

An excerpt from

The Fallen

by Resha Caner

The launch yard was an expanse of concrete, extending over a thousand meters into the distance, where it terminated in ocean. Benn perked up, and took a deep breath. He thought he could catch a faint smell of salt amongst a heavy mix of oil and rocket fuel. A gull sailed overhead and cawed. He tipped his head back to smile at the begging bird. Even if he had food he wouldn't encourage the scavenger. His upward gaze also caught sight of the shuttle. It was mounted vertically on a blast pad, held in place by scaffolding. The gray, rolled Litrium plate made the craft look like a single sweeping rain cloud sailing through blue sky.

Were it not for Litrium, space travel would never have become practical. Litrium revolutionized Ocedian society, and Nemesis was rich with it. But the moon tricked Oced. The first ship had been sent to Oced's third moon during winter. The barren surface and primitive native life were dismissed as a retarded evolutionary process.

A few years passed, Nemesis swung outward, closer to the sun than any human had ever been. Temperatures soared. Equipment failed. People died.

The pioneers fled. But Oced needed Litrium. It craved Litrium. It was addicted to Litrium. Where would the labor come from? When spaceships reached Calmeron and found the grossets, the problem was solved. Slave ships began making their way from Calmeron to Nemesis. Thousands died, but Oced had its Litrium cheaply. At least it had been cheap until the war came. To fuel

Hislacant killing machines, prison labor had been sent to the dismal planet. Now, though the war was over, Nemesis remained a prison colony. Tensions with the grossets were still too high to think of reinstating slavery.

Benn rode the elevator to the ship's passenger bay with two pilots, who took the seats far up in the nose of the craft. In a third chair positioned just behind them sat a chubby boy with a pock-marked face. He wasn't more than nineteen, and looked like a frightened child. The charges of the young guard, seven Wandi, were handcuffed together and seated in a line amidships.

Jay Min rested by himself against the back of the bay, still wearing his prison robe with the hood draped over his face. He wore leg chains pegged to packing cleats in the floor, and his hands were in cuffs with a chain running to another cleat in the ceiling. The chairs were temporary, and would be removed to fill the bay with Litrium for the return trip. Under the left cuff, a bloody bandage partially hid red streaks running toward his hand. The fingers were gray, and hung uselessly from their joints. The scar-faced guard had gotten his wish, and the tagging machine had done damage from which Jay Min would never recover.

The seat next to the grosset was empty, challenging Benn to sit next to Oced's greatest enemy; to remain calm in the face of a nightmare. Benn slid into place and buckled the harness.

"Peco," Jay Min muttered.

The reference to a beast sent Benn's heart into his throat, and he sucked in a quick breath. He looked straight ahead, and said nothing.

The instrument check seemed to take forever, but finally both the pilots and the control tower were convinced the shuttle was ready to fly. The craft shuddered as the engines came to life. Jay Min shifted in his seat, and the chains rattled with his attempts to extend them beyond their

restrictions. Benn rolled his eyes as far as possible to the side, despising his link to this creature. Last night he had no emotions. Today he could feel fear in his stomach.

The shuddering turned into a humming and the walls vibrated visibly. The ship lurched upward, knifing through Oced's atmosphere. The grosset clenched his right hand with a sudden jerk of pain while his left hand remained limp. "Calz," he cursed.

Benn closed his eyes as they took on unusual weight, pressing backward into his skull. He became dizzy, and the violent shaking of the craft seemed to be coupled with a long, slow swaying that stirred his stomach. His ears filled with a rushing noise like an ocean closing over his head. With his eyes squeezed tightly and his ears buzzing, he began to lose his sense of direction. He seemed to be spinning upside down, and his eyes flashed open involuntarily in a primal attempt to orient himself. He gripped the sides of his seat. How stupid to make such a ride with a hangover. He pressed his lids down again and clamped his jaw in an attempt to keep his stomach in its place.

"It has to end soon," he said to himself. "It has to end soon." It went on: shaking, spinning, jerking every joint in his body. He began to think he could bear it no longer, and he would be forced to vomit on himself. "Just one more second," he coached himself. "You can last one more second. And, then, after that, another second. I'll make it. One second at a time." Slowly, teasingly, the forces began to ease. The vibration of the craft diminished, but his brain still swam back and forth inside his skull. He kept his eyes closed. It would be almost twenty five hours before they reached Nemesis, and he needed sleep. He need to purge the remnants of the Echten from his body. He relished the approaching blackness, and hoped for a dreamless sleep.

Benn's hopes did not come to pass. Though he was not awake, he could sense the passage of time in empty blackness. Then the dreams came. Benn fought them, but the visions still came. He saw two men; the neck of one bent at an unnatural angle. The chest of the other looked crushed. Jay

Min, crouched over them. The killing look was in the grosset's eyes and he held an iron rod. Benn had seen pictures. It could be no other but Jay Min. Benn was alone with the creature among the smoking ruins of Vaanus. The chaos had separated him from his squad, and apparently the same had happened to Jay Min. The supreme commander of the rebellion stood before him with nothing but an iron rod. All he had to do was pull the trigger like he had done so many times before.

Benn's embattled lungs breathed in heavy wheezes, trying to extract oxygen from smoke. Instead, the deeper he inhaled the sharper the pain. The smoke burned his throat all the way down into his chest. He raised a clenched fist to his mouth as he coughed, fighting to keep his eyes and the pistol trained on the enemy. The grosset studied him, waiting for Benn's next move.

Steadying himself, Benn called out, "Alst! Ov zipe gibbe! Alstra!"

"I cannot hurt you, Peco," Jay Min's voice wrenched Benn from his dream. The cabin lights had been dimmed for the flight, and Benn peered through the tenebrous atmosphere at the grosset. The creature eased forward in his seat and gave the chains a gentle tug to confirm his statement.

"You mock me," Benn snarled. "but it is you who are caged like a Peco."

Jay Min hissed and his icy, sulking demeanor returned. Benn bristled at the reaction, and his lips launched a retort, "You call me a beast. After what you admitted in court you call me a beast."

The grosset tried to turn away, and Benn thought he would not respond. After a long silence Jay Min spoke again, "What I did was done out of necessity. I do not kill for pleasure."

"Calz," Benn mockingly used the grosset profanity. "People do as their real morals dictate. Any other claim is a fantasy."

"An interesting statement from a Ranger."

"I was drafted."

"It seems we all have our excuses."

Benn stewed for a response, but nothing came. He attacked from a different direction. "Do you know where you're going?" Jay Min did not respond. "Nemesis is not a friendly place. Criminal clans scour the surface looking for victims to be used in a variety of horrid schemes. The first year in a typical prison is always the worst. On Nemesis it goes downhill from there. All the guards do is prevent you from leaving. They don't rescue you if you are in danger, or sick, or hurt. They don't feed you. Nothing. You find a place to hide from the weather and a way to deliver Litrium to the guard stations. Period."

"You talk too much," Jay Min's voice was on the brink of being inaudible. "I do not need the help of a Peco."

"I'm not trying to help you." Benn leaned forward to push the intensity of his words. "You're just a grosset."

"Graseq," Jamin corrected.

"That's what I said."

"It is not," Jay Min insisted. "And my name is not Jay Min, it's Jamin."

Benn sat back and replied, "And I am not a Peco. I'm Hynfyd."

The grosset bent over so he could reach the hood with his right hand. He pushed the cloth back just far enough so Benn could make out eyes and a thin, twisted nose. A few curls of red hair climbed out from the dark recesses. "You're not Hislacant?" he asked.

Benn was stunned. His enemy had actually asked the question with a tempered compassion. His chest began to pound, as if the creature had reached out and touched him, bringing his heart to life. He did not reply, but his chin lifted with pride. Was it a trick? His imagination must be filling in the empty spaces again. Benn's skepticism returned, and he chose to keep his silence. His gaze

remained steady; his eyes locked with Jamin's. Blast! Don't let the grosset influence you, he thought. No. So be it. If the creature wanted to be called Jamin, Benn would call him Jamin.

Jamin's mouth opened several times as if he were about to speak, but it always closed again. What could he say? Each continued to stare at the other, not because they were waiting for words, but because they were looking at what had already been said. So few words, yet they meant so much. Benn held those words up next to Jamin to study how they fit. They did not fit well. It didn't make sense, and he wrestled to uncover what the Graseq was trying to accomplish. Whether Jay Min or Jamin, he could not allow himself to forget who this creature was, and what he had done. Jamin's stare began to make Benn uncomfortable. His eyes were without emotion, making no judgments, showing no discomfort, simply observing.

Benn shifted his body, plotting to appear casual. He closed his eyes, pretending to sleep. After more than half an hour, sleep did come. He drifted in and out. The guard came by to offer a meal, but the smell turned his stomach and he rejected the pasty inter-flight nourishment. He rose to pace for awhile, engaged the pilots in some idle conversation, then sat when it came time for the second meal. He was finally hungry and his stomach settled enough to receive it. The meat was tough and the vegetables were rubbery, but it gave him something to do. Afterward he pretended to observe the stars for awhile, then faked a nap.

"Ground station Nemesis," one of the pilots called out over the radio. "This is flight 1321 from Oced making our approach. We should be on the ground in 20 minutes. Please prepare for docking."

Benn turned away from Jamin to observe the field of stars. Directly in the center of the view was a gray-brown disk the size of a coin—Nemesis. The distant, smaller, pea green orb of Oced floated to one side.

“Yo-r appro-ch is confir-ed,” a distorted voice crackled back over an inadequate radio.

“Remem-er muh sh-pment?”

“Customs confiscated it.”

“Telam’s Blood!” the radio voice cursed, and the snarl of the interference joined in to make the remaining profanities inaudible.

“Calm down, Whiskey” the pilot laughed. “You always got a bottle stashed somewhere.”

“What the – am I supposed – do? – ain't nothin' in this – sandbox. – play another game of hiloc – blow – brains out.”

The pilot’s whole frame shook with laughter. “We’re having trouble picking you up, Whiskey. “We’ll talk again after we’ve broken the atmosphere and started our glide.”

“Hey,” Whiskey continued on. “– another mark –“

The pilot shut off the radio. “Begin descent procedure.”

Nemesis filled the entire window, and Benn began to pick out details. The atmosphere was clear of clouds, and no indications of water could be seen on the surface, but a mountain range snaked its way across the dismal brown landscape. The pilots worked frantically at the controls, as if they had to personally lower the craft with their own muscle. Whether going down was easier or his hangover was fading, the descent seemed to go much better.

After the craft had forced it’s way into the reluctant atmosphere, and they began their glide toward the landing strip, they flipped the radio back on.

“You’ve got a mark on your tail. Pull up,” the radio barked.

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I’ve got two ships on radar,” Whiskey exclaimed. “Pull up!”

“I can’t! My engines are off. We’re in our glide.”

“What’s going on?” Benn called out from his seat.

“Have you got rifles?” The pilot shouted to the fat boy.

“Yes, sir,” the boy squeaked.

“I suggest you get them out, and ...” he paused to look at Benn, before finishing his instructions “better give one to the sergeant.”

The boy unbuckled from his seat, and shimmied across the floor toward a locked case. Benn got out of his seat, and took measured steps toward the boy, countering the shaking and rolling of the craft as it glided toward the surface. He glanced out the window and saw a huge expanse of sand with a long, brown, roofless building enclosing a landing strip. The view bounced and avoided focus, causing Benn to lose his balance. He stumbled sideways and slammed into a bulkhead. Grabbing on, he steadied himself. Then, focusing on his destination, he continued toward the boy.

“He’s right on yur tail,” Whiskey said. “Git your cargo tuh transfer cells as soon as possible.”

“Put some heat on the mark,” the pilot ordered.

“How?” Whiskey asked.

“Telam’s Blood, man! Get your behind onto the strip with a rifle!”

Benn reached the boy and took the proffered rifle. He tucked it in the crook of his left arm, and held out his right hand. “Keys for my prisoner,” he ordered. The boy glanced toward Jamin. Benn stepped sideways to block his view. “Only rebels could get an unauthorized shuttle. They’re after the grosset, not your Wandii.” Reluctantly the boy handed over the keys.

Benn made his way back to Jamin. He paused in front of the Graseq as their eyes met. The compassion was gone. The game was on. Benn pondered his next move for another moment, but he had no choice. If he waited, he wouldn’t get the prisoner out in time. He reached up and unlocked

the chain from the ceiling cleat. Then, with his eyes on Jamin, he knelt and unlocked the floor cleat. The Graseq made no movements, but watched patiently.

Just as Benn sat in his chair the craft bumped the ground, and Benn was thrown upward from his seat. He reached down to grab on, and the rifle fell from his hands. He scrambled to retrieve it from the floor, but again Jamin did not move.

Before the ship had come to a stop the whining sound of motors released the locks on the door. The pilot leapt from his seat, and hit the door with his foot to break the seal. A rushing sound swept back from the opening, and Benn felt sucked forward as his ears popped, creating momentary dizziness. A dry, dusty smell swirled down from over his head, and the temperature soared. Benn could see a man standing outside the door in a wide-legged stance. He guessed it was the one the pilots called Whiskey. His eyes were bloodshot, and he held a laser rifle in nervous hands. He was shouting with excitement, "I hit it! I hit it!" Benn grabbed Jamin behind his elbow and lifted him from the seat, dragging him toward the door. The Graseq made little attempt to assist. Benn swung the rifle up from his hip to point at Jamin's head. "You'll either make it to the transfer cell or you'll die here."

Jamin picked up his pace.

As they reached the threshold of the craft, Benn could see three more guards on the runway: a dirty, grizzled old man without a shirt, and two women neatly dressed in uniform. They all held laser rifles, but their eyes were not on Benn. Instead, they looked down the runway. Suddenly, Whiskey dropped his rifle and broke for the guard building.

Benn turned to see a second shuttle knifing down the runway. A shock wave of sound ripped at his ears. He gasped, then seized Jamin with both hands and threw him out the door, then

leapt after the Graseq. When Benn hit the ground he bit his tongue, and blood flowed. Without looking back he pulled Jamin to his feet and shoved him toward the building.

Screeching metal pierced the air, and Benn could feel the pavement rumbling beneath his feet. Jamin no longer resisted, nor did he seem to feel his wounds. His long legs swept over the concrete in hard pounding strides. Soon Benn was chasing the Graseq, trying to keep pace with him. He stumbled and went down. He rolled and tried to recover his feet, ending instead in a sitting position facing the shuttle. The fat boy struggled to pull the Wandi through the doorway. The second shuttle, its tail in the air as it slid, hit the back of the first. An explosion ripped forward from the rear shuttle, engaging the first in a rolling wall of flame. Benn saw a look of surprise on the fat boy's face as he disappeared in a swirl of red and yellow fire. The intense heat was painful, and Benn rolled away, trying to find his feet. His mouth filled with blood, and his body agonized over a hundred cuts and bruises, but he was alive.

As he stood, horror struck him. His hands were empty. The rifle! As he turned toward the building, he had a brief glance of a body lying on the pavement. Then Jamin filled his gaze, the left arm hanging uselessly at this side, a rifle gripped in the right. Benn dropped back into a defensive position, but the Graseq moved in quickly and brought the rifle up against the side of his face.

Benn went to the pavement, sprawling on his back. Jamin stood over him.

“Welcome back to Hell.”

The butt of the rifle came down on Benn's head.