terminals.

Merriam grasped Randy’s shoulders, smiling proudly. “You look sharp.” She brushed his shoulders and tugged on his uniform, straightening wrinkles. As she absorbed his appearance, the Warrior Extraordinaire patch registered. Her brows leapt. “And you graduated top-tier of your class,” she exclaimed. “Fantastic. Your mother would’ve been *so* proud of you.” She swung open her arms, and Randy embraced her.

Two male faculty members in matching gray uniforms, leaving the canteen, sauntered by as they chatted with mugs of steaming liquid in hand.

Randy hugged Merriam tighter. “I wanted to let you know my request was granted,” he said, softly. They released each other.

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

“I’m going to be stationed at Colony Four.”

“Where your father is?” Merriam asked, to confirm. Randy nodded, his expression tense. “I know, betrayal hurts. It stings. And rage burns inside you, as it does me.” Her voice hardened. “But remember: duty first and foremost.” She stabbed a finger to her nephew’s chest. “You got that, Randal Scott?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He turned and headed down the corridor. “I’ve got to get going. I’ll call before I depart for my duty station.”

“Anything you need, you let me know, Randy.”

“I will,” he replied, walking away.

• • •

Stacie was headed for the Academy’s exit, walking down a long corridor same as all the others. Her stride exuded confidence, and rightfully so. Not because she was ultrarich or because she had a body that turned heads—all of which did inflate her ego. It was because she had transcended the expectations of naysayers and uncuffed herself from the prescribed lifestyle of the Eight, by joining the CDF.

Thrilled to be soon deployed on her first military assignment, her face beamed.

Lollygagging around the glass partition of the security office were three male cadets and one female. Stacie slowed her stride and came up behind them to see what they were so fixated on.

Planted in a chair was Cadet Wilmington with her hands bound behind her back, wearing a black sleeveless spandex half-top and shorts.

Uniformed in dark blue, a tall, broad-shouldered Academy enforcement officer loomed over her. Hellbent on getting a confession, he pressed a shock baton to her chest.

Electricity buzzed and crackled.

Wilmington screamed.