

[PDF] Speed Of Darkness (StarCraft #3)

Tracy Hickman - pdf download free book



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Description:

About the Author Tracy Hickman specializes in fantasy novels. His first publication with Margaret Weis was the Dragonlance Chronicles. Since that time he has jointly authored over forty book titles, and 18 bestsellers. Tracy's first two solo novels, Requiem of Stars and The Immortals were published in the spring of 1996.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1: Downfall

Golden...

That was his word for it, that rare, perfect day that warms the soul with a golden glow of joy. There was peace in a golden day.

Some days were gray, hung with leaden clouds and rain punctuated by brilliant flashes of burning white and rolling thunder. Other days were a vibrant cold blue arching over the frost-encrusted domes and sheds of the settlement. Some days were even red -- the evening sky painted by the dust in the spring winds before the crops had gotten their own hold on the soil. Some days even extended into the night with a velvety cobalt blanket across the sky.

He liked those autumn nights when he could leave his world behind by staring up into that rich darkness. God had put pinpricks in the dome of the night, he imagined, so that His light could shine through. As a child he had searched the stars, hoping to see through to the other side and catch some glimpse of this Creator. He had never stopped looking, even though he had reached his nineteenth birthday and had thought himself too mature for such things.

Each day held different colors for him. He had experienced them in all their hues. Each held a memory and a place in his heart. Yet none in his experience could compare to a golden day. It was the color of the wheat fields that rolled like waves across the low hills stretching out from his father's homestead. Golden was the warmth of the sun on his face. Golden was the glow he felt within him.

Golden was the color of her hair and the sound of her voice.

"You're dreaming again, Ardo," she whispered playfully. "Come back to me. You are much too far away!"

He opened his eyes. She was golden.

"Melani, I'm right here." Ardo smiled.

"No, you aren't." She pouted -- a formidable weapon in getting her way. "You're off dreaming again and you've left me behind."

He rolled onto his side, propping his head up on one elbow so that he could get a better look at her. She was just a year younger than he. Her family had arrived back when Ardo was nine years old, another group in a long line of religious refugees that fell from the sky to join with other Saints in Helaman Township.

Refugee survivors had been gathering from nearly all the planets of the Confederacy back then -- reluctant pioneers of the stars. Many devout religious groups had been among the first to be outlawed by the United Powers League on Earth back in '31. It was not a new story to Saints and Martyrs. Throughout humanity's history, those who did not understand the faithful had driven them from place to place and home to home. That they should be driven from planet to planet, then star to star, was beginning to sound painfully repetitious in their Heritage classes. Now, exiles once more, families of the faithful were scattered among the ill-fated transports of the ATLAS project, and when that mission ended in such cataclysmic failure, those families who survived searched desperately for their brothers and sisters. When communication was finally established between worlds, the Patriarchs chose an outlying region on a world they called Bountiful for their new home. Soon, Orbital Dropships were landing at the Zarahemla Starport daily. The newly arrived families would then make their way to the outlying settlements as best they could. Arthur and Ketil Bradlaw, with their wide-eyed daughter, were one of five families that arrived that day. Ardo had joined his father

as the entire township came out to welcome the new families and get them settled.

Ardo could not remember much about Melani then, although he had been vaguely aware of the stick of a girl who seemed awkward, lonely, and shy. He first took real notice of her when her fourteenth year brought some rather remarkable changes. The "stick girl" seemed to burst into his awareness like a butterfly unfolding from its chrysalis. Her features held a natural beauty -- body painting and makeup were frowned upon by the Patriarchs of the township -- and it had been Ardo's great good fortune to have been the first to approach her. His heart and soul fell into her large, luminescent blue eyes.

The nimbus of her long, shining hair played softly in the warm breeze drifting over the wheat fields. The wind carried the distant hum of the mill and the faint scent of the bread at the bakery.

Golden.

"I may be off dreaming, but I'll never leave you behind," he said to her, smiling. The wheat rustled about the blanket where they lay. "Tell me where you want to go. I'll take you there!"

"Right now?" Her laugh was sunshine. "In your dreams?"

"Sure!" Ardo pulled himself up to kneel on the heavy blanket he had spread out for them. "Anywhere in the stars!"

"I can't go anywhere." She smiled. "I have a test in Sister Johnson's Hydroponics class this afternoon! Besides," she said more earnestly. "Why would I want to go anywhere else at all? Everything I want is right here."

Golden. Who could ever leave on such a golden day?

"Then let's not go anywhere," he said eagerly. "Let's stay here...and get married."

"Married?" She looked at him, half bemused and half questioning. "I told you, I have Hydroponics class this afternoon."

"No, I mean it." Ardo had been working himself up for this for some time. "I've graduated, and things are working out really well on Dad's agraplots. He said he was thinking of giving me forty acres at the far end of the homestead. It's the sweetest place, right up near the base of the canyon. There's a spot there next to the river where...where...Melani?"

The girl with the golden hair did not hear him. She sat up, her blue eyes squinting toward the township. "The siren, Ardo!"

Then he heard it, too. The distant wail, rising and falling across the fields.

Ardo shook his head. "They always sound it at noon..."

"But it *isn't* noon, Ardo."

The sun was eclipsed in that instant. Ardo leaped up, wheeling around toward the darkened sky. His mouth fell open as the lengthening shadow surged across the yellowed fields of wheat. Ardo's eyes went wide with the rush of fear. Adrenaline roared into his veins.

Enormous plumes of smoke trailed behind fireballs roaring directly toward him from the western end of the broad valley. Ardo quickly reached down and pulled Melani to her feet. His mind raced. They had to run, find shelter...But where could they go? Melani screamed, and he realized that there was nowhere to go and no place safe to hide.

The fireballs seemed so close that both of them ducked. The flames arched over them, the thunderous sound of their fury quickly drowning the distant warning siren. The shadow of their wake covered the entire valley. Five enormous columns crossed overhead, their fingers reaching over Ardo and Melani toward the clustered buildings of Helaman Township. Then the fireballs wheeled as one, lifted over the township, and descended in roiling flames into Segard Yohansen's instantly ruined fields, about a mile past the center of Helaman.

Ardo shook -- whether from fear or excitement he could not tell -- but at least his stupor had ended. He clasped Melani's arm and began pulling at her. "Come on! We've got to get into the town before they shut the gates! Come on!"

She needed no further urging.

They ran.

He could not remember how they got into town.

The golden day had turned a muddy brown fading to gray from the smoke that still coated the sky overhead. It was an oppressive color, slate and cold. It seemed so out of place here.

"We've got to find my Uncle Dez," he heard himself say. "He has a shop in the compound! Come on! Come on!"

Ardo and Melani struggled to move through the center of the township, now crowded with refugees. Helaman originally had been nothing but an outpost in the far reaches of Bountiful. Its town center was the original fortress compound with the defensive wall encompassing the main buildings. Since then, the town had grown well beyond those central walls. Now more than ten thousand people called Helaman their home -- and nearly all of them had poured into the safety of the old fortress compound.

He could just see the sign "Dez Hardwarez" across the packed central square.

The rattle of automatic weapons clattered suddenly from the perimeter wall. Two dull explosive thuds resounded, followed by even more chattering machine guns.

A cry arose from the crowd in the square. Ardo felt more than heard the fear in the seething mob. Shouts rang out, some strident and others calming. The smoke overhead cast an oppressive veil over the surging mob.

"Please, Ardo!" Melani said, "I...Where do we go? What do we do?"

Ardo glanced around. He could taste the panic in the air.

"We just need to get across the square," he choked out, then, seeing the look in her eyes. "We've done it hundreds of times."

"But, Ardo -- "

"It isn't any farther than it was before. Just a little more crowded, that's all." Ardo looked at the tears welling up in those beautiful blue eyes. He squeezed her hand tightly. "Don't worry. I'll be right here with you."

Somehow, they were halfway across the square when it came.

A sheet of flame erupted beyond the fortress's outer wall. Its crimson light flashed against the blanket of smoke that hung oppressively over the town. The blood-red hue electrified the panicked crowd in the square. Screams, shouts, and cries all tumbled into a cacophony of sound, but several disembodied voices penetrated Ardo's thoughts clearly.

"Where are the Confederacy forces? Where are the Marines?"

"Don't argue with me! Get the children! Stay together!"

"It can't be the Zerg! They couldn't have penetrated so far into the Confederacy..."

Zerg? Ardo had heard rumors about them. Nightmares, so he thought, to scare children or keep outsiders from settling in the Outer Colonies. He could not remember all the whispered tales, but the nightmare was here now, and very real.

Another voice penetrated his thoughts. He turned toward her.

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