

REBEL'S QUEST

SUPREME CONSTELLATIONS BOOK TWO

by

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PROLOGUE

Sand blasted Roshan O'Landha's face and crept into every crevice, every wrinkle. Squeezing her eyes closed behind her night-vision visor, she tried to soothe the stabbing pain the bright light from an unexpected explosion caused. It reverberated throughout the chain of mountains around her, booming until her ears rang.

"Get down and stay down!" Roshan yelled into her communicator and prayed her team was all right. She pressed a different button with her thumb, using her call sign. "Paladin to base camp. What's your status?"

Jubiner's unmistakable voice, intermixed with loud coughing, emerged through the static. "We've got fighters down and I'm missing one, Paladin. Trying to get an update now."

"I copy. Standing by." Roshan tore off her visor and moved behind a pile of debris as she squinted through the whirling sand. She wheezed, then tried to clear her throat when she inhaled fine dust.

Suddenly she heard an all-too-familiar sound and rapidly flipped a switch on her communicator. Her voice insistent, she manually overrode any conversations going on at the moment. "All frequencies! We've got incoming! Take cover!"

Roshan jerked her chin strap tighter and rolled to her right into a shallow trench she knew should be there. She landed with a thud in the apparently not-so-shallow ditch, and the air gushed from her lungs on impact. Roshan was on her back and couldn't take her eyes off the missiles as they approached, deceptively looking like pretty falling stars.

"Damn it!" she whispered as she watched the missiles rain on their positions. She tore at her radio and switched to another channel. "Paladin to base camp. We need ARA now! What the hell are you people doing back there?"

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“This is base, Paladin. Counterfire has commenced.” The young man responsible for the Automatic Response Artillery sounded urgent. “They fired missiles from Ganath, undetectable by sensors. We had no way of knowing where to—”

“Well, they’re here now, so—” The ground shook and tossed the communicator from Roshan’s hand. She clawed through the whirling debris for it but couldn’t find it. Trying to open her eyes, she quickly closed them again when the sand battered them.

Explosions, on the ground and above her, hurt her eardrums. Roshan rolled into a position that provided better protection and covered her body as she let the shielding vest take most of the onslaught of debris. As the trash and the continued explosions pounded at her, all she could think about were the other members of her team. They were trapped at coordinates due south of hers, which meant they were farther away from this barrage of missiles and plasma-nodes now blasting into the ground.

They have to be all right. There’s no other option. Roshan repeated her mantra continuously. Debris hit her helmet with a nauseatingly cracking sound, and she moved her neck carefully, relieved to find that the noise hadn’t come from any broken vertebrae.

As another missile hit nearby, the ground shook, and Roshan felt the heat as a ball of fire expanded from the plasma charge. “Damn Onotharians! Damn them all!” The hatred in her voice didn’t scare her. She had lived with this hate for so long, nourished it until it had become second nature, as it had for so many of her generation. It was better to fight back than to surrender. *Giving them hell is what we live for. Payback.*

Finally Roshan managed to pull her visor down to cover part of her face. She was tired. Twelve days in the field on emergency rations and recycled fluids, combined with sporadic fighting, had taken their toll. Roshan rose onto her knees and scanned the area. She couldn’t use the infrared as long as explosions filled the sky, since it could blind her permanently. Dragging herself forward she felt with her hands to make sure she was following the trench. The luminescent compass strapped to her left arm above her chronometer wasn’t working because of the charges’ magnetism.

Roshan thought she heard something through the noise and stopped crawling. Pulling out a scanner, she set it to monitor her closest

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surroundings but found no sign of life. She paused and her blood ran cold. No sign of life? As far as she could determine, two of her team members should be within reach. At least her most junior team member, whom she always made sure stayed close during missions.

Roshan huddled over the scanner cradled in her lap as she rebooted it. When it went online again, it showed the same. No life signs. She wanted to toss the offending piece of technology as far as she could, but she forced herself to pocket it and resumed crawling due south.

A zinging sound from the night sky made her look up involuntarily and spot a distinct light traveling at an unimaginable speed. Not sure what kind of weapon this was, Roshan again threw herself headlong into the ditch. "*H'rea deasav'h!*" She didn't even have time to warn anyone over the comm link.

Deep, resonant thunder permeated the ground and air and rumbled toward her. *Twelve days in hell. Twenty-five years of my life. For this.* Roshan closed her eyes and grew more certain she might not survive. *A trap. A damn ambush instead of the breakthrough we expected.* Roshan braced herself for the impact of the detonation. *What's left, anyway? I've lost so many. Parents, friends, comrades...and, all those years ago, her.* A short moment before the shock wave hit, everything went white and erased the image of beautiful amber eyes. After that, all she knew was complete darkness.

CHAPTER ONE

I'm not using that thing." Roshan scoffed at the thin metal cane in Doc's hand. "Isn't it enough that my unexplained three-week absence will raise a bunch of questions? If my Onotharian contacts see me with a cane, after their successful ambush against the resistance, they're bound to be suspicious."

"But your ankle hasn't quite healed," Doc objected. "If you're not careful, you may walk with a permanent limp."

Roshan gestured impatiently toward her friend and comrade-in-arms. "Doc, listen to me. I have to get back to the capital. I can't limp, and I certainly can't use a cane. I have to appear as if I've just come back to Ganath from the Desamea asteroid belt. The Onotharians know I have my stockpile up there. My foreman created a disaster that needed my personal attention before the mission...and for all he knows I may have been captured, or worse."

Doc shook his head. "All I can do is advise you on what's medically sound. Do what you need to do, but please, stay off that foot as much as possible. And no personal combat training."

Roshan knew from the expression in Doc's eyes not to push any further. Rising from the gurney she reached for her jacket. "Thanks," she murmured, her thoughts already elsewhere. Time was a luxury she didn't possess. She had too much to do. "I'll do my best. I..." Roshan stopped in midstep and half smiled at him. "...owe you one."

"How do you figure that, Paladin?" Doc shook his head. "You were the one who dragged half of the members in the Gedor cell back to safety."

Roshan's chest constricted with a quick, sharp stab of pain. "That doesn't count. They were just inexperienced kids."

"Yeah, not like us veterans, are they?"

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“They’re nothing more than trainees who think they’re invincible. I hate using anyone younger than eighteen on these operations. Their inexperience and immaturity...it’s just wrong.”

Doc shook his head. “There isn’t much of a recruiting pool left to choose from. Let’s face it, everyone is either dead, captured, or off planet.”

“Maybe, but I don’t have to like it. Well, enough of this. Got to go. Thanks, Doc.” Roshan nodded briskly and was out the door before her face could give her away.

Roshan had been amazed to find herself still alive when she regained consciousness after that last major blast that had knocked her unconscious. The scene she had come across still haunted her. Five young resistance fighters, two boys and three girls, had all been badly wounded, and their remaining companions were dead because they’d strayed into the enemy’s kill zone.

From her vantage point Roshan had watched them try to take cover but without a clue where to go. Every move they made seemed to be a mistake. Logic told her to hold her position, but she couldn’t stand to watch the slaughter. She had transmitted her position to base camp and given a spot report to her team. Yanking off her pack and anything else that might weigh her down, she hid the equipment in the building she was about to abandon.

Roshan had dashed toward the wounded, taking cover wherever she could. Once on the ground she gathered the scattered resistance fighters and directed those who could still move to a bombed-out bridge north of their position. It had taken her three trips to drag the ones who couldn’t walk, one at a time. As she pulled the last one to safety, Roshan had lost her luck. An incoming barrage threw her several feet, nearly dislocating her hip and damaging her right ankle.

Roshan had still managed to crawl to the bridge, pulling one of the youths with her. There she rendered what assistance she could as they huddled together until the incoming fire ceased, allowing her team to find them.

Roshan rubbed her hip absentmindedly. She needed to forget the ordeal. Doc was right; their pool of recruits was limited. It was the price of this damn war.

“I *still* don’t have to like it,” she growled to herself as she settled behind the wheel of the hovercraft parked outside the aluminum-carbide

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cubicle that housed the small clinic. Her cell staged their operations from this site within a deep ravine, located among the Merealian Mountains. The mountains, which stretched from just north of Ganath toward the Davost peninsula, were well protected from the Onotharians' sensors because of the mineral-rich bedrock. When not on a mission, most of the 120 men and women of all ages who were part of the group led unassuming lives in the shadow of the Onotharian occupation, except for herself.

Roshan punched in a few commands, and her two-seat hovercraft hummed to life and rose a meter above the ground. It was time to resume her role as Roshan O'Landha, wealthy business tycoon, and as much as it exasperated her to move among the rich and worryless, Roshan knew her double life was unavoidable, especially now, if she wanted to be able to contact the Gantharians' new allies.

She jumped off the hovercraft without thinking and cursed under her breath when a searing pain shot through her right side. *Damn, I have to remember to be more careful.*

Roshan pushed the door to her cubicle open and looked at the deep blue trousers and blue-black coat that hung there. "Very well," she muttered, and began unbuttoning her coveralls. "Time to go."



"Ms. M'Aldovar! Wait!" a young male voice called from behind her. Andreia M'Aldovar slowed to a stroll to let her assistant, Rix M'Isitor, catch up with her. The young man was the oldest son of Dixmon M'Isitor, the Onotharian leader on Gantharat. He was eager to please her and, she suspected, quite infatuated with the fact that he worked for the most famous person on Gantharat, even when you counted his parents.

"Yes, Rix?" Andreia stopped when she saw the data-filer in his hand. It was blinking blue, which indicated a critical data update.

"Ms. M'Aldovar, there's a last-minute amendment to today's agenda. We received the situation report on last week's arrests."

"Then bring me up to speed." Andreia motioned with her free hand for Rix to continue.

"Three more shipments of rebels from the southern hemisphere have left for Kovos Asteroid Prison, ma'am."

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“ETA?”

“They should be on schedule, only an hour or so from now.” M’Isitor checked his chronometer. “Perhaps a slight delay since...er... they’re fully loaded.”

“Thanks for the update.”

“No problem, ma’am. I figured you needed it for the meeting.”

“That was very astute of you. Well, I must be off if I’m going to make it on time.” Andreia dismissed M’Isitor and headed for the vast hallways of the governmental administration building.

Located in the center of Ganath, the building was constructed mostly of alu-carbon and transparent aluminium, except for the spectacular portico that adorned the front entrance. The columns of the portico were made from the rare D’Tosorian silver-marble that the Onotharians had obtained illegally via the black market that operated in deep space between merchants and pirates. She found it telling that the Onotharians would take their smuggled goods and display them so blatantly, since D’Tosoria was located well within Supreme Constellations space and strongly endorsed the partial trading embargo the SC Council had levied against Onotharat. The tall columns supported an impressive transparent aluminum ceiling that gave the structure a dramatic, airy ambiance.

As Andreia tipped her head back and looked up at the blue sky that engulfed them in a bright light, she saw a familiar face on one of the many open ledges. *Mother. Wonderful.* Andreia entered the building and used the senior staff’s express lift to reach the third floor.

Her waist-long black hair in a perfect, intricate pile on the top of her head, Le’Tinia M’Aldovar walked toward her daughter with her arms outstretched. Her familiar scent, a delicate Ornamor flower perfume, engulfed Andreia as the stunning woman embraced her. Though petite, Le’Tinia was forceful. Her amber eyes under straight black eyebrows could easily pierce an adversary, leaving him devastated and crushed. She smiled, showing white, slightly pointed teeth. “*Henshes*, Andreia. It’s been too long.”

“Yes, it has.” Andreia kissed her mother’s cheeks repeatedly, the customary Onotharian greeting between children and parents.

“Hurry. We’re waiting for you, dearest.” Le’Tinia pulled discreetly at Andreia’s arm.

Andreia bet they were. The GCDL, the Gantharian Community

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Data Line system, didn't issue statements of conduct regarding their politics without their favorite spokesperson. Andreia had quickly progressed from being a mere decorative representative to helping the Onotharian citizens woo their Gantharian subjects; she had also emerged years ago as a forceful liaison between the Onotharian homeworld, six light-years away, and the Onotharian interim government on Gantharat. Born on this planet to Onotharian parents, Andreia was the perfect choice, according to her mother. To drive the point home, the data line constantly referred to her as an Onotharian daughter of Gantharat. A blessed mix that, combined with her strong convictions, had placed her in the eye of the storm.

“As you say, it's been a while. How was Onos, Mother?”

“Ah, too crowded and too polluted. We saw a few good performances in the ValaVala Concert Foyer, but living among the musically gifted Gantharians tends to spoil your taste forever.” Le'Tinia placed an arm around her daughter's shoulders. “Then I get the news that you've been rock climbing. Isn't that a sport for the young and newly rich? Hardly anything a future president of Gantharat can afford to do, is it?”

“I have to stay in shape, Mother.” Andreia was used to her mother's tirades, and nothing she could say would stop Le'Tinia. It saved time to simply nod and pretend to agree, rather than argue every little detail.

“Yes, of course you do. But there are other ways, *henshes*.”

The Onotharian term of endearment hung between them as they approached the largest of the six offices occupied by the top men and women in the Onotharian interim government. Andreia knew that her mother probably considered herself the most loving of parents, but her parents' actions and demands had too often proved the opposite, so she couldn't buy into the bright smiles they graced her with in public.

“Ms. M'Aldovar. The chairman wants you to sit on her right, ma'am. This way, please.” A young Onotharian woman guided Andreia past the high-ranking members of the interim Gantharian government, which included her father, who sat on one side of an oval table. At the far end, a woman in her late nineties rose to greet Andreia, sending everyone else around the table to their feet. “Ms. M'Aldovar.”

“Chairman M'Ocresta. It is an honor.” Andreia was still trying to grasp the fact that Villia M'Ocresta, one of the fifteen members of the House of Creators, had arrived on Gantharat without anyone telling her. Andreia refrained from sending her mother an ironic glance,

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knowing full well that her mother expected it and would triumph later. “I hope you had a pleasant and uneventful journey from our beloved homeworld.” The words nearly choked her, but, accustomed to effortlessly delivering untruths, Andreia smiled proudly as she gestured toward the others present. “I’m sure you’ve received a warm welcome. If I’m not mistaken, this is your first visit to this part of the Empire, isn’t it?”

The deceptively fragile-looking woman, her hair still black as the night and her complexion nearly flawless despite her age, nodded regally. “Indeed it is. Recent events have made it safe enough for me to travel to Gantharat. I received intelligence regarding your military’s and the Onotharian Empire Clandestine Service’s successful countermeasures toward the rebels. Very impressive, Ms. M’Aldovar. I commend you for your work.”

“Thank you.” Andreia used every ounce of her professionalism and her well-trained voice to sound forceful and self-confident. “We are proud of the dutiful men and women who risk their lives for their homeworld.”

“We are, most assuredly.”

Chairman M’Ocresta sat down and motioned for the others to follow suit. “I don’t have to tell you that even as we continue to make progress and enjoy our victories over these worthless scoundrels here on Gantharat, they continue to make political mischief for us elsewhere. As I am sure you are aware, negotiations with the Supreme Constellations have ceased because of the O’Dal woman and that child.”

“Yes, Chairman, I am monitoring the situation and know of its possible ramifications.”

“Good. This unpleasantness is about to lead us to war with the Supreme Constellations—something I find undesirable at this time. It annoys me that this planet and its insignificant inhabitants have embarrassed us so publicly. My patience for such things is running out. This occupation has cost us dearly. Now it has drawn the Constellations’ attention. I am well aware of the incident that killed your son, Valax,” she said, glancing at Andreia’s father, who looked uncomfortable and shifted nervously in his chair. Twenty years older than his wife, he was still a handsome man. Tall and skinny, with sharp features and thin lips, he resembled a predatory bird with his bent nose and golden eyes.

“Madam Chairman, it was a tragic incident that we could not have

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anticipated,” Valax said. “As for the Gantharians, they are a proud, resourceful people, and we knew when we conquered this world it would take time.”

“Proud? Resourceful? Noble words for such criminals. Cunning, deceitful, and destructive would be more appropriate. As for it taking time, I would think twenty-five years was more than sufficient. Finally, I must say, Valax, failing to anticipate a move on the SC’s part was rather poor for a strategic thinker such as you. Once Ambassador M’Ekar behaved so recklessly in his clumsy attempt to commandeer that boy who pretends to be Gantharian royalty, what did you think they would do? Nothing?” Chairman M’Ocresta huffed. “They never sit idly by—and the cost of this folly? Your son, our ability to negotiate, and public humiliation.” She paused and emphasized, “I tell you, time is running out.”

“What are your orders, Madam Chairman?”

“Now that you’ve finally incarcerated most of their senior resistance leaders, Valax, I want them broken immediately so we can end this foolishness. I want this planet to submit to our will, our ways, once and for all,” the chairman repeated, and let her almost-yellow eyes settle on each face around the table before continuing. “No more second chances. If Gantharat had not been rich in valuable natural resources and an abundant labor force, I would have recommended to the Emperor that we destroy every living being on it. If this situation does not resolve itself quickly, I may still make that recommendation.”

Andreia’s heart hammered. She could hardly believe her own ears. *Is she serious? After we’ve practically raped and plundered this planet, using its people as our workforce, she wants to kill off the cheap labor?* Andreia dug her blunt nails into the data-filer in her hands. This surprise meeting proved to be harder on her self-restraint than she’d anticipated. She could see the keen intellect and callous assessment in M’Ocresta’s eyes as she sat casually rolling the Garmawood pearls of her necklace between her fingers.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary, Madam Chairman,” Andreia said, keeping her voice cool and unaffected. “As you yourself have noted, we have captured a large majority of the traitors. The ones that remain at large are inconsequential. They are less resourceful, more like mindless children that we can mold to our will with the right types of propaganda and incentives.”

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“I have noticed your recent successes, Andreia. They are the only bright points I’ve seen in recent times,” M’Ocresta stated. “So you think we can mend the rift between us and the Constellations?”

“I do. It was unfortunate that the SC spies obtained sensitive materials from the O’Dals’ farm, but if we launch a successful information campaign, we can discredit the find as well as the boy’s heredity. As for Kellen O’Dal’s claim about him and the occupation, we must do the same. If we overreact, her story gains credence, which we must avoid. I say let the SC pay us a visit. We have nothing to hide. All they will find are obedient children loyal to Onotharat,” Andreia heard herself say, accompanied by sharp intakes of breath from the others around the table. No one ever contradicted the chairman.

“An interesting take on the matter,” M’Ocresta agreed calmly, and smiled. “I’ve always appreciated your candor, Andreia. You remind me of myself in my youth,” she said, and patted her data-filer. “Words are your weapons and you wield them well to keep the Gantharians at bay. Doubtless this method of yours helped us capture the rebels. A useful talent that I may apply with the SC. I will think about what you have said.” Villia M’Ocresta gracefully rose from the chair. “In the meantime would you care to join me in an early evening meal with representatives of the Commercial Lobby and their president?”

“Certainly, Chairman M’Ocresta,” Andreia replied. “I’d be delighted.”

“Very well. I’ll see you in...” M’Ocresta turned to her assistant, who checked his chronometer. “Ninety minutes then. I believe we’re meeting at the president’s residence. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, Madam Chairman.” The reply came out curt and almost rude, but Andreia didn’t care. The invitation helped make this day one of her worst so far.

“Until then.” M’Ocresta left the room, her entourage in tow. Most of the others followed, leaving Andreia alone with her parents and the provisional Prime Minister of Gantharat.

“What were you thinking?” Le’Tinia scolded. “Do you know how close you came to irreversibly offending the most influential and powerful woman on Onotharat?”

“This isn’t like you,” Valax added, his voice a fraction softer, but with the same absent look in his eyes that he’d had ever since Andreia was young.

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"I got invited to her dinner with the Commercial Lobby, didn't I?" Andreia said, tired of her parents' criticism, their disdain for her when they were alone. At least they weren't glorifying her brother, yet.

"I never saw Trax almost drop the ball as you did this morning." Le'Tinia grabbed her briefcase so forcefully she nearly jerked the handle off.

"Me? I did what I had to. Has it dawned on you that the chairman is probably here because of what my illustrious brother did, or hadn't that thought crossed your mind? He was the fool that allowed the SC spies to get away with sensitive documents and was killed in the process."

Suddenly furious and sick of their attitude, she swiveled and glared at them. "I've always done everything you've asked of me—personally, politically, and patriotically. You can't fault me for anything! I succeeded in keeping the chairman, whom I didn't know was going to be here, by the way, from firing you and killing the inhabitants of this world. Not a bad day's work, I might add, and not only that, she's pleased enough to ask me to dinner."

"You don't need to bring up Trax's unfortunate accident."

"I didn't, the chairman did." Andreia stared incredulously at her mother. "Really, Mother, only you would call the idiotic idea of going toe-to-toe with a Protector of the Realm an accident." She gestured dismissively. "You forget, Mother, it was just another of his foolish acts. He had only himself to blame, and you know it."

"Don't address your mother this way..." Her father seemed to have awakened and now towered over Andreia, who was shorter than most Onotharians. "Your brother made a heroic, if ill-advised, decision, and his death broke your mother's heart."

"I don't want to fight," Andreia sighed, well acquainted with how her parents could rant on and on if she didn't back off. "I have things to do before dinner."

"Your old friend will be there, won't she?"

Thank you, Mother. So nice of you to remind me. "Yes, I assume so. She is the president of the Commercial Lobby, after all, and the dinner is being held at her house." It was hard not to sound contemptuous.

"I insist that you take your bodyguards." Le'Tinia suddenly became a concerned parent. "After all, some seventy-five percent of the members of the Lobby are Gantharians. You're popular with most of them, despite things, but after the latest raids against the resistance,

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you just never know. The word's out and it's bound to affect the general opinion of our cause. The guards must keep you safe."

Andreia agreed with her mother for once. A brewing hatred had flared again after the Onotharian military and their Clandestine Service had so brutally attacked the rebels. "Yes, Mother. I will."

As Andreia said good-by, she no longer thought about her own physical safety, but focused on the unnerving fact that she was about to be in the same room with *her* once again. She had successfully avoided being on the same premises as Roshan O'Landha for the last few years, but had known that sooner or later they were bound to meet face to face.

Andreia just wished that it didn't have to happen like this, on Roshan's turf. *You're right, Mother. She hates me, and I don't feel safe at all.*