

Treasure of Light



KATHLEEN M. O'NEAL

KATHLEEN M. O'NEAL'S
magnificent DAW Science Fiction trilogy:

THE POWERS OF LIGHT

AN ABYSS OF LIGHT (#1)

TREASURE OF LIGHT (#2)

REDEMPTION OF LIGHT (#3)

(available Spring 1991)

TREASUR**E**
OF
LIGH**T**

KATHLEEN M. O'NEAL

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DEDICATION

To Julie and Lloyd Schott of Lakewood, Colorado.

For your infinite patience and your unending
warmth and kindness.

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Lastly, to the reader who finds that events, names, numbers, and often dialogue in this trilogy ring with a frightening echo of recent history, I admit my belief that in remembrance lies redemption.

**THE BOOK OF THE CAVE
OF TREASURES
First Century, A.D.
Old Earth Standard.
Fragment found on
Orillas VII, 4411**

These mysteries and this narrative were handed down even to our fathers, who welcomed them with joy and who passed them on to us. And these books of the hidden mysteries were placed in the Mountain of Victories to the east of our country of Seir, in a grotto: The Cave of Treasures of the Life of the Silence.

Listen that I may reveal to you the prodigious mystery concerning the great king who must come into the world.

The land and the heavens will wear mourning for his violent death and, from the depth, he will mount up on High. Then he will be seen coming with the army of the Light, for he is the Child of the Word that engenders all things.

So then my people, you who are the Seed of Life issuing from the Treasury of Light and of the Spirit, who have been sown in the soil of fire and of water, you must be on your guard and watch.

For you will know beforehand of the coming of the great king for whom the captives are waiting to be freed.

PROLOGUE

One hour before the end of An Abyss of Light.

The white com box buzzed.

Magistrate Slothen grimaced at it, looking up impatiently from the mass of reports scattered over his desk. His office spread in a fifty foot square around him. The room had a high arching ceiling and lavender walls. Holographs of a variety of galactic solar systems hung at his eye level, seven feet over the floor. His round white desk sat before the broad expanse of windows that gazed out over Naas, the capital city of Palaia Station—the center of galactic government.

He shuffled the sheets on his cluttered desk. Over fifteen thousand complaints of increasing pirate activity and floundering trade had already poured in, each planet raging about inadequate protection by the government. Gamants were to blame. A primitive human cultural group, they formed an infinitesimal part of his jurisdiction, yet caused fully fifty percent of the problems. Their rebellion sparked across the galaxy. He had no choice but to deploy his forces to suppress the increasing violence—but that left peaceful planets open to attacks from raiders. At this moment, starvation ravaged quadrant seven.

Slothen ignored the com and heaved a perturbed sigh. He'd given his secretary strict orders not to disturb him. No doubt Topew would have realized his error by now and be sheepishly preparing for the verbal lashing he knew awaited him when Slothen had the time.

"Gamants," he muttered tonelessly.

Slothen had often wondered if it wouldn't have been better to have wiped out the group millennium ago. He'd done that with the Viveka when he'd first become ruling Magistrate and had never regretted it. A wild and brutal species of crimson-skinned, four-armed ruffians, they'd threatened war against his government. He'd had no choice. Or perhaps he should have enslaved Gamants? That had worked remarkably well with the amorphous gelatinlike Octopii of Huron II. But, no. Instead, he underestimated the ingenuity of Gamants and waited too long, until they'd formed themselves into a formidable fighting force, stolen ships and weapons and fought their way out of his neatly bordered system to land on remote, hostile planets at the edges of the galaxy. The worst of the lot had coalesced into a strong Underground movement that waged a constant guerrilla war against his forces.

"I've been lenient for too long," he huffed, slapping his open palm on his desk.

As for the rest of humanity, he'd implemented a stringent process of information control and blackout, keeping them from discovering his efforts. Most of the human planets remained peacefully oblivious to the plight of Gamant civilization. Those few who knew of his efforts agreed with them. After centuries of careful manipulation, many human worlds possessed a rabid hatred for their brethren Gamants, blaming them for everything from Galactic financial instability to mysterious disease outbreaks. Humans were such irrational creatures—their emotions careened like ancient roller coasters. But with the right devices, they could be controlled.

His only major worry came from his own military. One entire branch of his forces was composed of superb human-commanded ships. He couldn't keep the information from his own officers—so he instituted a clandestine "scare" program designed to make them too frightened to commit treason. He'd isolated them from other galactic species—leaving only humans on those ships—and l

immediately and publicly corrected the brains of any deviants who developed traitorous ideas.

The com buzzed again.

Slothen contemplatively followed the machinations of his tri-brains, halting the flood of violent irritation that ravaged his mind. Eons ago, Giclasians had developed a third hemisphere from the proto-basis of what humans called the corpus callosum. That third brain served him now as a separate identity, a highly sophisticated interpreter which could trace every neural pathway in his left and right hemispheres to locate and study the origins of each fragment of mental stimulation. He'd actually initiated neurophysiological investigations to see if the human corpus callosum was capable of growing into a third brain, hoping he could stop Gamant aggressiveness by civilizing the beasts—but so far the results had been inconclusive.

He pressed the response button. "Topew, I told you I didn't want to be disturbed."

"I apologize, Magistrate, but this is urgent. Colonel Garold Silbersay, the former military governor of the Gamant planet Kayan is here, sir. He demands to speak with you."

Slothen bared his needle-sharp teeth in irritation. "Didn't I order Brent Bogomil to get him to the neurophysiology correction center?"

"Yes, sir, you did. But he's here, in my outer office, slamming his fists into the walls like a madman."

Slothen caressed his blue chin. Madman? The last message he'd received had reported Silbersay on the verge of violent schizophrenia. Bogomil said it had taken five guards to drag the colonel to a secure cell and lock him in. Had he gone over the edge in isolation? Possible. Should he risk seeing Silbersay? The man *had* been on the front lines of the skirmishes on Kayan. He might possess critical information about Gamant politics.

Slothen bit his lower lip and gazed out the window. The mirrored buildings of Naas sprouted like spears from the grassy plains of Palaia Station. The original terraqueous architects had done a superb job recreating the painstakingly ordered environment of Giclas IV, his home world. Thyphen trees marked each street intersection, their bare crimson limbs like streaks of blood against the green background of parks and fountains. Today, the yellow skies gleamed like transparent amber.

"Sir!" Topew's imploring voice came over com again. "Colonel Silbersay is shouting obscenities at my staff. He claims he has confidential information critical to galactic security. Shall I send him to the brig or call security to have him removed?"

Slothen twined the twelve fingers of his upper left hand and squeezed tightly—a sign of nervousness in one of his race. "Have two armed security officers escort him down the hall and wait outside my office door. I want no incidents."

"Yes, sir."

In the interim, Slothen pulled out his drawer and checked his image in the 3-D mirror. His physical appearance frequently upset humans. They weren't accustomed to the brilliant colors of Giclasian life. Behind his back he knew they called him the "Squid." *Idiots*. He'd seen pictures of Earth squids and it took a vivid stretch of imagination to compare them to Giclasians. He lifted his chin at the mirror. His balloon-shaped head gleamed like polished azure in the sunlight streaming through the window, accenting his wormlike hair and round ruby-red mouth. He tucked four of his limbs beneath the desk, leaving only two visible.

In a few moments, the door snicked back and Silbersay stormed in, fists clenched tightly at his sides. "Magistrate," he said stiffly, "I come to you on a matter of urgent diplomatic business." He looked older, his hair totally gray now. Against the lavender background, it shone like a wealth of silver threads. Tall for a human, he had a pug nose and black bushy brows that formed a solid line across his forehead. His purple uniform looked dreadful, as if he'd slept in it.

"I'm so glad to see you again, Colonel," Slothen said and smiled. Humans thought that Giclasian

speech had a stiff, mechanical quality. He deliberately tried to counter that by imitating human tones—
—Silbersay's eyes slitted. "~~Don't patronize me. You ordered my mind corrected specifically so~~
you'd never have to worry about me again! Well, you've got something else—"

"That's not true, Garold." He mimicked an expression he knew humans took for injured dignity. "Captain Bogomil reported that you were suffering intense emotional pain over the Kayan episode. I merely wanted to ease your torment."

"Ease it? By destroying critical personality centers in my brain? I thought that sort of treatment was only for dissidents who disrupted galactic harmony. *But me, Magistrate?*" Silbersay put his hands on his hips and paced across the purple carpet, stopping and starting erratically like a windup toy with a faulty spring. "What's happened to us? Are dirty dealing and murder so fundamental now that your administration can't function without them?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Garold," Slothen responded quietly.

"Stop it! I've been on the front lines, I *know the* sort of insane politics you've been playing. First you assassinate Zadok Calas, then—"

"We did *not* assassinate Calas." The elderly Gamant leader had been a curious sort, stubborn beyond reason, flamboyant in his own brusque way. "Intelligence reported a disgruntled Gamant fanatic ended Zadok's life. We had nothing to do with it."

Suspicion still lit the depths of Silbersay's dark eyes. He kept forebodingly silent.

"I don't order murders, Garold," Slothen lied. "I thought you knew that. Tell me what other falsehoods are circulating about me among my top staff members. I know the past year has been difficult. What else is bothering you?"

"What else?" Silbersay mumbled in a low savage voice. His gaze darted over the floor as though searching for something he'd lost. The collar of his purple uniform had darkened with perspiration. "*What else?*" He squeezed his eyes closed a moment and Slothen could see his jaw tremble. "*damned* fool question if ever I heard one."

Slothen sucked in a breath. Gently motioning to a chair, he repeated, "Sit, Garold. Tell me what's been going on out there."

He cataloged Silbersay as the man tiredly dropped into the formfitting chair. Dark rings of fatigue shone beneath the colonel's eyes; they made his alabaster face seem even paler. Slothen thought about that. Silbersay must have escaped Bogomil's grasp, which meant he'd undoubtedly hired illegal transportation and that implied criminal associations. Had he also hired assassins? Covertly, Slothen's gaze slid to the huge windows behind him. No ships marred the lemon skies of Palaia, but unease crept up his spine. The penalty for military personnel associating with enemies of the Union of Solar Systems was death. And Silbersay knew it better than anyone. Slothen casually reached beneath his desk to press a button which would signal the guards in the corridor to be on full alert.

"Are you all right, Garold? You don't look well."

"I'm not well, Magistrate."

"Are you upset about my relieving you of your command on Kayan? It was nothing personal, I assure you."

Silbersay tugged nervously at the fingers in his lap, not looking up. "You killed thousands needlessly."

The scorch attack. Yes, Slothen vaguely remembered the details. "They were destroying government military installations. You lost—how many men? Over a thousand, wasn't it? Gaman broke the treaty first. We took what action seemed necessary to defuse a potentially explosive situation."

"Well, you've done it now," Silbersay hissed, and when he lifted his head, his eyes flared

insanely, nostrils quivering. Slothen tensed. “You didn’t listen to me and now you’re in for it. You’ve unleashed the dragon. You’re on the verge of another full-scale Gamant revolt.”

“I don’t think so, Garold. We’ve thoroughly contained every outburst so far.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Slothen said and extended two of his arms to cover the reports on his desk which confirmed the opposite. “Besides, Garold, their new leader is a seven-year-old. I hardly think he’ll be a threat, at least not for a few years. In the interim, I’m sure we can effectively manipulate him.”

Still, one could never tell. Slothen wrung two of his hands nervously. The last Gamant Revolt, led by the old war-horse, Zadok Calas, had shredded the Union. Perhaps the boy had the same suicidal instincts.

Silbersay shifted suddenly, glaring like a man on the verge of violence.

Slothen extended a blue hand and made a desist motion with it. “Garold, please, calm down. I wasn’t disputing your word. If I receive information supporting your theory, I guarantee I’ll deal with the situation immediately.”

“Deal with it? *Deal with it!*” The colonel waved both arms wildly. “You mean you’ll—you’ll send the battle cruisers in to turn their planets into molten slag. That’s what you call *dealing* with it?”

“It stops the problems on individual planets and sets examples by which other Gamant worlds can judge how far to push us.”

A twitch jerked Silbersay’s left cheek. “You don’t understand. None of you do. You’re not human. You’ve no idea what fires the souls of primitive peoples. They’re afraid all the time. They live on the edge of survival. All you have to do to turn the tide of violence is make some concessions. Give back some territory, send them some food or medical supplies. In no time they’ll return to herding their goats and tending their miserable crops. *You mustn’t push them!*” He shoved suddenly out of his chair. “*They go crazy when you push!*”

“You needn’t shout, Garold. I—I’m listening. Truly, I am,” Slothen assured gently, finger poised over the button that would bring the guards rushing through the door. He vacillated. He could simply have Silbersay dragged down to the neuro center and find out most of this information—but perhaps not the most significant details. High level human officers had developed skilled methods of blocking data extraction in recent years. His biologists had yet to discover how.

“Please, Garold, sit down and tell me precisely where you see the problems in our handling of Gamant affairs. We certainly don’t want another full-scale revolt on our hands. I respect your opinion. You know that. You’ve been one of my most valued advisers for thirty years.”

Silbersay tilted his head and tears filled his eyes. Pathetically, he protested, “But you relieved me of my duties. You killed my planet.”

“Yes, I’m sorry I had to do that, Garold. I—”

“*It was that damned Mashiah on Horeb.*”

The subject shifted so suddenly, it took Slothen’s third brain a moment to reorient his thoughts. The Mashiah? Oh, yes. Adom Kemar Tartarus, the presumed savior of Gamant civilization. “What about Tartarus, Garold?”

“He caused it all. He sent emissaries to convert the Gamants on Kayan. After hearing about his new God, they went wild. They threw themselves at my men in wave after wave, using primitive weapons against our pulse cannons. And there were so many.” He stared forlornly at the floor for some time, trembling hands clasped together, as though in prayer. The silence stretched so long that Slothen fidgeted.

“Garold? ... Garold?”

Silbersay whispered in a strained voice, “How could *anyone* believe some lunatic notion of a crystalline god sent to deliver them from *our* bondage and destroy us? We outnumber them a million

to one!”

“It’s simpleminded. All religious belief systems are—especially the Gamant notion of Epagael. I know, Garold, but they can do a great deal of damage if they decide to. We’ve heard rumors that he’s sent emissaries everywhere. Are Gamants still fired up about his religion even now that he’s dead?”

“He—he’s dead?”

“Yes. Apparently his lover murdered him.”

“And Baruch’s forces? They haven’t intervened?”

“No. His cruisers are picking up survivors off Abulafia and Ahiqar. We had to take punitive action in that system several weeks ago. I’ve considered dispatching a convoy to see if we can’t corner them there before they get away again, but—”

Silbersay pounded a fist into his palm. “Ridiculous. The Underground never splits its forces. So long as they’re there in strength, you’ll lose as many vessels as they will.”

“Yes, my opinion exactly. At any rate, we’ve also just initiated a new suppressive action on Tikkun. We’ve set up a series of neurophysiological experiments to explore Gamant brain structure. We’re taking the inhabitants of small isolated villages first and slowly working on the mind-sets in the major cities—to forestall any foolish attempts by Gamants to join forces and escape us.”

“I—I can’t believe Baruch hasn’t descended in a ball of fire! He never leaves his people at our mercy for long.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, Garold. This will make you feel better. Baruch should already be under lock and key aboard the *Hoyer*. We—”

“*We captured Jeremiel Baruch? Impossible!*”

Slothen allowed a wry smile. His blue hair writhed, pleasantly caressing his skull. “But we’ve done it. We’ve been working with a man named Ornias, a powerful politician on Horeb. He lured Baruch in by telling him he needed assistance in halting the civil war there. The thought of Gamants killing Gamants brought Baruch running like a mother hen.”

“War?” Silbersay’s face slackened, eyes widening in horror. Sweat beaded across his forehead and nose, gluing his white hair to his temples.” *War!* What actions have you taken? Dear God, you haven’t ordered another scorch attack, have you? No. *Oh, no.* You can’t kill more innocent people!”

Slothen threw out two of his hands. “It’s all right, Garold. Don’t worry about it. Cole Tahn is in charge. It’s not your concern.”

“*What have you DONE? Tell me?*” Silbersay cried and took three quick strides forward, face twisted with madness. Slothen hit the button beneath his desk, then lurched out of his seat and raced toward the window, his six legs swirling in a blur. Two security guards burst through the doors, rifles aimed at Silbersay’s back.

The colonel spun, staring insanely into the cold hard eyes of the human guards. “Oh,” he whispered forlornly, on the verge of tears. “Poor Cole. Poor, poor Cole.”

“Garold,” Slothen said quietly. “You’re not stable. Let me get you some help. The psycho professionals on Palaia are the best in the galaxy. We’ll—”

“*No!*” he screamed. “I won’t let you destroy my mind with your probes! I got away from Bogomil and I’ll escape you, too!” He lunged at the guards, forcing his way past. The surprised officers glanced to Slothen for further guidance.

“Stop him,” he ordered. “Minor Force.”

The dark-haired guard scrambled into the hall and a shot rang out. He heard a body thud dull against the walls, then slam to the floor.

“He’s down, Magistrate. What now?”

“Take him to Doctor Zirkin. Tell him the colonel is a top level military official and needs special retraining. I want all of his memories purged from the first instant he contemplated joining

government service.”

~~The guard's expression darkened, fear in his eyes. Slothen bared his needle teeth again and feigned a malignant smile. The guard hurried into the hall. "Yes, sir," he responded and hit the button to close the door.~~

Alone again, Slothen twined his fingers so tightly they hurt. “Now I’ve lost my best Gama specialist. Where am I going to find someone else? Maybe I ought to look within Gamant civilization itself? Subvert someone, give him a little power, and use him for all he’s worth?” It was a problem he’d have to think more about. If Silbersay proved right about the coming revolt, he’d have to find someone soon. Worse, he might have to contact the other Magistrates and that could prove catastrophic. Isolated and sleeping in classified Peace Vaults in the Giclas system, he hadn’t had to disturb their rest in centuries.

Taking a deep breath, he dropped heavily into his chair and opened a line to the front office. “Topew?”

“Yes, Magistrate.”

“Send a dattran to Captain Brent Bogomil. Tell him I’m *not* happy with him. I want him to report to me immediately.”

A pause, then Topew replied. “Your last order told him to swing by Horeb and see if Tahn needs assistance in the scorch attack there. Shall I cancel that?”

“Yes. Tahn’s done enough of these things. I’m sure he can handle it in his sleep.”

CHAPTER 1

Captain Cole Tahn strode down the long corridor of the battle cruiser, *Hoyer*, absently returning the salutes of the occasional crew members he passed. Turned low to simulate nighttime, the overhead panels threw light like tarnished silver over the white walls. He grimaced at the odor that filled the hall. Level seven housed the techno-science division and they must have been performing some peculiar experiment for the air smelled acrid, like putrifying corpses beneath a searing desert sun.

In a bitter voice, he accused, “Or maybe it’s just your own goddamned guilt you smell.”

Though he’d just showered and changed clothes, his purple uniform clung in clammy folds to his sides and back, already drenched in sweat in anticipation of the next hour. A tall man with broad shoulders, he had brown hair and piercing blue-violet eyes that, on this somber evening, took everything: the wall clocks flashing the hour in blue at every intersection; the depressing gray carpet beneath his boots; the dull annoying thudding of his heart.

He rounded a corner and his steps faltered. Ahead, the numbers 955 shone in silver on the cab door of Mikael Calas, the new leader of Gamant civilization—an innocent child caught in the midst of a government hurricane that looked certain to destroy everything in the universe in its wake.

Tahn inhaled deeply, fighting the tide of futility and despair that rose. He’d retrieved Mikael from Brent Bogomil’s protective grasp just after Cole had finished obliterating every known population center on Kayan. Before that, the boy’s mother and grandfather had been brutally murdered. Mikael still bore deep emotional scars. Tahn had tried to befriend him to ease those hurts. Immediately after on-loading Mikael, Tahn had taken the boy to his cabin and stretched out on the floor beside him, showing Mikael his galactic stamp collection, talking, trying to get him to open up and eat something. Reports said that the boy hadn’t so much as touched a crumb of bread since the death of his mother.

Resolutely, Tahn forced his feet forward. He lifted his hand to the black com patch outside the boy's door. "Mikael? It's Captain Tahn. Can I speak to you?"

A brief pause ensued, then a frail voice responded, "Yes, sir."

The door slipped open. Standing stiffly in the middle of the room, Mikael was dressed in the long brown robes characteristic of Kayan Gamants. Small for a seven-year-old, he had jet black hair and dark brown eyes. Just now, those eyes glinted with fear—as wide and terrified as those of a rabbit caught in a trap. Tahn quietly took a step inside and winced when Mikael ran backward, lips pressed tightly together to stifle tears.

The door slipped closed with a soft snick, leaving them in near darkness. He struggled to project a friendly smile as he looked around the cabin. It spread ten by fifteen feet and had a table and two chairs on the right side and a bed on the left. In the back, a desk with a computer unit filled a small niche. Only one light panel glowed, its glare sneaking around the edges of the almost closed door to the latrine.

"Are you all right, Mikael?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're keeping it pretty dark in here."

Mikael wet his lips and didn't say anything for several seconds. Then he pointed to the overhead panels and whispered, "Those bright lights scare me, sir."

Tahn nodded, silently chastising himself for not thinking of that. On Kayan, Gamants had lived in primitive caves. Oil lamps and candles provided their only source of illumination. "Would you like me to have a lamp brought up? We could secure it to the table and you wouldn't have to use the lustreglobes at all if you didn't want to."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The words had been uttered so softly, Tahn had barely heard them. He shifted uncomfortably, putting the weight of his two-hundred pound frame on his left foot. Mikael flinched at the movement and it dawned on him how daunting his physical presence must be to this boy. He knelt down. "I brought you something," he said, trying to sound cheery.

"What?"

Tucking a hand inside his shirt pocket, Tahn pulled out three stamps sealed in clear petrolon and handed them to Mikael. They'd been the boy's favorites, ancient stamps portraying the first starship. Mikael peered across at the gifts and his shoulders hunched defensively; he turned away.

The posture affected Tahn like a truncheon slammed into his gut. He bowed his head, fighting with himself, silently shouting obscenities. Then, gently, he said, "It's all right, Mikael. I just thought you might like to have these. I want us to be friends."

Silence—but the boy's dark eyes hurled bitter recriminations: *You killed my world. You killed my family!*

Tahn lifted a hand to massage his taut forehead. He had no excuse to offer, other than his own self-hatred, and he doubted the child would appreciate such an irrelevant excuse.

He took the stamps and carefully spread them out across the gray carpet, facing Mikael; but in the darkness, he couldn't be certain the boy actually saw them. He tapped one, asking, "You remember this one?"

The boy shivered and hugged himself.

Tahn frowned, seeing the goose bumps on the boy's arms. "Are you cold, Mikael?"

"Just a little."

"I'm sorry. The ship shuts down the cabin temperatures at night, and I forgot to show you where the thermostat is." *Damn it. Kayan was a tropical forest most of the year. Of course, he's cold.* Getting to his feet, Tahn went to the control panel over the boy's rumpled bed. He increased the temperature

seventy degrees.

~~“Just turn this dial to the right, Mikael. That will make it as warm as you need it to be.”~~

Mikael didn't answer. He had his lower lip clamped between his teeth, staring fearfully at the stamps as though they were some hostile form of life that might rear up and attack him.

Tahn came back across the floor and knelt again in front of the stamps, pointing to the stamp on the far right. “This one is the first star freighter humans ever built. Do you remember? It came from Old Earth.”

Mikael looked up and whispered, “I remember.”

“Do you recall how old that stamp is?”

“No, sir. I don't care.”

Tahn exhaled slowly. “But I thought that was the one you liked most. I wanted to give it to you.” He picked up the stamp and handed it to the boy.

Mikael took a step backward. He cocked his head and the dim light frosted his long lashes with dew. “I don't want it. *I don't want anything from you!* You're a bad man!” His chest puffed and spasmodically. The glare he leveled at Tahn was pure hatred.

Tahn lowered the stamp to the carpet again. *In the name of God, can none of us ever escape the terrible memories of murder and destruction?* Mikael watched him intently and began to cry very quietly. In the same way Tahn would demonstrate to an enemy that he was unarmed, he opened and lifted his hands, then cautiously slipped an arm around the boy's shoulder, squeezing comfortingly.

Mikael's face went livid with terror. He let out a high-pitched shriek and started flailing again at Tahn with his fists, striking him in the face and shoulders, struggling to get away.

“Mikael, don't.” Tahn gathered the boy in his arms and hugged him, feeling the desperate sob that wracked Mikael's body. Tears soaked the collar of Tahn's purple uniform. He held Mikael tightly, stroking his dark curls. Every muscle in the boy's body had gone rigid. “I'm sorry, Mikael. I just wanted you to know that I'm here to help you. If you—”

“No, you're not! You're a liar!” Mikael screamed and writhed in Tahn's arms. “You hate me! You hate all Gamants.”

Like a stiletto between Tahn's ribs ... “I don't hate you, Mikael. It's just that I have to do things to protect all of galactic civilization and sometimes Gamants make that hard.”

“*We don't!*”

Tahn held Mikael at arm's length and gazed seriously into those dark eyes. “Listen to me. I'm going to tell you the truth. You know how the Underground goes around fighting all the time?”

“Yes,” Mikael sobbed. “Jeremiel Baruch, the leader of the Underground, is a very great hero. When I grow up, I'm going to be just like him.” A shining light gleamed in Mikael's eyes when he spoke of the most hated criminal in Magisterial space—and Tahn's most vehement enemy.

“I understand that you feel that way, but sometimes Baruch hurts Magisterial citizens.”

“Like how?” Mikael charged disbelievingly.

“At this very moment the Underground is stirring rebellions on lots of Gamant planets and, as a result, half of quadrant seven—that's over on the Orion arm of the galaxy—is starving.”

“Why?”

“Because the Magistrates only have a limited number of battle cruisers, so they can only protect so many people at once. When they're off fighting against the Underground, that leaves other planets open to attack from raiders. They—”

“Are raiders like pirates?”

“Yes, just like that.” He softly patted Mikael's arm. The boy tilted his head so that the light ice of his black hair with a veil of silver. “Raiders come in and cut off supply routes to blackmail planets into giving them their goods and resources for free.”

“You mean raiders steal things?”

~~“Pretty much. They make demands that no planet can really meet and then ...”~~

When the door com buzzed, Mikael jerked and glowered at Tahn as though he'd been betrayed. From outside, a deep voice called, “Captain Tahn? It's Doctor Iona.”

“Just a minute,” he called back. All the strangling tensions that enveloped him increased.

Mikael seemed to sense it. He gazed up in utter terror. Tahn hugged him one last time. In Mikael's ear, he whispered, “Sorry. I was going to tell you before he got here. There's something you need—”

Mikael wrenched free from his grip and stood panting. “That doctor's going to hurt me, isn't he?”

“No, no. I won't let him hurt you.”

“Then why's he here?”

“I want you to sleep for a while. You know you haven't been sleeping very well. You wake up a lot at night, don't you?” The hospital monitors they'd installed had recorded dozens of wakings during the night, most accompanied by screams and flailing arms. He'd watched the holos with mounting alarm. He'd felt that way himself once upon a time, unable to sleep for even a few minutes for fear some terror would slither out of the darkness to twine around his body and squeeze the life from him. But there were more reasons he wanted the boy to sleep—reasons of his own.

Mikael closed his eyes and tears traced glistening lines down his cheeks. “Sometimes I have nightmares. I can't help it.”

“I know that. But you—”

“I'll be good. I'll go to sleep. Don't let him hurt me!”

“Mikael, you're the best boy I know. It's not your fault you can't sleep.” He lifted a finger and tapped it against Mikael's temple. “It's just that there are some ... oh, sad things in your head that keep you awake. But you need to sleep. Doctor Iona is going to give you a shot. It won't hurt. I promise. You'll sleep for a few hours and when you wake up you'll feel better. Here, let me help you lie down.”

Tahn stood and led Mikael to his bed where the boy sat on the edge, refusing to look at him. Cole's stomach roiled. Mikael took a deep breath and dragged a sleeve over his eyes, trying to be brave. Cole patted Mikael's hair and went to the door, turning on the light panel over the table before hitting the entry patch. The door slipped open and Iona stood in the hall. He was a medium-sized man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a bulbous nose; the gold braid on his shoulder epaulete glistened in the dim white light.

“Come in, Doctor. Mikael's calm and ready for you.”

Iona entered, glancing surreptitiously at Mikael before putting his bag on the table and rifling through it. “I'm glad to hear it, sir, given the insanity running rampant across the rest of the ship.”

Tahn grimaced in understanding. He had a few final arrangements to make with the High Councilman on Horeb who was “selling” Baruch to the Magistrates, but it looked like they'd finally ended the Underground leader's reign of terror. The crew was going wild with joy. In the off-duty lounges champagne flowed like a river. Only a year ago, Tahn would have been in one of those lounges, celebrating with his crew, exulting in that triumphant flush of victory.

But he no longer knew what he was fighting for. He glanced back at Mikael. The child slumped hunched on his bed, his brown eyes as wide and hate-filled as an innocent prisoner facing his executioner.

Once again, all the old doubts consumed Tahn, gnawing at his insides. He started pacing. When he passed the mirror over the table, he caught his reflection and stopped. He looked as frantic as a man caught in a cross fire, not knowing which way to turn. Disturbed, he dropped his gaze to the floor. In the circle of light thrown by the table lustreglobe, he saw, for the first time, the tiny piles of li-

scattered across the carpet, beside the table legs, beneath the chairs, humped like anthills against the walls. He frowned, wondering what they were. They had no toys aboard. Had Mikael created his own game?

He turned halfway around, pointing to the lint. "What're these, Mikael?"

The boy blinked owlishly. "They're mountains."

"What happens in those mountains?"

Mikael licked his lips anxiously, like he didn't want to tell him. Then, in a suddenly violent voice, he blurted, "People kill each other!"

Tahn clamped his jaw tightly. Undoubtedly the boy's game centered around killing Magisterial soldiers, taking revenge for the destruction of his world. In a kind voice, he asked, "Did you win?"

"My side always wins."

"Good. Sometime, if you want someone to play with, I'll fight on your side."

Iona turned around and Tahn saw Mikael blanch. The boy pushed jet black curls out of his eyes and twisted his fingers in his lap, watching the doctor fill a syringe with sedative. The breathless look on Mikael's face made Tahn queasy.

"For God's sake, Iona. He's only seven. Do you need so much?"

The doctor straightened indignantly. "I thought you said you wanted him out for the next twelve hours, Captain? Was I mistaken?"

"Does it take that much?"

"This dosage is adequate to keep him out for twenty. I think he needs the rest and that should give us enough time to complete our Horeb mission and be far away before—"

"*That's enough, Doctor.*" The words cut as sharply as glass, and Tahn knew it, but anger and futility taunted too powerfully just now for him to be civil. The last thing in the world he wanted was Mikael to know that he was going to kill another Gamant planet.

"Forgive me, sir. I didn't realize—"

"Forget it."

Guilt swelled in Tahn's breast. He'd been treating his crew like strangers for the past week. So much so that they seemed to tiptoe around him. He couldn't help it. He felt trapped, on the verge of reckless actions. His mind had gone round and round the circle of possible alternatives and the only way he could see of resolving his inner conflicts was to resign his commission.

At the thought, a cold wave of fear splashed him. The Galactic Magistrates would erase all the memories he'd gained while in government service, claiming it was a matter of galactic security. Then he'd be confined to an institution for the rest of his life. They had little sympathy for captains incapable of carrying out their orders, no matter how onerous.

And they'd gotten goddamned onerous in the past year. How many planets had he killed? Four? Or should he count the half measure on Nuja? And at this very instant he stood on the precipice of another attack on Horeb.

The ache in Tahn's stomach intensified as he watched Iona lift the syringe again. "This just looks big, Mikael. It won't cause any pain. Sometimes, though, it makes you hear or see funny things. You just ignore them, all right?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, strange voices or flashes of light. But they aren't real. Don't let them scare you."

The boy looked up at him accusingly from beneath dark lashes. "Are we orbiting Horeb, sir?"

Tahn held his breath. "Yes."

"I have a cousin on Horeb. Can I go see her? I think she lives in a city named Seir."

"We're not going to stay for very long. We're just here to pick up a prisoner."

"But the doctor said we'll be here for hours. Maybe if you didn't give me that shot I could g

down for just a few minutes.”

“No. I—I’m sorry.”

Mikael fumbled with the sleeve of his brown robe. “I guess it doesn’t matter. My cousin probably thinks I’m dead anyway. Just like everybody else does.”

Tahn shoved his hands in his pockets, straining at his own impotence. He had no choice. His orders from Slothen obliged him to target the capital first. In an hour, this boy’s cousin would be swallowed by a massive wave of molten rock and debris.

He fought to keep his voice steady, “Why don’t you lie down, Mikael. This won’t take very long.”

“Yes, sir.” Bravely, Mikael stretched out on his back. He dug tiny fingers into the gray blanket and watched intently as Iona came across the cabin to lean over him. The syringe gleamed silver.

Gently, Iona said, “I’m going to push up your sleeve, all right, Mikael?”

“You’d better hurry. I might throw up.”

“Oh, don’t do that. This isn’t nearly as bad as it looks.”

Iona moved the brown cloth from Mikael’s left arm and then placed the barrel of the syringe against it. A whoosh of air sounded and the cold barrel went away. Mikael opened his eyes and looked curiously at the cold spot on his arm.

“See? That didn’t hurt, did it?” Iona asked.

“No, sir.”

“When the sedative starts to be absorbed, it will ache a tiny bit, but by then you should be asleep. So you won’t feel it except for just a minute.” Iona backed away.

Tahn heaved a sigh and walked to Mikael’s bedside. Kneeling, he forced a confident smile. “Are you okay?”

Mikael just glared.

Tahn pulled the blanket up and tucked the edges around Mikael’s legs, making sure he’d be warm enough. “There’s nothing to worry about, you understand? You’ll just sleep for a few hours and when you wake up—”

“You’ll take me to Magistrate Slothen? So I can talk to him? I need to talk to him. An angel told me I had to.”

“An angel?” A tingle touched Tahn’s spine. Imaginary friends? Defense mechanisms came in many forms. He had a number of his own that were no less exotic—like having to position chairs to form a barricade around his bed every night after a major battle to keep the ghosts at bay. Thank God his crew knew nothing about such things or they’d wonder about his sanity.

“Yes, sir. The angel’s name is Metatron. He comes as a big dark shadow, then turns into a bright and shining man. He’s the one who took me down the mountain to Colonel Silbersay’s office before...”

At the pained look, Tahn’s heart slammed against his ribs. “I’ll take you to Slothen. Under the Treaty of Lysomia, it’s your right. I’ll make sure nobody stops you. Don’t worry, now. You just get a good sleep.”

Mikael’s mouth pursed and his eyes glistened with bitterness. Tahn felt sick to his stomach. Gently, he ruffled Mikael’s hair before standing up.

“I’ll see you in a few hours. I have some arrangements to conclude with a Councilman on Horeb, then I’ll come back and we’ll—”

“About the prisoner?” Mikael demanded.

“I’m afraid so.”

Mikael’s face contorted. “You’re going to hurt Horeb, aren’t you?”

Tahn opened his mouth to give some quick lie, but no words would come.

“Aren’t you?” Mikael demanded, bracing himself up on his elbows.

~~Tahn~~ blindly studied the boy’s tiny shoes placed so carefully at his bedside. “Sometimes, Mikael, I have to do things I don’t like. It’s just that—”

“Because the Magistrates tell you to?”

“Yes. I’m an officer in their fleet. I have to obey orders.”

Mikael wiped a hand beneath his runny nose. On the verge of angry tears, he said, “You’re a bad man.”

“Mikael, I—”

“*Go away! I don’t want you here anymore!*” He curled on his side and closed his eyes, evading everything Magisterial that filled the world around him. Tucking a finger in the corner of his mouth, he sucked softly.

Tahn backed away, then turned and strode out the door into the corridor. A handful of technicians walked briskly by, saluting. He returned the gesture hollowly.

Finally, Iona exited to stand beside him and Mikael’s door slipped closed.

Tahn pointed a finger sternly. “Baruch isn’t going to come aboard easily. I want a member of your staff on the security team. Have him prepare a dose large enough to handle a raging Orillia lion.”

Iona nodded contemplatively, fastening his bag. “You’re sure Horeb will turn him over?”

“I’m damned sure. The Magistrates haven’t given them any choice. And find Dannon. I want somebody to give a positive ID of Baruch. Nobody else has ever seen him in the flesh.”

Iona threw out his chin indignantly. “You want *me* to find Neil Dannon? Begging your pardon, sir, but I have more important things to do than turn every female crew member’s cabin upside down.”

Neil Dannon had once been Baruch’s closest friend and second in command of the Underground fleet until he’d betrayed Baruch during the Silmar battle a few months ago. Tahn’s crew had despised Dannon from the day he’d stepped aboard.

Angry with indecision, feeling impotent, Tahn snapped, “Then start with the bars, Doctor! I expect a report from you in half an hour.”

He spun on his heel and headed for the bridge, practically running down the white corridors to the closest transport tube.

When he walked out onto the bridge an ominous silence descended. Composed of two levels, the room opened around him in an oval. On the lower level, officers sat in twos stationed side by side in four niches. His chair, with its massive array of buttons and computer access links, occupied the upper level, giving him a complete view of every action on the bridge. His second in command, First Lieutenant Carey Halloway, swiveled around to pin him with cool green eyes. A tall athletic woman with her auburn hair hung straight over her brows and fell to her shoulders to brush the epaulets on her formfitting purple uniform.

Tahn ignored her and turned to his redheaded communications officer. “Macey? Get me that High Councilman on Horeb. Let’s get this over with.”

“Aye, sir,” Macey responded. The com aura burst to life, glowing like a golden halo around Macey’s head.

Halloway’s eyes narrowed and Tahn’s jaw muscles jumped at the look she gave him. They’d been arguing for a week, debating the rights and wrongs of the curious orders they’d been getting lately. And just now, he could see that same mutinous gleam in her emerald eyes—as though she were clandestinely saying: *Don’t do this, Cole*. Only days ago, after they’d scorched the planet of Kaya, she’d stamped into his cabin and demanded a stiff scotch. He could still hear her strained voice ...

“*What the hell are we doing, Cole?*”

“*I’m obeying orders. I’m not sure what you’re doing anymore.*”

“Goddamn it! We’ve just been ordered to kill another planet! How can you sit there so calmly?”

—“It’s only a level two attack, Carey. We’ll destroy all the known habitation centers. The planet’s resources will be intact. Some of the people might even survive. But the nuisance factor will be completely eliminated.”

“And you can live with that?”

At the time, he’d wanted to tell her, “No.” But he couldn’t. They’d had orders to carry out. And now, as she lifted a brow and studied him pensively, he wanted to tell her again. Instead, he strode forward and dropped into his command chair.

“Captain,” Macey informed him, “I have the Councilman.”

“On screen, Lieutenant.”

Councilman Oraias’ tanned face formed. His braided beard, sandy hair, and smug smile looked store-window perfect despite the civil war that currently raged across the surface of his planet. Dressed regally in a gold silk robe, he seemed to be standing in some underground rock chamber. Red stone walls glimmered darkly in candlelight. “Greetings, Captain. I understand the Magistrates have considered my offer?”

Tahn glowered. The bridge crew had gone rigid, eyes glued to the screen. At her console, Halloway cursed. Orniias had outrageously demanded that the Magistrates give him the planet Grinlow in exchange for Baruch.

“Let’s get this on the table quickly, Councilman. The Magistrates say no to your request for Grinlow. However, they will up the reward for Baruch to five billion notes. Do you accept or reject?”

The Councilman’s face tensed, his lime green eyes hardening. “Five billion is hardly enough ___”

“Yes, or no.”

“You don’t mind if I think about it for a short time, do you, Captain?”

“I’ll give you five minutes. In the meantime, *put Baruch on. I want to see him.*”

Orniias inclined his head cooperatively and Tahn’s stomach muscles tightened as two guards in gray uniforms shoved a tall muscular blond in front of the screen. Standing with his hands bound behind his back, the blond lifted his bearded chin defiantly. He had the most piercing blue eyes Tahn had ever seen. A sheen of sweat matted the man’s hair to his forehead and temples.

“Baruch,” he said tautly.

“Tahn.”

They stared hard at each other and a hollowness boomed in Tahn’s chest. The brain death that awaited this brilliant military commander was less than he deserved—but Tahn couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Feeling trapped and indecisive, he lightly pounded a fist against his chair arm.

“You’ll be well-treated, Baruch. I give you my word.”

“Until you get me to the nearest neurophysiology center.”

“Nonetheless—”

“Did you give your word to the innocent victims on Kayan? Or Pitbon?”

Tahn shifted uncomfortably. Both worlds had been devastated by beam cannon fire—almost nothing had survived. “I wasn’t at Pitbon.”

“No,” Baruch challenged, struggling against the hard hands of the guards who held him. “How about Jumes or Wexlen? I *know* you were there.”

Tahn looked up slowly. Baruch had pulled magnificent maneuvers in those battles, slipping through his fingers before Tahn knew what had happened. *But not this time, Baruch. Not this time...*

“Councilman?” Tahn called, indicating the discussion with Baruch was over. He sat up straight when Orniias stepped back in front of the monitor.

CHAPTER 2

On Horeb, the third moon rose over jagged maroon peaks, washing the sandy plains with a brooding silver light. Jeremiel Baruch shook the cuffs that cinched his hands behind his back and gazed steadily at the dusk sky. *Hoyer's* shuttle dove out of the heavens like a deadly lance. How long did he have? Two minutes? Three?

Rage burned inside him. Ornias had slipped away in the fight that erupted just after Jeremiel's conversation with Tahn. The Councilman's henchmen had died to the last man to provide covering fire while Ornias escaped through the honeycomb of secret passageways that laced the rock beneath the palace. *My fault. I should have shot him the instant I got my hands on a pistol.*

Baruch braced his feet, watching the shuttle. Around him, charred and broken buildings loomed blackly. People raced through the smoky war-torn streets, clubs or rifles clutched to their bosoms. Somewhere, a baby wailed. In the distance, flashes of fire from the continuing war splashed the desert.

He took a deep breath as he studied the way the ship banked, circling the spaceport. "Bless Epagael," he prayed softly. "Just one more time. Let this work and I swear I'll become a Believer again." Operation Abba was an untried plan—an insane plan meant only for times as desperate as he now faced.

Around his shoulders, he felt ghostly ancestors crowd. People who'd fought arrogant conquerors with all their lives. People who'd been crushed beneath the wheels of fate and refused to stay down. The confident voices whispered encouragements to him, eerily real in the still winds of dusk.

"Harper?" he called to the tall black guard standing behind him. Harper stepped forward, leveling his rifle at Jeremiel's stomach. Baruch looked at it and threw him a weary smile. "Sure you don't want to change your mind?"

Harper shook his head faintly, glancing up at the shuttle. "Too late for that. Janowitz? Uriah?" he called to the other guards. "Get ready."

The shuttle landed in a burst of dirt and hot wind. Jeremiel ducked his head. Three Magisterial guards in purple and gray uniforms flooded down the shuttle's gangplank and ran toward him. Another man, redheaded and short, stayed by the shuttle entry, his rifle clutched tightly as he studied the mayhem that filled the streets of Horeb. People still ran screaming, trying to get into ships before the Magisterial attack.

"That's him," the tall dark-haired lieutenant said as he pointed at Jeremiel. "Put him in the shuttle. And hurry. We've only got a few minutes before this entire planet goes up in flames."

The blond corporal grinned maliciously. "Come on, Baruch. We've got a nice cold lab chair waiting for you."

"Yeah," the lieutenant chuckled. "And the probe helmet's included for free."

All three soldiers laughed uproariously. The two corporals grabbed Jeremiel by the arms and brutally searched him, then forced him toward the ship. Harper, Uriah, and Janowitz brought up the rear.

Jeremiel stepped into the narrow crew compartment lined with padded blue benches. He could see the entire length of the white fuselage. Four round portals dotted the hull. He went to the far side and waited pensively. When Harper and his team tried to follow, one of the Magisterial soldiers threw out an arm to block their entry.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" the sergeant asked Harper.

"With you, mister!" Harper declared defensively. "My orders are not to release Baruch to anyone but Captain Tahn!"

“You don’t trust us with a five billion note prize, eh?”

“No.”

Jeremiel glanced from one man to the next. The tall dark-haired lieutenant exhaled hard and scrutinized Harper. “I’m Lieutenant Simons. Who the hell are you? My orders are to take Baruch *alone*.”

Harper’s mahogany face went stony. “I’m Councilman Ornias’ agent, Lieutenant. My name is Harper. The Councilman ordered us to go along to insure his investment.” Harper subtly regripped his rifle. “If we don’t go, Lieutenant, neither does Baruch.”

“Oh, for God’s sake! Just a minute,” Simons huffed, throwing up his hands. “Let me tran *Hoyer* and get Tahn’s okay. We don’t have time to argue.”

Jeremiel gritted his teeth, watching Simons and his red-haired copilot head for the command cabin. The other two members of the Magisterial security team shuffled aimlessly, cursing under their breath about “goddamned Gamants.” Through the open door, shouts and cries rose in a deafening crescendo. Gunfire shredded the city streets. A brilliant flash of purple lit the interior of the shuttle, and both soldiers spun to peer out the side portals.

Jeremiel screamed, “*Now, Harper!*” and lunged forward, leveling a kick at the closest soldier’s throat. The man fell backward, dead before he hit the floor. Jeremiel whirled as Simons raced back, his pistol aimed.

The shuttle blazed with rifle fire.

Jamie Ryngold sprinted down the long white hall. Of medium height with broad shoulders and blue eyes, he had short brown hair that brushed the tops of his ears as he ran. Five other members of the security team weaved around him. They hurried toward the landing bay to meet Captain Tahn and the shuttle transporting their prisoner up from Horeb. A smile of excitement touched Jamie’s lips. The great Jeremiel Baruch, leader of the Gamant Underground and murderer of dozens of his friends—*last, they had him*. He silently raised a fist to the ceiling in exultation.

“You look happy,” Kell Gilluy, his lover, said wryly.

He smiled at her. Tall, with a mass of blonde curls and blue eyes, her purple uniform hugged her body, accenting every toned muscle. “Happy? That’s an understatement.” He affectionately patted the med pack on his belt. “Maybe I should have overfilled this syringe and taken care of Baruch without any further fuss.”

“Not a good idea, love. The Magistrates prefer to have him alive so they can drain him dry of every shred of information first.”

“Yeah, I know. With Baruch’s wealth of knowledge, we ought to be able to permanently kill his damnable Underground Movement.” The faces of a dozen dead friends flashed before his eyes. His jaw hardened.

“Let’s hope Iona finally found that scum, Dannon, so we’ll have a positive ID on Baruch. I won’t believe it’s actually him until we verify it.”

They passed a few engineering technicians dressed in brown jumpsuits. The glare of the diode overhead panels spread like a veil of dove-colored silk over the walls, glinting in the metallic facets of the bulkheads. The wall chronometers flashed the time.

“Damn,” Kell said, “Tahn’s going to kick our asses for being late.”

“You think Baruch’s already on board? I doubt it. Simons left less than an hour ago to pick him up off Horeb.”

They slowed to a brisk walk as they rounded another corner and from the edge of his vision, Jamie saw Kell whirl. He turned in time to see her flinch as though at the flick of a whip. Her knees were weak and she grabbed for the wall, bracing her hands against it to steady herself.

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