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Published by Solaris

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RAVEN

S T R A T A G E M

Y O O N H A L E E

AVAILABLE

UK // 16 June 2016 // ISBN 978 1 78108 448 9

US // 14 June 2016 // ISBN 978 1 78108 449 6

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SOLARIS



First published 2016 by Solaris
an imprint of Rebellion Publishing Ltd,
Riverside House, Osney Mead,
Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK

www.solarisbooks.com

ISBN: 978 1 78108 484 7

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

Designed & typeset by Rebellion Publishing

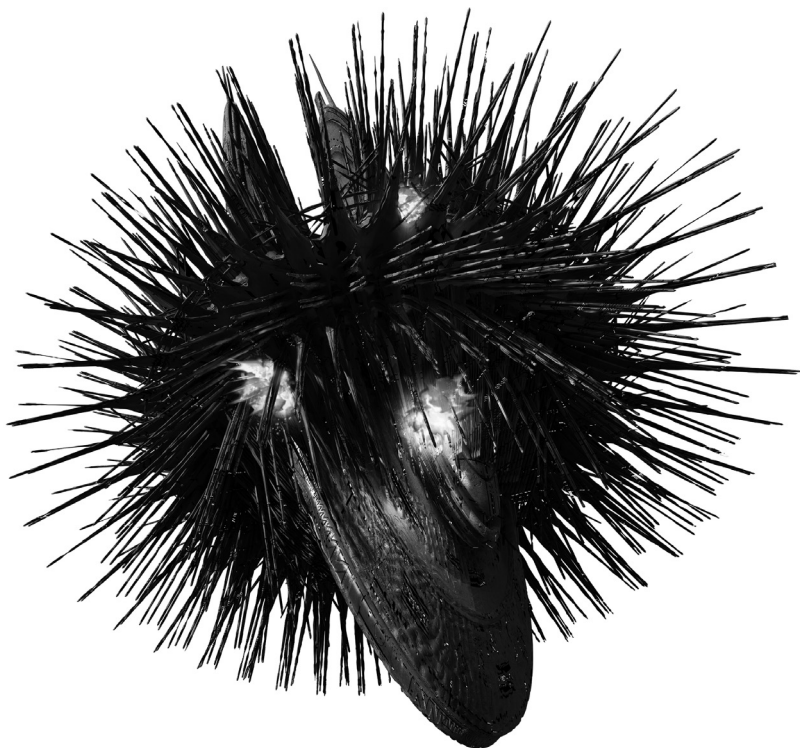
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RAVEN

S T R A T A G E M



Y O O N H A L E E

CHAPTER ONE

LIEUTENANT COLONEL KEL Brezan's general had just been tapped to deal with the Hafn invasion. Brezan had expected chaos, just not this much of it. General Kel Khiruev had had to scramble her swarm after the Hafn assassinated General Kel Chrenka eighteen days ago. In Brezan's experience, assassinations never made the situation *less* chaotic.

Brezan was one of Khiruev's personnel officers. It was a better position than Brezan had ever hoped for, given the equivocal notes in his profile. As it stood, Khiruev's swarm was immense, in keeping with the threat that Kel Command anticipated. Brezan was impressed they'd scared up so many people on short notice. They'd given Khiruev one of the hexarchate's six cindermoths, its largest and most powerful vessels of war, as her command moth: the *Hierarchy of Feasts*. The swarm contained an additional 119 bannermoths and 48 scoutmoths. Kel Command had informed them that the Hafn had advanced to the Severed March, a region of space that had been quiet for as long as Brezan remembered, and which was therefore less well-prepared for the event than anyone would like. Yet here they were, cooling their heels at a transfer point because Kel Command, in its infinite wisdom, had decided that it was so important to add a single captain with secret orders that it was worth holding up Khiruev's swarm.

Brezan had spent the last seventy-three minutes reviewing the damnable woman's profile and refraining from kicking the terminal.

He didn't care how good she was at calendrical warfare. If he didn't hear from her transport in the next twelve minutes, he was going to recommend that they head out anyway, with a side of telling Kel Command to go hang. The Hafn had already left population centers on eight planets in crystallized ruins. The priority was fighting them sooner rather than later.

Captain Kel Cheri. Her early record showed that she was competent, as infantry officers went, with one oddity, her mathematical aptitude. The Nirai, the faction that contained most of the hexarchate's scientists and engineers, had tried to recruit her on the strength of it. Her heart had been set on joining the Kel, however—something that Brezan knew a little about—and, as the joke went, the Kel never said no to volunteers.

More interestingly, Cheri was a Mwennin, a member of a minority that no one had heard of. Granted, in an interstellar polity containing uncounted systems, this wasn't difficult, but the Mwennin additionally kept their heads down and avoided faction service. Brezan had no doubt that their existence was tolerated only because their numbers were minuscule even in the one system where they had settled, and because, between the heretics and the foreigners that might as well be heretics, the hexarchate had enough trouble to deal with. Still, Cheri had acquitted herself well enough, given her origins.

Brezan couldn't help a twinge of bitterness when he thought about it. He came from an honorable Kel family, an older sister on *General Inesser's* staff for fuck's sake, but he would never go far and he knew it. Some of the soldiers made disparaging comments about the fact that he was a womanform when they thought he couldn't hear them. But his fellow officers were civil about it, which was all he cared about. Rather, the notes in his profile about impulsiveness and unconventional thinking had impeded his advancement.

Cheri had not been able to stay out of trouble either, for all that her record had previously been good. She had recently been involved with the Siege of the Fortress of Scattered Needles, which had been taken over by heretics colluding with the Hafn. Brezan suspected

that the record was leaving out something important, but most of the relevant segments were classified. Even General Khiruev's direct inquiries had been stonewalled.

Even better, Kel Command had fielded the undead general Shuos Jedao at Scattered Needles. No one denied Jedao's brilliance at tactics, but he was also mad, and he had once massacred two armies at Hellspin Fortress, one of them his own. The Kel swarm sent to deal with the Fortress's heretics had been wiped out, probably by Jedao himself. He was supposedly dead for good now, but who knew how true that was. Kel Command had been reviving him through mysterious means to throw at emergencies for the last few centuries, after all.

Cheris had tangled herself in that disaster, and something accomplishment had convinced Kel Command that General Khiruev would find her vitally useful. They just wouldn't say how. Brezan would rather they had sent a shipment of extra boots. Because, with all the marching they did in space, the boots would be more useful.

Brezan looked around the cindermoth's command center with its faintly glowing terminals, the impatient officers, beetleform and deltaform servitors performing maintenance. General Khiruev was a dark-skinned woman with an untidy streak of white in her hair and disfiguring scars showing pale along the side of her face where she'd never bothered getting them fixed. Unlike the others, she looked unruffled. On the other hand, the moth commander, Kel Janaia, kept checking her terminal for the time even though her augment's internal clock should have been synchronized with the mothgrid.

Seven more minutes. Shouldn't they have heard from the transport by now? Brezan resisted sending a note to Communications, who wouldn't thank him.

Of course, this was business as usual. It was no secret that Kel Command, being a hivemind, frequently made questionable decisions. A few centuries abusing composite technology would do that to you. Brezan functioned indifferently as part of a composite, one of the reasons he had expected to land at a boring desk dirtside

instead of here, but he conceded that that sense of utter humming conviction, of *belonging*, was addictive. At least things weren't likely to get worse.

As it turned out, things were about to get worse.

"Sir, a needlemoth is requesting permission to land," Communications said to the general. "The transport bears one Captain Kel Cheris for transfer."

Who the hell was the captain that she rated a needlemoth, anyway? Brezan had never seen one in person, although they turned up all the time in spy dramas. Scan had put it on the central display. It looked like it'd hold a person and a half, if the scale was to be believed.

"Not late yet," Khiruev said with an equanimity Brezan wished he shared. "Colonel Brezan, make the arrangements."

"Sir," Brezan said. He dispatched instructions to the mothgrid to be passed on to the captain. She'd be staying in one of the nicer guest rooms rather than with the command moth's infantry complement, as befitted her courier status.

Just then they received a report that a Hafn swarm had been spotted on the way to the Fortress of Spinshot Coins. Like Scattered Needles, Spinshot Coins was one of the hexarchate's nexus fortresses, which maintained calendrical stability throughout the realm. Unless everyone adhered to the high calendar and its associated systems of behavior, the hexarchate's exotic technologies—most notably the mothdrive that permitted fast travel between star systems—would cease to function. The nexus fortresses had been designed to magnify the effect of calendrical observances.

The Hafn, not being stupid, were focusing their efforts on the fortresses. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that the Hafn had demonstrated that *their* exotic technology functioned in hexarchate space, where the high calendar was dominant. It shouldn't have been possible, yet here they were. Still, the general had orders to protect the nexus fortresses at all costs. Who knew what the Hafn would be able to pull if they got calendrical terrain lined up on their side?

“Scoutmoth 19 says there are possible scan ghosts,” Communications was saying when someone entered the command center.

Brezan started, mainly because he had studied Cheris’s profile extensively. While he expected her to report to the command center, the newcomer didn’t move like her. The medical records and kinesthetic data had showed that Cheris had the standard body language that Kel infantry were imprinted with in Academy. This woman moved with the deceptive efficiency of an assassin. Brezan began to snap a reprimand. Instead, the words stuck to his teeth.

Captain Kel Cheris was short, with yellow-pale skin, an oval face, and black hair worn in a regulation bob. Those weren’t what surprised him. At least they matched the profile.

Besides the jarring body language, he noticed her uniform. Kel black-and-gold, like that of almost everyone in the command center, except her insignia should have been a captain’s talon. Instead, she sported a general’s wings. Beneath the wings was a Shuos eye. To say nothing of her gloves, Kel-black, but with no fingers.

Brezan froze up. He knew what the insignia meant, what the fingerless gloves meant. Occasionally the Shuos, who specialized in information operations, were seconded to Kel service. They wore the ninefox eye to indicate their faction of origin. But no Shuos general had served among the Kel for four centuries.

No living Shuos general, anyway.

General Khiruev had risen from her seat. “That joke’s in terrible taste, fledge,” she said in her mild voice. Nevertheless, people flinched from ‘fledge’: the Kel only said that to cadets, in public anyway. “Fix the insignia and take off the gloves. Now.”

During his lifetime, General Shuos Jedao had been one of the Kel’s best officers. Then Hellspin Fortress had happened. Brezan considered it proof of Kel Command’s psychosis that their response to Jedao going comprehensively insane was to stick him in an immortality device to repair his mind, then add him to the Kel Arsenal on the grounds that Jedao was scarier than they were, so why not weaponize him?

The half-gloves that Jedao had worn in life had been out of fashion in the hexarchate for a good four centuries, and with excellent cause.

“Oh, come now,” Cheris said. She spoke with a drawl.

A terrible suspicion curdled in Brezan’s mind. Granted, the hexarchate was home to a staggering number of low languages in addition to the high language, but Brezan made a point of getting to know people’s origins, even when those origins were as hopelessly obscure as that of the Mwennin. He’d listened to samples of Mwennin poetry-chants—he didn’t even like poetry when it was in one of his native tongues—and they had, if anything, sounded like rapid torrents of sibilants. It was possible that the Mwennin had multiple languages themselves, but he doubted any sounded like Jedao’s native drawl, which he remembered from the archive videos he’d viewed in academy.

“Doctrine,” Khiruev said, “escort her out of the command center and lock her up. I’ll deal with her later. If Kel Command intends this as a puzzle, it can wait until things are less hectic here.”

The Doctrine officer got up.

Cheris didn’t even glance in their direction. “General Khiruev,” she said, “I believe you’ve served at your present rank for fifteen years.”

Brezan’s suspicion sharpened.

The muscles along Khiruev’s jaw went taut. “That’s correct.”

“I’m Shuos Jedao. I’ve held the rank of general for a good three centuries and change.”

“That’s not possible,” Khiruev said after a second.

Stop listening to them, Brezan begged silently.

“Oh, don’t tempt me to make a Kel joke,” said Jedao or Cheris or whoever the hell they were, “there are so many to choose from. Why don’t you set me a test?” The corner of their mouth tipped up. Brezan had seen the same smile in a four-hundred-year-old recording of a completely different face.

One of Brezan’s problems was that he was, despite his competence, a marginal Kel. Brezan possessed weak formation instinct. The injection process wasn’t entirely predictable, and sometimes cadets failed out of Kel Academy because they couldn’t maintain formation.

He had spent his entire time there convinced they'd kick him out. Formation instinct, the emotional need to maintain hierarchy, made Kel discipline possible and allowed the Kel to use formations to channel calendrical effects in battle, from force shields to kinetic lances. A Kel without formation instinct was no Kel at all.

But for once, his deficit was an asset. He went for his sidearm.

His enemy was faster. Brezan was aware of fragments: the noise of their gun going off. The world dimming at the edges. A sudden shock running from hand to wrist to arm. The bullet singing as it ricocheted off Brezan's gun's slide; the gun itself flew out of his hand. Everyone ducking.

Brezan's hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"Shit," Brezan said with feeling. His ears were ringing. "I have Captain Cheris's profile memorized and her aim isn't remotely that good."

"Overkill is something of a personal defect," Jedao said, not modest in the least.

All the Kel in the command center were watching them. General Khiruev was watching them. A terrible yearning filled her eyes.

Brezan was fourth-generation Kel. He knew what a Kel looked like when hit between the ears by formation instinct. He should have kept his fucking mouth shut.

"General Jedao," Khiruev said, "what are your orders, sir?"

It was an open question who was the worse master: Shuos Jedao, arch-traitor and mass murderer, or Kel Command. But Brezan clung to the compass of duty. He dropped the useless pistol and scrambled for his combat knife.

He wasn't alone. The Doctrine officer was a Rahal, but they were even slower than he was. Soon every Kel in the command center had a gun trained on one or the other of them. People he'd served with for years. He was threatening their new formation leader. The only reason he and Doctrine weren't full of holes already was the novelty of the situation.

Hell of a way to die. At least he wouldn't be around to hear his insufferable sister Miuzan ribbing him about it. He dropped the knife.

“Hold,” Jedao said before anyone could change their mind and fire. His eyes were thoughtful.

Brezan recognized the *are you or aren't you?* expression of someone trying to decide from his severely cropped hair whether he was a man after all, or a woman who preferred masculine styles. Ordinarily Brezan would have clenched his teeth. In this instance, however, he enjoyed the petty pleasure of confusing Jedao even in such a small matter.

“What’s your name, soldier?”

No point keeping it to himself when the other Kel would rat him out. “Lieutenant Colonel Kel Brezan,” he said. He had the petty satisfaction of watching all the Kel twitch at his failure to say “sir.” “Staff officer, Personnel, assigned to General Kel Khiruev of the Swanknot. If you’re going to shoot me, you might as well get it over with. I won’t serve you.”

Brezan heard an inner whisper urging him to trust General Khiruev’s judgment; to serve the new formation leader the way Kel were made to serve. Damnably, he quelled it with ease. His proper loyalty belonged to Kel Command, not an upstart undead Shuos general possessing a Kel captain.

“You might be a crashhawk,” Jedao said insultingly. He was perfectly relaxed, but given how the situation was playing out, he had no reason not to be. “Hard to tell. Still, there are people like you”—his gaze flicked to Doctrine—and the seconded personnel who don’t have formation instinct. I won’t be able to rely on them.”

Brezan gritted his teeth. There were eighty-two Nirai on the *Hierarchy of Feasts* alone, more in the rest of the swarm, to say nothing of Shuos and the occasional Rahal and a couple Vidona. If Jedao was going to—

“I’m not going to kill them,” Jedao said, “but I can’t bring them with me, either. I need a list of people to let off. I assume we have sufficient transports for the job. They’ll have to have everything but minimal life-support and navigation disabled. Won’t buy me much time, but every little bit helps.”

Brezan could fight, but he’d die the moment he twitched a muscle.

If, for whatever incomprehensible reason, Jedao intended to spare those he couldn't control with formation instinct, there was a chance of getting word to Kel Command. Even if Kel Command was responsible for this mess to begin with, or more likely, Jedao had played some trick to set it up.

General Khiruev and the chief of staff were calmly discussing logistical options to offer to Jedao.

Holes opened in Brezan's heart.

"All right," Jedao said. "I suppose we had better send Colonel Brezan off before we bore them further." He gestured toward a pair of junior officers.

Brezan didn't resist, but he did say, bitterly, "Congratulations, Jedao. You've hijacked an entire fucking swarm. What are you going to do with it?"

He glimpsed Jedao's brilliant smile before the soldiers yanked him around. "I'm going to fight the Hafn, of course," Jedao called after him. "Oh, and give Kel Command my love."

I am going to kill you if I have to crawl through vacuum naked to do it, Brezan thought as he was marched out of the command center. He had the feeling it wouldn't be that easy.