

CHAPTER 1

MIRROR, MIRROR

Whatever is yours --- we want it.

--Hadrian of Tsoros, High Chancellor of the Homeworld Alliance

Thin, gossamer light, but no less substantial than chain, the manacles seemed to float on his wrists.

The glitter of a signet ring in fine gold came from from one finger. They had allowed him to keep it. Small comfort, but meaningful. When one has apparently lost all, any reminder of happier days is beyond price.

Flanked by two prison guards, Col Adrian walked resolutely from the warden's office, through corridors of sparsely placed security personnel. All eyes on him, they were nonetheless careful not to stare as his party gained the open air.

Dead man walking. Again. Well, not quite dead yet...

In the near distance, slow and mute as bullocks, the other captives in this highly secured prison moon that circled Altair made their maddeningly routine circles in the exercise yard. There, alone as always, walked the one man with whom the Captain had developed any association in this daunting place. And alone of all the others gathered in the yard in pursuit of hopeless health – he was Sephid.

Col had never learned how one of the Storm World's own had come to the prison moon.

Soon demoralized and without care, the Commander had strenuously resisted all attempts at contact by his fellow inmates. It had taken weeks to steel himself to look at anyone, until the one day when the closest thing to rough dispute had erupted.

Another of the incarcerated, in his attempts to pick a fight with the dour, ever silent newcomer had instead found himself face to face with a tall, very muscular warrior with dark glowing skin, shining black locks and deeply furrowed brow ridge. The Sephid had firmly removed the inmate's calloused hands from Col's throat, then carefully twisted them until, writhing in agony, the attacker had withdrawn. The man from Sephis had turned away, to melt in among the others gathered to witness what they hoped would be a bloody but welcome diversion.

But not before he had held Col's gaze long in his.

No words had passed between them. That had come later as the tall rescuer came to check on the newest addition to their sorry ranks. It was only much later that the Captain would learn how very much this small, determined often-wordless company would come to mean to the one growing ever more distraught, ever more vulnerable to despair.

No one was meant to interact with any prisoner being moved to or from the

facility.

So it was with some surprise that Col saw his cell block mate suddenly approach the group without warning and stop the man in shackles.

The tall warrior had time to softly utter two words before the guards threw themselves upon the speaker. Struck repeatedly with their electric prods, the Captain's sole ally in this world, it seemed, was soon unconscious and savagely dragged away.

Col instinctively moved forward, but his progress was swiftly halted by the ever-diligent guards.

"Stand down, Captain Adrian. Not your affair."

"He's a friend."

"You have no friends here. Did he speak to you?"

Col thought hard, although his face did not betray it.

"No," he replied. "As you said – I have no friends here."

"Let's go. You don't want to be late, do you?"

Col watched as the limp body of his block mate was removed from the shuttle bay, then turned to his wardens.

"Never. Especially not to my own hanging."

The guards watched and waited on the shuttle bay as the young co-pilot inside the ship gave a peremptory nod to the prisoner, and led him aboard. But the pilot looked up and grinned in welcome as their cargo shifted toward his seat.

"Hallo, Patterson. So I've got you again," said Col.

"It seems so, Commander. What is this, the third time, in this month alone? You know what they say – three times a charm."

Dark grey eyes flashed in reply. "At any rate, it's the fourth, if memory serves."

"You're a real favorite with me, sir," said Patterson, as he finalised his liftoff, leaving the shuttle bay and the gaunt grim walls of the prison receding fast below them.

Col observed their departure, noticing by rote the careless retro firing and that their trajectory had been less than perfectly attained.

Old habits.

"I'm getting real fond of you, too," he murmured, instead. "Are people beginning to talk? And what about you?" Col added provocatively, leaning so closely and so suddenly near to the desperately nervous co-pilot, that the fellow nearly lost his seat.

The poor lad pulled back; he was just in training on this short trip between Altair and her prison moon, and utterly unprepared for this kind of response from a prisoner. But instead of withdrawing, the shackled man's face drew even closer to his.

Too close. The clean-shaven jaw was still prominent after months of prison repasts. The dark hair still fell forward, and Col's eyes now flashed cool grey as the young guard, more alarmed than ever at the bizarre intimacy of the question, struggled to keep his composure.

Patterson's ribald laughter was no help.

"But we're not supposed to talk with the prisoners," the trainee stammered. Patterson only laughed more heartily.

"What's he going to do? Report us?"

Col sat back in his seat. "Never mind, darlin'. I don't fancy being the one who's tied up, anyway."

So it was that for the fourth time in the last month, he settled into his customary seat in the shuttle, eyes drawn to the horizon, where the edge of Altair slowly crept into view. And for the four thousandth and fourth time, he regarded his shackles – light, smooth and deceptively slight. Regarded the shuttle interior, with its scanty armour, minimal weaponry.

How to do it? There's always a way. Always. In four months I should have found a way to get out of this damned place.

You would have, came the soft little voice in his head. Time and countless repetition had not dulled the acid sarcasm. Most definitely you would have. If you had been someone else.

I don't need to be this hard on myself.

This was in his own defense, yet the thought gave him little comfort.

Yes, came the little voice again. Don't be. You've got the entire Altairan government to do that for you, now, don't you? After all, you brought down an empire.

I did what was needed.

Really? demanded the soft little voice, more sharply than before.

Shut up, soft little voice.

~

"Dr. Weller."

Sitting at ease behind his spacious desk in the darkened suite, Stephen Weller looked up from his digipad.

With his dark hair falling across his forehead, it was with cool, reflective grey eyes that he regarded the younger man who shifted restlessly on the couch across the room.

His patient.

To any unfamiliar to them, seeing them like this, together in the same room,

the two men might have been near kin, so alike were they. It was only one of the reasons the Commander had been selected in the Government's efforts to finally address the issue of Dyle Carzon and his work at the Base. The same clean jaw lines, the same flashing eyes and penetrating gaze.

But in the man at the desk, that gaze was more penetrating still, underlining some dark emotion. And the cold silver that streaked his dark hair and the lines on his face hinted at something substantially more incarnate than simply greater age.

"Yes, Captain?"

Unable to keep still, Col Adrian abruptly sat completely upright, and ran long, nervous fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"What do you remember then, Col?"

The captive rose slowly to his feet. It was with measured steps that he walked to the high windows in the behaviourist's office and paused there. The security grids just outside the portal shone here, as they did at every window at Altair Base, and their soft light played over the tall man standing there, seemingly strong and fit.

But face of the one at the window was pale. Beads of perspiration marked the high forehead and his eyes darted from room to window and beyond, almost unmindful of the Base's limitless periphery of jungle spreading in tangled richness far below.

Weller saw it all with grim satisfaction; the young man's altered composure, the rare but certain signs of self-doubt and precariously maintained control. It was all as he had wished, and the scientist fastened upon it greedily. The patient was there by warrant. His memories, or lack of them, at the center of a still active enquiry, were a tenure of the State. And in this critical and highly unusual case, the use of psychoactive and conditioning medications had been held in virtual check, for excellent reasons. Whatever ease these interviews might bestow was a matter of utmost indifference to the Government, and to very nearly the System's finest behavioural modifier, who now noted how quickly Col first strove, then recovered his control.

And his eyes never left Col Adrian.

Weller was used to his subjects' attempts to disguise their true emotions. Their subterfuges were as varied and creative as their motives in concealing the truth. Many had tried their hand at such illusion; none had succeeded. Yet it did not surprise Weller that the gaze of the man at the window was once more as cool and as direct as his own. And when Col spoke, his voice while plaintive, was once more strong, if not openly defiant.

"Why are you asking me this? Again? How many times do I have to say this?"

"Answer the question."

The Captain moved slowly from the window to the shelves of carved wood

adorning the far wall of Dr. Weller's suite. There, softly lit and meticulously displayed, were the collected artefacts prized by this most unusual of scientists, a man whose eager mind plumbed the mysteries of vanished races, whose tastes sought out the rarest of ancient relics.

Priceless, lustrous in their antiquity, as lustrous as the wood that held them. And as Col spoke, his fingers touched and played over them. Here, a relic from the Antarean moons. There, a funeral urn from a lost era of Altair itself, and finally, a rare *engwa* figure from Sephis.

Weller did not hinder him, and Col held the ancient thing, tenderly turning the finely carved totem over and over in his hands as he tried once more to remember, to provide what would finally satisfy his inquisitor. As if seeking an answer that had yet defied him, he studied the gracefully arched brows of the figure, the high forehead, the thin circlet, marvelously worked in stone, holding back the wisps of hair. The large, wide lips of the stone image were pursed, as if about to utter some wondrous secret, still vital but now lost in millennia past.

"The building was in flames."

"Was that before or after the People made their attack on Carzon's laboratory?"

"After. *No*. Before. During Teng's final pass with the Phantom, the ship's guns had hit the main power modules. Each of the floors, every one of them, started to explode. One by one, they began to collapse. I was on the ground, some distance from the building as it finally came down. I don't know how I got there. One of the People must have pulled me there, away..."

"From Carzon's fortress."

"Yes. From Carzon's fortress."

"And the morph?"

It was a now shaking hand that rose to Col's brow. It was now shaking fingers that rubbed the temples, as if to prompt the memory itself, somehow recover what was lost. Weller took it all in, silently weighing the silence, avidly evaluating what could only be real distress. And he had already made his decision before the Commander spoke, in tones so low that the scientist exerted his utmost attention to hear clearly.

"She never left the She didn't...She's gone. Gerda Tau is ..."

Unable to continue, he stopped and turned his head to one side, away from the penetrating gaze of the man at the desk.

Weller counted to a slow ten. Then he closed his digipad. "Come here, Commander."

With flushed face and his breath coming quick and hard, the agitated man came forward, to sit numbly in the chair directly before the desk. The behaviourist regarded him in silence. Then he finally leaned forward, reaching across to touch the Captain's

hand.

“Look at me.”

Adrian raised reddened eyes to his opponent’s bright gaze. Weller did not release Col’s hand; his words were calm and precise.

“She is dead, then. I’m content that you’ve told us all you know.”

As if on a signal, the guards stationed outside the suite entered, and Col rose to take his place in the muster. But as they moved to the door, Dr. Weller called out, and Col turned to face him, his tormentor and liberator.

“I am sorry for the loss,” said the behaviourist.

Col studied his inquisitor for a long moment, an enigmatic look in the grey eyes.

“Whose loss are you sorry for, Weller? Mine? Or yours?”

And once more passive, silent and most carefully attended, he left the room.

Once more he passed through corridors as familiar as the sides of one’s own coffin. And as he finally entered the highly secured temporary quarters, to await his inevitable return to the prison moon, his mind was on two things only.

The events that had just passed.

And two words, spoken just hours ago by one brave enough to risk all. Two words that had changed everything.

They had been in Sefhid – a language Col alone could have understood. And he pondered them, repeating them over and over, until they became a mantra that fed wonder, a litany that conjured providence, as staggering as it was utterly unforeseen.

Be ready.

Beware.