

“THE RED DAGGER” PITCH

A bored Titus Allegine stares at the tall man standing in the corner with the red dagger tattoo on his neck. His intense curiosity drives him to investigate, but an assassin's bomb rips through the space ship. A searing heat tears into his back and the last thing he sees before total nothingness is a pair of shiny black boots.

Titus awakes on a ship, badly burned and newly orphaned. Being the second-born child, he neither wanted nor expected to take the throne, but he is duty bound to do exactly that. But how can a nine-year old boy rule a kingdom and protect himself from the assassin who took his family, especially since it could be someone he knows?

His world on the verge of civil war, Titus must survive more assassination attempts and fight a military determined to take over. With his dreams pulling at his inherited duty, he will decide if becoming a hired bodyguard, a Red Dagger, like the man who saved him is worth sacrificing the future of an entire planet. At the same time, as those he loves either dies or is killed because of him, he must reconcile with his own desire to kill.

“The Red Dagger” begins the epic journey of a boy who will decide the fate of two worlds and learns that duty to those he loves requires he make terrible choices.

“THE RED DAGGER” FIRST 5000 WORDS

PROLOGUE

At first, Titus Allegine could only stare at the young man sitting by himself in the corner of the passenger liner's common area.

Titus knows who the man is by the eyes alone. Silvery blue. Katarine's eyes.

With a goatee and mustache, his dark skin and intense yet guarded expression, the man is a perfect copy of Praetus. In a galaxy of hundreds of colonized worlds and countless billions of people, what were the odds Titus would find his adoptive parent's only biological child, abandoned in a moment of profound grief?

Titus watches the man for two days, still uncertain he should approach and introduce himself, let alone reveal how Titus knows him.

Katarine's last words whisper, “Take care of my husband and our son. They will need you.”

Titus sighs and bites down on his burnt-out cigar. He failed Katarine with Praetus. Perhaps this was his only chance to keep the last half of his promise.

CHAPTER 1

Titus stabbed at his pasta and kicked his heels at the legs of his chair. His parents and older sister, Trisha did little else except talk politics. Pure boredom. He glanced around the crowded restaurant in search of something more interesting.

“I’m afraid it’s inevitable,” his father said.

“Surely the people won’t tolerate an attempted coup,” his mother said. “They’ve expressed their support of you.”

“But they also want change, more say in governmental activities . . .”

The rest of the conversation retreated to background noise when Titus spotted him. The man standing near the entrance was tall, wide-shoulders with dark skin, black hair tied in the back and piercing black eyes that seemed to miss nothing. He wore a plain white shirt and brown pants, similar to the uniforms of the ship’s crew. But he was no mere crew member. The man stood out by his size alone, but what grabbed Titus’s attention was the bright red dagger tattoo on his neck.

The man returned Titus’s stare with a wink and a smile.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Titus said to his mother.

“It can wait,” his dad said. “We’re almost done here.”

Titus fidgeted and whined, “But I have to go bad.”

Trisha glared at him, a typical expression whenever he embarrassed her. It happened a lot, and sometimes he did it on purpose.

“Very well,” Dad said with a sigh as he stood.

Titus leapt to his feet and said, “You don’t need to come with me. I know where it is.”

Without waiting for a response, Titus ran toward the entrance. He didn’t have to use the

sanitary. He wanted to get a closer look at the man with the tattoo.

As he rounded the last table, an explosion ripped through the restaurant and threw Titus to the floor. A searing heat tore into his back and the last thing he saw before total nothingness was a pair of shiny black boots.

Intense heat.

Screams of pain and terror.

Titus cried out, but when he breathed in, his lungs filled with a terrible smoke. His body convulsed with coughs and his back screamed with terrible pain. He could see nothing past rolling black smoke and hungry orange-yellow flames.

“Mom! Dad!” Titus tried to yell, but only a hoarse whisper escaped.

Strong arms lifted him up, but they were too big and bulky for his dad.

“Hang on, boy,” the tattooed man said. “I’m getting you out of here.”

Silence.

Not quite. A deep throbbing.

An engine?

Titus tried to open his eyes, but they felt coated with a thick, gooey grime. He moved to wipe it away when a soft voice said, “He’s awake.”

“Mom?” Titus tried to turn over, but a hand touched his shoulder and gently held him down.

“You need to stay still,” the light voice said. “Your back is burned pretty bad.”

That wasn’t his mom’s voice. He wiped the grime out of his eyes and opened them.

After several seconds of furious blinking to focus, he saw an angel kneeling in front of him. She had long, wavy brown hair, golden-brown skin and silvery-blue eyes full of kindness. Around her neck glimmered a gold oval locket with intricate carvings around a brilliant blue sapphire.

“Where's my mom?” he asked.

The woman touched Titus's cheek. “I'm sorry. She's not here.”

“My dad? My sister, Trisha?”

The woman looked away and Titus followed her gaze. The man who had carried him away kneeled next to the woman, his brow furrowed and his lips pursed.

“What's your name, boy?” he asked.

“Titus,” he whispered, his chin quivering. “Where are my parents and sister?”

The two exchanged glances and Titus knew. He closed his eyes and squeaked, “No. They can't be.”

The woman stood and sat on the bed. She carefully placed his head on her lap and stroked his hair.

“I'm sorry, Titus. So very sorry.”

Titus grabbed a handful of the woman's thick, brown skirt, hid his face and cried.

CHAPTER 2

The black dragon with bright green eyes towered over Titus. Acid saliva dripped down his jaw and plopped onto the ground, sizzling the grass with an acrid smoke.

Titus screamed and fled.

The dragon's footfalls followed, thunderous, and a loud belch followed.

A white-hot pain pounded into Titus's back.

His back arched and he screamed again—

Titus jerked awake with a yell. Heart pounding and back twinging he glanced around the darkened room. Where was he? In the dragon's belly?

No. It was only a nightmare. As he calmed down with deep breaths, a sliver of light underneath the door drew his attention. He tried to slide out of bed, but the pain in his back reminded him of what had happened. He choked back a sob, sat up and eased his feet to the floor.

Whispers on the other side of the door encouraged him to clench his teeth against the pain and stand up. He crept up to the doorway, uncertain his back could take the stress, but he made it. He pressed his ear against the door.

“Who do you think they were after?” a woman's voice asked.

“I don't know. There were a lot of important people aboard that ship, but the explosion did seem to originate from where the boy's family was sitting. They had quite the entourage with them, most well armed.”

“What do you want to do?”

“We should talk to the boy first.”

Footsteps approached, but before he could straighten, the door slid open. Titus fell forward into a pair of muscular arms.

“Easy, boy,” the man said as he steadied Titus.

Titus rubbed his eyes against the bright light. “Where am I?” he asked.

“You're on our ship, *Sentinel*. My name is Praetus and this is my wife, Katarine.”

Titus glanced from one to the other, uncertain what to do.

“Are you hungry?” Katarine asked.

Titus nodded.

She held out her hand and said, “Come. I'll fix you something.”

Titus took her hand and she led him out of the cabin. The ship, at least from what he could see, wasn't very big. On one end of the short corridor was a closed hatch with white lettering that read “Engine Room,” and in front sat the bridge. A blonde man faced the viewscreen showing the liquid, blue-white light of subspace.

They entered the first room to their left. A kitchen with one wall of cupboards and a metal counter. In the middle sat a rectangular metal table with six metal chairs around it.

Katarine sat Titus at the head of the table and she went to the fridge. With her hand on the fridge handle, she turned and asked, “What would you like?”

He shrugged and slouched into the chair. He jerked forward with a grimace as he was reminded yet again his back was not yet healed.

She smiled and said, “I'll fix you one of my favorites. Don't worry. It's very bad for you.”

Instead of returning her smile he tore his gaze away. Katarine's smile reminded him too much of his mother.

“Are they really dead?” he asked. “All of them?”

“I'm afraid so,” answered a deep voice.

Titus turned to see Praetus enter. He sat next to Titus and said, “I need to inquire you

about a few things. Are you up for it?"

"Praetus," Katarine said. "He should eat first."

He appeared to ignore her and awaited Titus's answer.

"Sure."

"Excellent. What's your name?"

"Titus Allegine."

Praetus looked at Katarine and Titus glanced from one to the other. He recognized that look. His parents did that when they wanted to communicate something he wasn't supposed to know.

"From where do you hail?"

"Brawantin."

"Your parents were Zeta and Laphanse Allegine?"

Titus swallowed. "Yes."

Praetus stood and said, "Thank you, Titus. I need nothing further for now."

He turned to leave when Titus said, "Who killed my family?"

Praetus turned back, but Katarine answered, "Don't fret, Titus." She placed a glass of bright-red yantas juice in front of him. "You're safe here."

Titus stared at the juice. He didn't care about that. He wanted to know who killed his parents and sister, and why.

Praetus set a hand underneath Titus's chin and forced him to look up. Titus returned Praetus's intense gaze, somehow knowing he should not look away.

"You'll be fine," Praetus said. He smiled and let go.

Titus wasn't sure what that meant, but he smiled back anyway.

Sitting in the copilot's seat Titus pointed to the blue lever on the brushed-silver console.

“And what does that do?”

Sitting beside him in the pilot's chair, Praetus said, “That controls the forward thrust of the sublight engines.”

Swiveling around to see how many times he could go around before getting dizzy, Titus said, “Will you teach me how to fly?”

“I regret not. We don't have the time.”

“Why?”

“You'll be home soon.”

Titus stopped spinning and tried to focus his wobbling eyes on Praetus.

“Home?”

“To Brawantin.”

Titus bit his lower lip and said, “I don't want to. I want to stay with you.”

Praetus smiled but said, “You belong to your family, Titus.”

“My family is dead.”

“But you have other family, aunts and uncles, don't you?”

He did, but he hardly knew them. They were like his parents, spending all their time playing politics. Being on board *Sentinel* was fun and interesting. And he liked Katarine and Praetus. They never shooed him away like his parents often did. Besides going home reminded him of how much he missed them and Trisha.

“But I want to be like you. I want to have a tattoo like yours.”

Praetus chuckled. “It takes ages of hard work to get a tattoo like mine.”

“Like what?”

“To become a Red Dagger, you train long and hard. You'll have to be an expert in flying all types of craft, spacefaring as well as atmospheric, train in multiple weapons and fighting techniques, and then pass rigorous mental and physical exams.”

“I can do that.”

“I bet you could,” Praetus said. “When you're older, perhaps. But right now your duty is to go home.”

Praetus's tone said nothing Titus could say would change his mind.

Titus jumped out of the chair and said, “I'm not going back home, and you can't make me.”

He ran out of the room and expected Praetus to either yell or chase after him. But only silence followed.

A second later, he entered their cabin and saw Katarine come out of the bathroom. She held her stomach and her face was pale.

“Are you sick?” he asked.

She waved a hand and said, “It's nothing, sweetie. I'll be fine.”

“Can I help?”

She sat on the couch with a sigh and said, “You could get me a glass of yantas juice.”

“Okay.”

He ran out of the room and bumped into Ritch, *Sentinel's* pilot. The short, thin man with yellow hair and green eyes grabbed Titus' shoulders and said, “Hey, boy. What's the haste?”

“Katarine's sick. She wants some yantas juice.”

Ritch urged him toward the kitchen saying, “Then go get it.”

Titus stared after Ritch. Why wasn't he more concerned about Katarine?

Realizing he was wasting time, he hurried to get the juice.

When he returned, Katarine lay asleep on the couch.

Even more worried, he walked over and set the glass down on the end table. As his mother often did when he was sick, he put a hand on her forehead. It was cool, so she didn't have a fever. He sat on the floor next to her. She slept soundly, not like when he was sick and tossed and turned all the time. He rested his cheek on the soft cushion and watched her. She was so pretty, but he especially loved her eyes. And she was probably the kindest person he ever knew second only to his mom – when she had time for him. He sighed and closed his eyes.

He simply had to find a way to stay.

Over the next three days, Titus tried everything to convince them to not take him back home. He finally quit when even Katarine lost her patience and yelled, "Enough, Titus! You're going home, no more fighting it."

When they exited subspace near Brawantin, Titus ran from the bridge and into his room. He sat on his bed with his knees to his chest and tried not to cry. He failed. He made no sound, but tears blinded him and fell down his cheeks onto his bare arms. The thought of leaving Praetus, *Sentinel*, and most especially Katarine, made his heart hurt.

His door opened and he turned his face to the wall. He could tell by the light footsteps it was Katarine. She sat next to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. He leaned into her with a sob.

"I know you don't want to leave, Titus," she said rubbing his arm. "Praetus and I will miss you, too, but you really must go home. Everyone belongs with their family."

"I want you to be my family," he choked out.

She sighed and hugged him close. He closed his eyes, snuggling into her softness and breathed in her sweet, flowery perfume.

After a few minutes, she let him go. "I want you to do something for me," she said.

"Okay."

"I want you to show us what a good boy you are. If you truly want to be like Praetus, you must understand the importance of duty, and right now your duty is to be with your people. Show them how good, decent and brave your parents and sister were by being that yourself. Do you understand?"

He sat up straight and said, "I understand."

She smiled and his heart felt like it could fly away. He would do anything to keep her smiling like that – even go home.

"Then I suggest you get ready," she said.

He jumped out of bed, and then threw his arms around Katarine's neck. "I love you," he whispered in her ear.

She hugged him back saying, "I love you, too, Titus."

When he let her go, he saw tears in her eyes. She stood and hurried out of his room.

After he washed the tears from his face, he joined the rest on the bridge. Brawantin, a bright, blue-green world with puffy white clouds floating above most of it filled the viewscreen. Three armed carriers blocked their way to the planet's surface. Titus's breath hitched, both in sadness at being home, and afraid of those carriers. They were black, silhouetted against the clouds, the only lights coming from the bridge. Like the dragon of his dreams only with a single yellow eye instead of two green ones. His back twitched with the memory, so he shook his head

to get rid of it. He glanced at Katarine standing to the side and remembered his promise. He took a deep breath and stood next to her.

"What is your purpose here?" a harsh voice on the link asked. Titus focused on the grizzled face of the ship's captain. His eyes were so sunken into his face, Titus couldn't determine the eye color. He was bald and pale. Even his lips seemed devoid of color.

From the pilot's seat, Praetus said, "We hold important information pertaining to the Royal Family. I must converse—"

"What sort of information?"

"It's sensitive and cannot be relayed over an open link."

"And how would you gain any kind of information about the Royal Family—"

"I was aboard the *Hyanth* when it blew, Captain. Now you will allow us to land immediately, and have the Family's representative waiting for us."

"And I, Captain, cannot take the chance you're the ones who sabotaged—"

Praetus stood, and Titus could tell by the way he leaned over the console he was furious.

"Hold tongue, Captain. We're Red Daggers, hired by one of your citizens, and are forbidden to deceive not only our clients, but those they work for or are accountable to. Now, an armed escort while we land is your decision and your representative is more than welcome to have his or her own armed personnel available. We will be landing on Brawantin and you will set up an immediate private audience with the person in charge." He paused. "Unless you prefer to argue our rights with The Red Dagger Elders."

The captain paled and said, "I'll get back to you with instructions."

The viewscreen went black, and Praetus sat back down with a grunt.

Titus fidgeted. He wanted to look brave, but sweat trickled down his neck and back. He

wiped his clammy hands on his pants. Katarine placed her arm around his shoulders and squeezed him close. He looked up, and she smiled at him. He grinned back, taking courage from her touch.

The captain returned to the screen and said, "I'm sending a shuttle for you to follow. Should you make any unusual moves—"

"*Sentinel* out."

Titus recognized the shuttle as similar to the one he and his family used to travel from their home to *Hyanth* since she was too large to land on the planet.

Ritch piloted as everyone else watched the shuttle lead to the planet's surface. About a half an hour later, the shuttle landed on the 100 meter square tarmac built in the center of the palace courtyard. *Sentinel* landed right in the center. As Ritch and Praetus shut everything down, a dozen palace guards surrounded them. Six soldier's spilled out of the lead shuttle to join them. Every one brandished rifles or pistols, but kept them pointed downward.

Praetus stood saying to Ritch, "Check all the systems and make sure *Sentinel* is ready to go at a moment's notice. Katarine and I will meet with Brawantin's leadership." To Titus, he said, "You'll remain here for now, and help Ritch if he needs it."

Titus nodded.

"Any idea how long you'll be?" Ritch asked.

"We'll call you in an hour. If you don't hear from us, however, take off without us, and let no one stop you. I have a feeling this place is on the cusp of something bad."

"Praetus," Katarine whispered when he passed her to exit the bridge, "If that's true, Titus's life—"

"That is why he's staying here until we can figure that out."

Titus stared at Praetus and began to shake all over again. It never occurred to him that whoever killed his parents might also want him dead.

Apparently seeing his fear, Praetus placed a large hand on Titus's shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Titus. Nothing bad will happen to you."

"What about you and Katarine?" he asked.

Praetus gave him an odd expression and Katarine said, "We'll be fine, Titus. We know how to defend ourselves."

Titus watched them leave the bridge, and when the hatch closed, he looked out the viewscreen. He watched them being led into the palace, a place he no longer considered his home, hoping and praying nothing bad would happen to either of them.

CHAPTER 2

"They're here, My Lady."

Othelia turned from the bay window overlooking the courtyard and said to Jerrie, her assistant, "Thank you. You may send them in."

The stout woman bowed and stepped out of the office. Othelia looked around. It used to be her younger brother, Laphanse's, office, and she couldn't bring herself as yet to call it her own. It still had all of his books, his desk, photos and personal memorabilia, mostly gifts from Lords of State and other world leaders. Yet she was the true foreigner in the room.

Losing Laphanse and his family was a huge blow, but becoming Queen was worse. She was in line for the throne before Laphanse, but she abdicated it when their parents died. She never wanted power and hated politics. Mathematics was her joy and passion. Less than a week after giving up the throne, she left Brawantin for Ipentha and took a position at an advanced physics company that researched and developed new engines and ship configurations for air, land and space. Few people knew – or cared – she was royalty. How she longed to be back there amongst her computers happily crunching numbers and testing her designs.

But what other choice did she have but to rule now? She never married, and had no children of her own.

She considered stepping down once again, but having their cousin, Narin, the only son of their father's brother, take over would be disastrous for Brawantin. He loved power and considered the people mere subjects instead of citizens.

She couldn't prove it, but she believed he was responsible for Laphanse's death. But Narin being the General of Brawantin's military made an impartial investigation into *Hyanth's* destruction near impossible.

"Your Highness?"

Thoughts scattered, Othelia focused on the couple standing at the threshold behind Jerrie. She tried a welcoming smile, but let it fall, knowing it looked more like a grimace.

Standing to the side, Jerrie said, "I present to you Red Daggers Praetus and Katarine Morgh." To the couple she said, "Mr. and Mrs. Morgh, Queen Othelia."

Othelia tried not to wince at her title. After a second's hesitation, she approached and extended her hand to Praetus. He took her hand in a surprising light grip and bowed low to kiss her ring. She couldn't help but be impressed he knew how to approach royalty. Katarine did as well, knowing to curtsy before kissing the ring. With that done, Othelia stepped back and indicated the two chairs in front of the desk.

"Please have a seat," she said.

They did so after Jerrie left and closed the door behind her. Othelia sat behind the desk and clasped her hands on top.

"Captain Ero explained to me you were aboard the *Hyanth* when it was destroyed. Tell me, exactly what happened?"

Praetus cleared his throat and then described where he was when the bomb went off and everything he saw.

Othelia felt light-headed. She had to swallow several times before she could speak.

"You're sure none of the Royal Family survived?"

The couple glanced at each other and Katarine leaned forward and whispered so quietly Othelia had to practically read her lips, "Is this room secure?"

That this room could be bugged never before occurred to her, but it would be something Narin would do.

She shook her head and mouthed, "No."

"I'm sorry, Highness," Katarine said, "The explosion was far to devastating and centered on where the family sat. None of them could have survived."

The gleam in Katarine's eyes indicated she wasn't telling the entire truth. Turning her gaze to Praetus, she found the same in his.

What could they be hiding?

Othelia stood and said, "I need some air. Please walk with me."

She led them in silence through the courtyard and into the back gardens. At the edge of the tall Erra trees with their thick, blood-red leaves and deep-red bark, she turned and ordered the two guards following them to wait here until they returned.

Gregory, her head of security since she abdicated the throne balked, but nodded, and said, "Just buzz your link if you need anything." Glaring at Praetus he added, "We'll be at your side in seconds."

Praetus seemed to understand the warning and gave a slight nod in response. Othelia couldn't explain why, but she felt safe with these two. She was willing to bet they were very good at what they did.

They reached the center where the flower garden opened up into a small meadow with a pond. A couple dozen Xarenths, one of Brawantin's native birds swam or sat on the edge. They all squawked in unison at the human intrusion.

That was fine by her. The more noise they made, the likelihood of anyone listening wouldn't hear what the Morghs had to say.

She stopped and said, "Tell me what you didn't want overheard."

"How close were you to the Royal Family?" Praetus asked.

Confused by the question, Othelia nonetheless answered, "Laphanse is – was my younger brother."

"That's not my question. How close were you to them? What sort of relationship did you share?"

"I never wanted any harm to come to them, if that's what you're asking, especially not the children. Nor do I appreciate the—"

"Please," Katarine interrupted, "We do not intend to insult you or accuse you of anything. It's just the information we have is extremely sensitive and if given to the wrong person will only cost more innocent lives."

Othelia sighed to calm herself and turned her gaze to the ground. "I never wanted to be Queen. I still don't. I knew even as a child that Laphanse would make a much better ruler. If I could walk away even now without endangering Brawantin's people, I would do so."

"You suspect the King and his family were killed as an attempted coup."

She lifted her gaze to Praetus, surprised her anger had yet to ebb. "I don't suspect it, Mr. Morgh. I know it. I just can't prove it."

"Who do you think is responsible?" he asked.

"Forgive me, but I don't know you. I cannot risk revealing anything that may put my life at risk. Especially since I have no proof."

"You think your own life is in danger?" Katarine asked.

Othelia thought about it. "No, at least not as long as I remain here. The palace guards are hand-picked. They go through a rigorous vetting process that can take over a year. They are a completely separate entity from our military and answer to no one but the King or Queen. I have the utmost confidence in their loyalty to the crown, regardless of who wears it. I believe that's

why Laphanse was killed on the *Hyanth* and not here."

"Your Highness—"

She held up a hand and said, "No more questions. Just tell me why you're here and why it's so important you don't want to reveal it to even Laphanse's closest relative."

Katarine said, "One person did survive, Your Highness."

Othelia stared. "What?" she managed to choke out a few seconds later. "Who?"

"Titus."

Othelia's knees almost gave way. She walked three steps over to a blue-marbled bench and sat down.

Titus lived! She was both elated and terribly saddened. That poor child, losing his entire family in a single flash of heat and flame. How alone and grieved he must be. But mixed in with all of that was a sense of relief. She didn't have to be Queen only to relinquish it when she died to the one man who didn't deserve it. All she needed to do now was be the Royal Steward until Titus's nineteenth birthday. If she remembered right, that was only ten years away.

Othelia wiped her cheeks and asked, "How did Titus survive?"

"He was headed right for me when the bomb went off," Praetus said. "His back was burned, and the shock wave threw him right to my feet, knocking him out. I picked him up and ran to my ship docked nearby. We barely made minimum safe distance before the entire ship blew. But don't worry, he's completely healed now. He has a few burn scars, but they aren't severe enough to handicap him."

"Where is he?"

"Aboard the *Sentinel* with my pilot," Praetus said.

"What were you doing there? We don't normally hire Red Daggers."

"One of your Lords hired me as a personal bodyguard for the trip."

"Who? And why would he feel it necessary to hire outside security?"

Praetus pursed his lips as if uncertain to answer.

"Never mind," she said with a wave. "With everyone aboard but Titus and yourselves gone, it doesn't matter."

He smiled as if relieved.

Othelia wiped her face again thinking she probably looked terrible, but nothing could be done about that now.

"I'd like to see him," she said as she stood.

"We could take you to our ship," Katarine said as she stood, "or we can bring him to you."

"Bring him back to Laphanse's – my office. The guards will escort you."

Katarine smiled and said, "Will do."

The walk back was made in silence and Othelia took that time to think about Titus. She always liked him, but he was precocious and fiercely independent. How good of a king he would make, she couldn't begin to guess. Then again, she had years to figure that out. She only hoped she would be a good influence on him. She would also be his parent from this moment forward, and that made her anxious.

When they reached the edge of the garden, she told the two guards waiting for them to escort the couple back to their ship.