

HAMMERSPACE

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PROLOGUE

LEGACY

With a resounding roar and from deep within caliginous grey storm clouds scudding low over the field, heat lightning snaked downward, shedding a rain of brilliant, deadly white sparks as the bolt struck the highest spires of the broken towers.

The explosive thunderclap sent a flock of raptors into panic-driven flight. With leathery wings flapping and strident rasping calls, they careened upward from the ruins, madly circling the clearing. Then, the greater part of the *palú* flock sped deeper into the North Jungle.

Only two remained – a mated pair, whose recent nest in the twisted mass of metal and stone overcame their instinct to flee. Returning to the tortured structure, they perched anxiously. The topmost towers of the fortress, rising blackened and rusted from the scene of battle, still glowed red with the charge as the heavy forest air grew heavier with the scent of ozone and charred metal.

A peace unallied to any kind of safety descended. The tiny reptiles nervously preened, peering out and downward upon a scene of carnage.

One hundred meters below the nest, stunt-winged snakes and myriad coloured lizards sunned themselves, spreading blue-tipped claws across the tumbled stones, now covered with tendrils of livid green vines and moss.

Flecked with saplings, it was a field that stretched for leagues. A small city might fit here, with room enough to spread. In the distance, the massive trees still ringed the devastated land, ardent yet unable to fill the open space with new progeny. Soaring and timeless, they stood in mute but monumental witness to the work of rain, diligent soils and tireless jungle heat. In open defiance of the field of death, clusters of vivid yellow flowers overspread the ground in bright abandon, weaving a vibrant patchwork of stark intensity. Their bright hues threw the rough stone remnants and heat-split boulders into an incredible and unexpected panorama of shadow and light.

The ion field of Sepsis never sleeps.

Hugging the planet in chaotic embrace, the skies sparkled magically above the counterfeit meadow. Spurred by the planet's unpredictable magnetic and ionic fields,

lightning again coiled across the narrow window of open sky as the clouds, churning faster before the real storm, built and concentrated the charge. In a fragile equilibrium of destruction and creation, the field edge skirted the lower stratosphere, flaming brilliantly before collapsing into ribbons of iridescence, glowing with magenta, silver and neon blue.

Reaping the benefits of the rare open heights above, another flock of *palú*, these smallest and most prolific of the Storm World's raptors, rose again screaming from the trees, spiraling through the air in tumultuous dance. In ravenous flight, their raucous cries and beating wings drove the humming denizens of the middle airs before them, reveling in the bright, rarely seen glow of Sephis' sun.

It was not merely hunger that drove the small winged lizards up toward the towering trees.

As rain finally splashed down, through the floating rainbows of warring light and vapour, the *palock* hide shod boots of 'Khem Azur stepped out onto the springing turf.

Tall, visored in a lightly silvered helmet, his richly woven talar swung just above the stunted, busy grasses and masses of flaunting gold. Five Out Worlders – cloaked, and silent – followed their Commander. Halting as the tall figure paused, they waited attentively when he raised a gloved hand. One hung back to one side, respectfully awaiting a word, a small parcel clutched in the lightly gloved hands. Beside him, his squad leader – taller and broader in temerity as well as mien – moved forward, to take his place at the side of their Commander.

“How many?”

“Nearly three hundred dead, Lord Azur,” replied Pell'n. The Commander's long time Lieutenant surveyed the expanse of the place of death: the broken stones, the coarse rubble so darkly strewn, a scattered tale of fierce and bloody battle laid out across the richness of the living grass.

“And the Master?” asked Azur.

“None can say, Lord. Not truly. But the fate of Dyle Carzon can easily be assumed. Survival is not among the possible options.”

Pulling his cloak gracefully to one side, 'Khem Azur knelt, fingering the scorched stones, crystalised in the fiery heat from the guns.

“You saw this,” came his low prompt.

His Lieutenant pointed toward one of the tallest of the trees, a massive giant whose lacy green fingers reached skyward nearly two hundred meters.

“I was there, in my shuttle, Sire,” he said, then nodded toward the one with the parcel. “And Losh himself was with Carzon only hours before, in the citadel itself. The fortress fell before the ship. In just two passes. The People do not lie when they deem him their finest – Teng, son of Akai.”

Azur tossed the stone back down to its leafy grave. “The People do not lie.

Let me see it again.”

Pell'n turned to Losh and motioned for the parcel in his ensign's hand.

“Bring it, Losh,” he said.

Swift and tireless with the restless fullness of youth, Losh strode forward. Long had he served as the Lieutenant's favoured ensign, nearly all his short life. Strong and lithe, he regarded Pell'n; time and service brought cunning to all who served Azur. The older officer's body bore the scars of his long tenure. There were other scars, from other wounds. No one knew Pell'n as he did, not even Lord Azur. Few trusted him less.

Azur removed his gloves; the long fingers were wine-dark, smooth, the slight webs between the shapely digits barely noticeable. Carefully, as if still unsure of an unaccustomed freedom, he removed the light helmet. A face as finely chiseled as the hands, the brows arching, with cheekbones high, the skin glowing like richly burnished leather. And the eyes large, golden-hued, beaming with intelligence. He breathed deeply, savouring the scent of the field of ruin, admiring the work of leaf and vine and rich jungle loam.

The jungles of Sephis do swift work. All this. In just a few short months. Then he took the bundle and untied the cord. Exposed to the pitiless sunlight, the cloth within was finely woven, silken but stained and torn. Azur's bright eyes studied it again, as he had studied it when Pell'n had first shown it to him, months before.

“His allies in the Homeworlds would pay dearly for this. You are certain it is his?” came the soft voice again.

Pell'n hesitated before he replied. His own memory of that night, deafening, bloody, and chaotic was still keen, still fresh in the alien's mind.

“Before I fled with the shuttle, Commander, I myself saw Carzon. But that was early on, before the People had breached the fortress walls. Our fate was sealed. We were overcome; never before have I witnessed such savagery, such fierce courage. The People fought as demons, as if famished for blood. And then the Phantom came from the cover of the ion storm. The devastation was complete. What the People's small weapons did not destroy, the Phantom's guns did. No living man could have survived this. And Carzon was a fool, to have let himself be trapped so. In my *estimation*, Sire,” he added quickly, seeing the look in Azur's golden eyes.

But the tall leader glanced away, to the edge of the glades pushing their young growth exuberantly into the field.

“Someday, your *estimation* may prove your undoing, Pell'n. Obsessive, yes. Unfathomable, without question. Dyle Carzon was many things. But he was never a fool. And the creature?”

“The People themselves mourn. The Colony is still full of it.” Khem Azur smiled, but not from pleasure. He carefully returned the bloodied shirt to its thin

shroud, knelt again, and rose. In his hands, its heat-crazed surface diamond-like in the sun -- an Out Worlder's helmet. Below it, exhumed from the soft loam, lay the strewn relics of the soldier's skull. White in the dappling sunlight, the empty cranium's jagged edges were etched and worn by the jungle's indifferent teeth and remorseless tears.

He laid the helmet back in its sooty grave. And, as though loathe to leave the rich abundance at his feet, his hands, like polished carnelian, dipped again and rose once more; this time cupped and filled with fragile, silken fragrance. He himself rose, now, and his hands parted, scattering the pungent, honeyed petals over the dark, secretive stones.

"The benediction of green, Pell'n. The richest absolution. New life comes," he said. "In what form shall we see it next?"

His Lieutenant once more surveyed the field of battle -- it was little more than an islet, still carrion-fed. But now: vital, burgeoning and swelling amidst the giant trees. "A fitting grave, Lord Azur," he replied.

At this, his Lord grew pensive. It was growing late. While their presence here was clandestine, it was still perilous. Their landing had been amongst the easiest yet. Yet not flawless; there were repairs to make, all-important tidings to appraise. They would leave this place now.

The sinking sun cast a simple pearly light over the glade. But despite its plain, truthful glow, there were still shadows here. Questions. Not merely the reminders of one night, filled with death, and its irresistible, unending conflict with the needs of life. He motioned to his men; his own helmet, silvery, confining, and defining turned in his hands.

"Have you ever wondered?" he mused. "How it is that the dreams of men and their actions so rarely coincide? I have. And now, I wonder -- where is Col Adrian?"

