

## *Prologue*

The wails of the dying joined with the triumphant shouts of the city's defenders and the *Whump!* *Whump!* of war catapults in a chorus of horror and madness.

A piercing screech penetrated the secret room. Thurle crouched and clasped his ears. He had seen firsthand the savagery of the *Charakai* attack; had endured the terrified screams of the Bikashi soldiers as the bird-reptiles feasted on their still living flesh. When his master had signaled the retreat, he had been almost giddy with relief.

"This battle is lost," Sequana had acknowledged as his lieutenants urged their steeds to haste, "but the war will go on."

The Pharlaxian leader had charged Thurle with bringing the Sword to him. It was an honor Thurle considered well deserved. After all, wasn't it he who had revealed the plans for the city defenses that had almost led to their victory—*would* have led to victory if it hadn't been for the Earthling female? The one named Hickory Lace, who had used her dark magic to call the *Charakai* down upon them. *Balor curse her name*. The memory of the trust his leader had placed in him fortified Thurle and he thrust his fears aside.

A few days before he had defected to the rebels, Thurle had scouted the maze of tunnels leading under the mountain and into the Temple of Balor and he was confident he had taken the correct turns. He examined the rock facing him. He found four faint hollows in the otherwise smooth face, placed his fingers in the holes, and pushed. The rock wall swung gently away from him, and a shaft of light greeted him from the other side. Thurle peered through the crack. Seeing no one, he slipped inside.

He had come to the temple many times, and normally there were supplicants and priests aplenty, but not today. The priests were on the city ramparts, encouraging the city militia to greater efforts, distributing amulets and giving blessings and absolution to the troops.

The perpetual fire sitting on the altar flickered red, sending shadows dancing across the four faces of Balor that had been sculpted from the mountainside and formed one of the temple's walls. Thurle's heartbeat slowed at the sight of his God. He was, after all, about Balor's business.

Quickly, the naur padded over to the grotto where the legendary heroine Connat-sèra-Haagar was immortalized in stone. The statue held a double-edged sword aloft while the dead and dying enemy lay before her in various postures of terror.

The weapon glittered metallically in the light from the fire pit. Thurle took a dagger from his belt and tried to prise the Sword from the statue's hand but to no avail. Drawing his longsword, he slashed at the statue's fingers. His blade clanged and ricocheted, sending spasms of pain along his arm. Thurle was horrified. Sequana had assured him that stealing the Sword was a command from Balor, but this felt like a desecration. He mumbled a prayer, *forgive me Balor*, and brought his weapon down with all his might.

The statue's arm shattered and the heroine's sword clattered on the floor of the temple amidst a cloud of dust. He wrapped the relic tightly in his cloak, making sure not to touch the blade. Lifting it reverently, he bowed to the mutilated image, then hurriedly retraced his steps and left the temple.

## Chapter 1: The Hinterlands

“What the hell are you doing?” Jess Parker gripped the top of the pilot’s seat and shouted into Saurab’s ear. ‘I thought you knew how to fly this antique piece of scrap iron.’

The spaceship bucked and swooped in the grip of the magnetic storm raging in the ionosphere. The blinding red and green flashes of the flickering aurora struck the hull and surrounded the jet with the eerie luminescence of St. Elmo’s fire.

“Jess, for God’s sake strap yourself in.” Hickory Lace fought to stay in her seat and clipped on her cross belts. “You don’t want to go home with an injury before we even get started. You promised Mack he could have some bonding time alone with the kids, remember?” The howling screech of the storm battering the hull almost drowned out her voice.

“I know, Hick, but these two space-jockeys will kill us if they keep going like this and Mack won’t be pleased about that, either.” Her head jerked forward as the ship hit a pocket of air and almost stalled. She glared at the pilot.

The third passenger caught her shoulder and forced her back to her seat. “Don’t antagonize him, Mother. You know Saurab. He’s just as likely to crash-land this crate to spite you.”

Jess pushed back into her seat, buckled her belt and groaned theatrically. She raised her eyes to the heavens. “Hick, why did we have to bring Gareth along? He’s such a boy.”

The jet shuddered violently and Gareth’s teeth rattled. “More to the point, Mother, why did you persuade the Admiral to sign up two Dark Sun smugglers for this mission in the first place? If we get out of this alive, Mack is going to hear about it.”

The pilot turned his head and grinned. “Save your grievances for someone who cares, Earthman, and do as your commander says. The *Shahrazad* has survived worse than this before now. Why not sit back and enjoy the ride—let the professionals worry about flying? After all, that’s what we’re being paid for, right?” He laughed and turned back.

The jet hit an air pocket and lost height rapidly and then an updraft hoisted it skyward again. Hickory felt her gorge rise.

“Hold tight,” said Jakah from the co-pilot’s seat. “Saurab flies the *Shahrazad* like he fights. He’ll get us down safely.”

A memory of the diminutive Dark Sun single-handedly taking on three opponents flashed into Hickory's mind. Saurab had skipped and rolled, avoiding his opponents' swords and disarmed them in the process. He had sent them running with a prick at their buttocks and a wild laugh. *I'm not so sure being a member of a gang of space smugglers is the best qualification for flying a spaceship safely through a storm.*

The ship pitched violently one last time. Saurab brought it under control and swept through a break in the clouds into the lower atmosphere. Instantly, the ship righted itself and the howling ceased. The *Shahrazad* glided smoothly to the surface. Saurab engaged landing thrusters and settled on the ground with a gentle, almost soundless, bump.

Hickory let out a long breath and checked her crew. All five had gone through the Maquillage program before setting out on the mission. As a result, their body metabolism and respiratory systems were now in harmony with the Prosperine environment and climate. Their physical appearance had also been transformed. Body and facial hair had been removed except for their eyebrows and a strip on their skull, styled like a mohawk in the Avanauri fashion. Their skin had been impregnated with a screening agent, without which the intense radiation from Prosperine's sun would kill them in a few days. Pupils were enlarged and altered to bright blue and, in Hickory and Jess's case, their eyebrows and cheeks were emphasized to simulate those of an Avanauri female. Perhaps the most striking changes were around their eyes and neck. Hickory and Jess's skin had speckled purple markings that encompassed their eyes and then followed the curvature of their cheekbones, fading to a point at their earlobes. The men had black pigmentation around their eyes.

She shook her head disbelievingly. What was it between Jess and Gareth that they took every opportunity to have a go at each other? *The weird thing is in a real emergency they would give their lives for each other.* She knew their behavior was an act to disguise what they meant to each other. Jess was thirty years older than the boy and she did treat him like a mother at times, much to Gareth's chagrin.

Saurab's eyes crinkled. "Well, we got here all right. Prosperine—in the middle of nowhere, just like the Admiral ordered." His fingers flew over the holo-screen, and the engines cut out in a long whine. He unbuckled his belt and flicked the switch to open the cabin door.

The three passengers disembarked and moved to the rear of the vehicle. "Okay, open the cargo door," shouted Hickory, signaling to the pilot. The massive door lowered to the ground and the Hickory walked up the ramp. "Jess, Gareth—switch on your SIM and set it to Avanauri."

The SIM was a two-way speech and transmission chip in the audio center of their brains that translated foreign speech into English and vice versa. They were implanted during Alien Corps training. The translation process was so fast, it was as though they heard the foreign words in English. The reverse was similar—they thought in English and the SIM translated it into Avanauri, then sent the appropriate phonetic vibrations to her vocal folds. Hearing themselves speak a different language, one they understood without having to think about it, took a bit of getting used to. But the SIM and the Maquillage were essential to be able to operate under cover in alien environments.

“Let’s get these supplies unloaded quick-time,” Hickory said, motioning to Gareth and Jess to follow her.

Jess took off her jacket and tossed it on the ground. Her shirt was damp with sweat. “Okay, commander, and then I want to have a few words with our smuggler friends. Where did they learn to fly, anyway?”

“They don’t have your benefit of Agency training, but at least we got here in one piece,” said Hickory. At the same time, she wondered at her father’s choice of associates for this mission. Yes, it had started out as Jess’s idea, but the Admiral had jumped on the suggestion. Normally, the Agency would arrest any smugglers they bumped into, especially members of the Dark Suns who had a reputation for violence in pursuit of their chosen profession.

It was too warm and she had too much on her mind to worry about that now. It was the middle of the day; the air shimmered and the sand burned beneath her feet. At all points of the compass, she saw mountains. Those to the north looked closer, but Hickory knew this was an illusion. The mountains of Erlach were the mightiest on the planet. Some of their peaks were cloaked in perpetual ice and stood over four miles tall. In comparison, the crags of Western Avanaux were but molehills. According to her map, Saurab had landed the ship about twenty miles from the border.

Jess dumped a backpack beside Hickory and said, “That’s the last of it. A pity we couldn’t bring Titus along. These packs are pretty heavy.”

Hickory had a brief mental picture of the yarrak and smiled. Twice the size of a fully-grown Clydesdale, the animal was the favored choice of transport for the native Avanauri. Its massive body was pale pink in color and crossed by gray undulating stripes, and it stood on two huge front limbs and two shorter back ones. A small head at the end of a long sinuous neck contained

disproportionately large eyes and a huge quivering proboscis. The creature was more intelligent than a dog and just as friendly, but Titus would have been terrified in the confines of the spaceship. “We’ll have to make do with our backs unless we can track down some of his wild cousins.”

Gareth approached with Jakah and Saurab at either side. All three were arguing fiercely.

“Is that the way they teach you to fly in the Dark Suns, eh? You guys are straight out of the Keystone Cops,” said Gareth.

A dark flush crept over the smaller Saurab’s face. The reference to the silent movie characters meant nothing to him, but he knew when Gareth was insulting him.