

THE
BROTHERHOOD
OF
SWORDS

(The Pentarchy of Solarian: Book #2)

W.D.WORTH

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BRIGANTIA



RAVEL



REQUIEM

ON THE ARMORED road lay silver and gold,
That ever shall tempt the hearts of the bold,
But the bright flush of desire, like the Devil's pyre,
Lasts only so long as the life-bound fire,

Yet the warriors' code even time cannot dim,
Its flag is red and its message grim,
From the Mountains of Fear to the grassy sward,
Ride the Brotherhood of the Sword,

From rocky shore to southern sand,
From the raging seas to the wrecks on land,
Upon blooded fields the soldiers have roared,
Bound by the Brotherhood of the Sword,

Forged by honor and of one accord,
Forever stands...the Brotherhood of the Sword.

(From the Tomb of the Pentarch)

PROLOGUE: The D'ia Mor

(219th Cycle of Post-Cloister)

THE GARDAI FLEET *Corvette, Trojan*, materialized in sync with its covey of supply vessels just beyond the gravitational pull of Kol Bara—a Earth-class planet in the Rudd sector used by both the Gardai and Guild as a distribution hub. The bridge crew suffered through the mandatory few seconds of leap-shift dizziness, only to find the gigantic bulk of the battleship *Owen* filling their screen.

“This can’t be good,” Edwin Croll, Oberon of the *Trojan*, muttered beneath his breath. He had hoped for a few turns of R&R to break the monotony of continuous duty for the past moon—not only for him but for his crew.

Not bloody likely.

The presence of the supply commander’s flagship at this isolated outpost meant something was up. As the junior oberon of his squadron, whatever that ‘something’ was would likely fall to him.

Sure enough, the grizzled face of Squadron Leader Jan Flynt now glared at him from the screen. Croll blinked and steadied himself, still struggling with his nausea.

“You’re to repair on board the *Owen* at 18:00 hours, Oberon...and that means sober. Report directly to Commander Argus.”

Croll stifled a groan. Senior Oberon Flynt’s voice was worse than the grating of two files. And he wasn’t done yet.

“No shore leave for the crew until we know what the commander wants,” Flynt ordered, and his bushy eyebrows drooped even lower. He looked and acted like a bulldog at the best of times, but now it appeared he wanted to bite someone. “I know you, Croll. You’re planning on wetting your cock. But if you’re even a second late, your ass is mine.”

The face dissolved and the screen returned to the clutter of a crowded port anchorage. The sight of a Grimman-Seth *Ness Hai Dragon* floating off to his right did little to lighten Croll’s mood. *Fucking egg-suckers. What else can go wrong?*

The Battle of Hurin—which had ended the Great War and seen the ultimate defeat of the Grimman-Seth—was now one hundred and seventy-nine cycles in the past. Every time he came in contact with the bird kind he remembered how many had died on that deadly turn. Among them had been several ancestors from House Croll. The bitterness still rankled, for the wingless bastards were now equal partners in the Confederation of Four.

All that blood and death for nothing.

He couldn’t help noticing the glum faces of his bridge crew as he motioned for his first officer to follow him into his ready room.

Gavin Dax was a native of Faerwyn-Joss, the Earth-twin. Though Croll had been with his first command less than three moons, he had quickly discovered Dax was a jewel in the rough, a seasoned veteran who was both willing and able to assume much of the load associated with running a warship's complement of a hundred.

"Well, Gav...you heard." Dax merely nodded, his weathered face twisted in a grimace and his thick shoulders tight as iron. He was pissed. He had every reason to be, but following unpopular orders was part of the Gardai way. "It's a shitty deal, but I won't be junior forever...and it means we're exempt from off-loading the convoy."

The attempt to lighten the mood fell woefully short, but Croll went ahead anyway. "I'm going planet-side for a while. I've no idea what's coming down, but it probably means immediate redeployment. Let the crew know I'll make it up to them, somehow." He was about to turn away but had another thought. "Have my coxswain lay out my number ones. I'll be back well before 18:00."

As Croll headed for his shuttle, he felt the envious eyes on his back. He was dancing a thin, wobbly line. A ship's oberon could not befriend his crewmen, but he must have their respect. Though it was within his discretion as the ship's commander, traipsing planet side while his men were stuck onboard was a trifle selfish. Still, if he didn't relieve himself he would be like a bear caught in a briar patch...and the crew would be worse off for it.

It was only a five minute trip to the spaceport. He landed his shuttle in the Gardai zone and flagged down surface transport into Port Leven. He knew the capital well enough, having served on the regular supply run to Kol Bara since his promotion. His squadron

normally docked here every two weeks for a forty-eight-hour furlough, but the past moon had been hectic, with not a single pause.

The *phaeton* dropped him in Jamul Varsi, the seedier side of the city. The area was thick with inns, taverns, and most important to him at the moment—flesh palaces. There were so many that most of the squadron had nicknamed the zone Slutville.

He was still wearing his working uniform with its prominent badges of rank. A disruptor pistol hung in plain sight on his hip, but he kept his eyes open. Many of the Gardai had been mugged on these rough streets, even during the light of midturn. All but a handful had been lucky enough to awaken hours later in some shadowed alley, naked and coinless and unknowing of how they'd gotten that way.

Flashing lights laid a winking rainbow carpet beneath his feet. Honking *phaetons* flashed by on the street, and both *flitters* and *skimmers* in the skies above produced an unending conundrum of sound. A witch's brew of malodorous stenchs competed with tantalizing scents from the food stalls scattered along the boardwalk. *All we need is some fucking rain to muddy this picture.* Croll ignored his rumbling stomach. A much more important part of his anatomy had priority.

He recognized the sign when he came to it: a glaring red neon-rose on a black background, with dancing pink letters that spelled 'The Fallen Flowers'. He groaned at the play-on-words. *Fallen flowers of a certainty.*

The building was three stories but seemed squalid and squat among the towering monstrosities hemming it in. Whatever paint

had once graced its walls had long since flaked off to reveal dull gray stone scarred and weathered by time, along with the stains from whatever noxious elements the city had rained down.

He made his way to the entrance only to confront a giant wearing a disruptor and a long blade; the burnished steel glimmered wetly in the fading light. The Mannish grunted and shifted his feet, peering down at Croll with his hands hovering above his weapons. His wide, deformed face slipped into a smile that was more a sneer.

“So...you’re back again, are ya? That tiny cock o’ yours must be half worn off by now, Croll.”

“Step aside, Bim,” Croll commanded, undaunted by the monster’s size or his mouth. “You know the drill.”

Bim grunted again but moved as bidden, and Croll slipped inside.

He paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimness, and his ears picked out the soft strains of music, dimmed as though far off. The rose-tinted lamps strung along the hall glowed like half-lidded cats’ eyes as he made his way toward the sound.

The passage opened onto a cathedral-like room dominated by crystal chandeliers radiating just enough light to see. In a corner to his left, a half-drunken troubadour lazily plucked a zith—a 12-stringed instrument slightly bigger than a mandolin. Croll had heard sweeter sounds from a cat getting its balls chopped off.

A spiral stairway wide enough for three men abreast twisted upward and disappeared into the gloom. The carpets throughout were scarlet, as were the chandeliers’ bulbs. Pink flowers and green shrubs festooned the wall panels, making it appear he had entered a

garden. The fruits of the garden lay scattered about the room in various sultry poses. Croll was interested in none of them.

His sharp eyes spotted a tall, broad-shouldered man straining the seams of a cream suit at the far end of the room. He was leaning against an ornately carved bar of ancient oak. Shipped from Earth itself, or so the rumor went. Croll had no idea if it was true. Knowing Mazur Spink, he doubted it. All the Mannish were lying, thieving bastards.

The landlord's back was toward him as he sipped his drink, yet his beady eyes followed Croll in the enormous mirror lining the entire back wall. He spun around suddenly, and a gummy smile lit his pudgy face. "Ed, my boy! You're scarce as dinosaur shit, by krikey!"

Croll matched his smile and they shook hands. Time was tight, so he got right to it. "I need something special, Maz...none of the worn-out wretches slumming behind me."

Spink nodded his shaggy head, not at all put out by the thinly veiled insult.

"I don't suppose Rosie is free?" Croll suggested hopefully.

Spink smoothed his lapels and shook his head. "Poor Rosie. She took sick and we're not sure she'll pull through."

"Whore's disease?"

"Aye...a nasty case."

Croll waited for a further explanation, which never came. Impatience goaded him. "And being a cheap bastard, you won't pay the Genetic Engineers to fix her." He had finally struck a chord. Gold-flecked gray eyes flashed a warning.

"It's my coin, Croll. I spend it how I please."

“I’m the same, Maz, so I’ll not waste mine on anyone less than Rosie.”

The silence stretched taut as the two men stared each other down. There were only a few paying customers on the scene—on the ground floor, at least. But it was early yet. The place wouldn’t swing for another few hours.

The owner’s shoulders relaxed first and he signaled the bartender. “A glass of our best for the oberon,” he ordered, friendly and businesslike once more. “I’ve just the thing to please, Ed. Got her hidden upstairs. She’s new, all the way from Reamur in the Grimman-Seth sector.”

“Never heard of it,” Croll said, eyeing the stairway. *The fucking stairway to heaven. I wonder how many feet have trampled their way up that hill to sample the fallen angels in this hellhole.*

“Not surprised.” Spink slid a full glass along the bar. “The egg-suckers conquered it long ago and enslaved all those they didn’t kill. This beauty stayed alive, at least.”

Croll picked up his drink. The scent of the liquid seared his nose before he got the first sip down. *Kola Red—the drain seepage that passed for whiskey in Port Leven.* “How special is this so-called beauty...and how much?”

Spink’s granite jaw sported a neatly trimmed Van Dyke, and he thrust it forward. “She’ll cost ya a hundredweight o’ gold, or two hundred silver,” he blurted.

Croll choked and some of his drink sprayed over his uniform. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“I told ya, this one’s special...and fresh. They don’t come no fresher, if ya know what I mean.” Spink’s thick lips parted to reveal

gold-tipped teeth. Upon his right hand was a platinum ring with an embedded Emerald Radian, worth at least as much as the woman he had just priced.

Croll set his empty glass on the bar, exaggerating the movement to give him time to think. *A virgin, then. But a hundred gold?* He had the coin. Far more if need be. His parents were rich merchants well placed in the Guild, and he was now the sole heir to their fortune. Eagerness warred with good sense, yet time was ticking. There were plenty of other places he could go, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't run into more snags. He decided on the instant.

"All right...if she bleeds, I'll pay you. If not..." he patted his disruptor, "...I'll burn you with this for lying and wasting my time."

Spink smirked. "I reckon I know which pistol you'll be usin', right enough. Let's go."

He led the way upstairs and Croll followed. The man's plump buttocks wobbled a hand's breadth from his nose and he tried not to puke. Spink was not particular about his hygiene. They passed the second floor and continued to the third. The heavyset bar owner was wheezing through his mouth by the time they came to the last room and stepped inside.

The girl lay stretched out on the bed, bound hand and foot, with a wad of cloth stuffed in her mouth. She wasn't quite naked. A loincloth covered her mount but left her long legs bare. Large, firm breasts rose and fell in rapid breaths that outlined the taut muscles of her belly and ribcage. *Eighteen cycles if he had to guess.*

Her eyes were the dark green of a swath of wildwood and wide with fear as she watched them, yet it was the heady scent filling the

room that took Croll's breath and made him instantly hard. His mouth gaped in shock and Spink chuckled.

"They exude the smell through their sweat. The Grimman-Seth call it the Musk of Attar, or so the warlord who sold her to me explained. Only a handful of Reamurian women have the talent. As you've already noticed, it's rather stimulating." Spink reached up to wipe his brow. "I almost succumbed to it myself, but that would've cost me the first time price."

Croll barely listened. The girl's skin was flawless rose-pink from head to toe, and slick with sweat from her struggles to get free. Her long hair was undulating waves of platinum, as glistening as the metal. He was enraptured. "She speaks Common?"

Spink shrugged. "No idea. From the moment I first got the bitch, all I've heard are screams and curses in some heathen tongue. That's why I gagged her."

Croll leaned down until his face hovered above the girl's. He spoke slowly, enunciating each word. "I'll remove the gag. If you scream and carry on, I'll put it back...but tighter." He yanked the cloth from her mouth.

Her eyes now watched him with a mix of anger and fear, but there was intelligence there. He could *feel* it, and the hidden sense had never steered him wrong. Her magnificent chest expanded as she took deep breaths and ran a pink tongue over dry lips. But she remained silent. That told him she had understood.

"Give me some time alone with her, Maz." He held up his hand as he saw the landlord was about to argue. "I want to get a few things straight before we conclude the deal, that's all. Not long enough to tamper with your merchandise."

Spink stared at him for a few seconds, then reluctantly nodded and left. But there were no echoing footsteps after the door closed.

A pitcher of water and a tray with glasses rested on a table against the wall. Croll filled a glass and raised the girl's head, allowing her to sup her fill. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. "I know nothing of your past; nothing of your birth or the things you've done so far in your life. Yet I sense you're intelligent and aware of what is happening here now. Spink swears you're a virgin and plans to sell you to me for the night. Whether or not you are is unimportant to me. The evil grunt is as slippery as they come, but even *he* doesn't realize your true value. Neither do you I'm betting, so I'll make this onetime offer."

He tapped the gold-plated diamond insignia on his uniform collar. "I am Edwin Croll, Oberon of the *Trojan*, a fleet *Corvette* sworn to protect the Confederation of Four. My word is good, for I live by it. My family has wealth and power in Brigantia, our capital. If you please me tonight, I'll take you there and place you in charge of my home. My duties will keep me away much of the time, so you'll be alone to do as you please—to a certain extent. It's not exactly freedom. You'll be my indentured servant so to speak, and my house guards will closely watch you at first to prevent your escape. Yet your life will be better than it was on Reamur, and infinitely better than here. You must choose now, for I have little time to spare."

She continued to stare at him with eyes as bright and green as the power stone on Spink's finger. He could sense she was seriously considering his offer. He hardened his voice but kept it low, struggling to remain cool-headed. The effect of her scent was

intense. "I will have you tonight regardless. As soon as I'm done, he'll take you. Then an unending series of men will follow until you're a mere husk of the proud woman I see before me now."

She flinched, but her voice came as sultry and soft as her skin. "I will speak to you, warrior...but only if you release my bonds."

He drew his blade and slashed the ropes binding her hands and feet, stepping back to wait as she slowly sat up and faced him. The movement was deliberately sensuous, and she did not take her eyes from his. He chewed on his lip, aware he was holding his breath.

"I am Rynine Tamaris, and in my veins flows the royal blood of Reamur. I *am* a virgin, as you will discover soon enough. You are young and not bad looking as Earthers go. If this must be my first time, I suppose I could do worse. I will agree to your proposal, but only if you swear it in blood."

"In blood?"

"Use your blade to make a shallow cut on my palm, and then yours. Our blood will mingle and become the same. You will then swear to uphold your vow."

Croll gaped at her but made no move.

"Why do you hesitate?"

"I'm reluctant to mar such perfection."

Her full lips slowly twisted to a smile. She uncoiled like a cat coming to wakefulness and stood. Even barefoot, her eyes were level with his as she held out her hand. "Do it."

He performed the simple ritual and swore the oath. Then he could wait no longer. He gripped her buttocks and pulled her tight against him, all but devouring her mouth. She did not resist; nor

did she respond. As he pulled back, he saw her regarding him with one eyebrow raised.”

“Why such haste, Oberon? When you open a fine bottle of wine, do you swill it in one gulp? Or do you savor it, sipping slowly so you may enjoy every nuance of flavor and aroma? So it is with lovemaking. You must start slow and build to a climax...often many climaxes. That way, the act will be memorable.

The movement of her lips and the glint of white teeth behind them were too inviting. He kissed her again, though less ardently than before. This time she answered him, joining her probing tongue with his until he finally pulled back, frowning.

“How does a virgin know so much about pleasuring?

She offered him a taunting smile. “The elder women schooled me well, describing in significant detail what would happen on the most important night of my life. They also showed me how to comport myself, and I learned by watching them in the act. I know many interesting things, though I have tried none of them as yet.”

His frown left him and he pulled her close, thanking all the old gods that few egg-suckers took their pleasure from human women. “We shall, my beauty. We’ll both learn how to please each other. It’ll be a game between us, a contest to see who does it better.”

She raised her forefinger to his lips and slowly traced his smile. “I am already the victor, my warrior. You just don’t know it yet.”

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