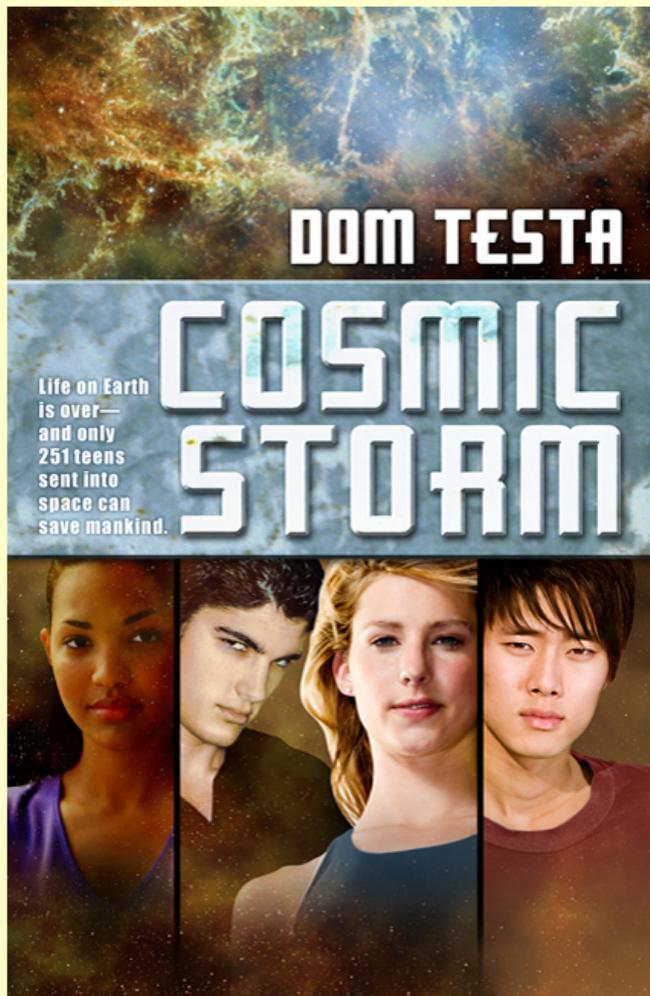


READ IT FIRST



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COSMIC STORM

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A Tor® Teen Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

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ISBN 978-0-7653-2111-4

First Edition: October 2011

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



It was actual paper, something that was a rarity on the ship. It measured, in inches, approximately six by nine, but had been folded twice into a compact rectangle. One word—the name Gap—was scrawled along the outside of the paper, in a distinctive style that could have come from only one person aboard *Galahad*. The loop on the final letter was not entirely closed, which made it more than an *r* but just short of a *p*; a casual reader would assume that the writer was in a hurry.

Gap Lee knew that it was simply the way Triana Martell wrote. It wasn't so much impatience on her part, but a conservation of energy. Her version of the letter *b* suffered the same fate, giving the impression of an extended *h*. It took some getting used to, but eventually Gap was able to read the scribbles without stumbling too much.

And, because he had scoured this particular note at least twenty times, it was now practically memorized anyway.

He looked at it again, this time under the tight beam of the desk lamp. It was just after midnight, and the rest of the room

was dark. His roommate, Daniil, lay motionless in his bed across the room, a very faint snore seeping out from beneath the pillow that covered his head. With a full crew meeting only eight hours away, and having chalked up perhaps a total of six hours of sleep over the past two days, Gap knew that he should be tucked into his own bed. Yet while his eyelids felt heavy, his brain would not shut down.

He exhaled a long, slow breath. How just like Triana to forego sending an e-mail and instead scratch out her explanation to Gap by hand. She journaled, like many of the crew members on *Galahad*, but was the only one who did so the old-fashioned way, in a notebook rather than on her workpad. This particular note had been ripped from the binding of a notebook, its rough edges adding a touch that Gap could only describe as personal.

He found that he appreciated the intimate feel, while he detested the message itself. The opening line alone was enough to cause him angst.

Gap, I know that my decision will likely anger you and the other Council members, but in my opinion there was no time for debate, especially one that would more than likely end in a stalemate.

Of course he was angry. Triana had made one of her “executive decisions” again, a snap judgment that might have proved fatal. The rest of the ship’s ruling body, the Council, had expressed a variety of emotions, ranging from disbelief to despair; if they were angry, it wasn’t bubbling to the surface yet.

Now, sitting in the dark and staring at the note, Gap pushed aside his personal feelings—feelings that were mostly confused

anyway—and tried to focus on the upcoming meeting. More than two hundred crew members were going to be on edge, alarmed that the ship's Council Leader had plunged into a wormhole, nervous that there was little to no information about whether she could even survive the experience. They were desperate for direction; it would be his job to calm them, assure them, and deliver answers.

It was simply a matter of coming up with those answers in the next few hours.

He stood and stretched, casting a quick glance at Daniil, who mumbled something in his sleep and turned to face the wall. Gap leaned over his desk and moved Triana's note into the small circle of light. His eyes darted through the message one more time, then folded it back into its original shape. He snapped off the light and stumbled to his bed. Draping one arm over his eyes, he tried to block everything from his mind and settle into a relaxed state. Sleep was the most important thing at the moment, and he was sure that he was the only Council member still awake at this time of the night.

He wasn't. Lita Marques had every intention of being asleep by ten, and had planned on an early morning workout in the gym before breakfast and the crew meeting. But now it was past midnight, and she found herself walking into *Galahad's* clinic, usually referred to by the crew as Sick House. It was under her supervision, a role that came naturally to the daughter of a physician.

Walking in the door she was greeted with surprise by Mathias, an assistant who tonight manned the late shift.

“What are you doing here?” he said, quickly dragging his feet off his desk and sitting upright.

“No, please, put your feet back up,” Lita said with a smile. “You know we’re very informal here, especially in the dead of night.” She walked over to her own desk and plopped down. “And to answer your question . . . I don’t know. Couldn’t sleep, so I decided to maybe work for a bit.”

Mathias squinted at her. “You doing okay with everything? I mean . . . with Alexa . . . and Tree. I mean . . .”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for asking, though.” She moved a couple of things around on her desk. “It’s just . . . you know, we’ll get through it all just fine.”

A moment of awkward silence fell between them. Lita continued to shuffle things in front of her, then realized how foolish it looked. She chanced a quick glance towards Mathias and caught his concerned look. “Really,” she said.

And then she broke down. Seeming to come from nowhere, a sob burst from her, and she covered her face with her hands. A minute later she felt a presence, and lowered her hands to find Mathias kneeling beside her.

“I’m so sorry,” he said quietly. “What can I do?”

“There’s nothing you can do. But thank you.” Suddenly embarrassed, she funneled all of her energy into looking composed and under control. “Really, it’s probably just a lack of sleep, and . . . well, you know.”

Mathias shook his head. “I don’t want to speak out of place, but you don’t have to act tough in front of me. We’re talking about losing your two best friends within a matter of days. There’s no doubt that you need some sleep, but it’s more than that. And that’s okay, Lita.”

She nodded and put a worried smile on her face. “You know what? Sometimes I wish I wasn’t on the Council; I think sometimes we’re too concerned with being a good example, and we forget to be ourselves.”

“Well, you can always be yourself around me,” he said, moving from her side and dropping into the chair facing her desk. He picked up a glass cube on her desk, the one filled with sand and tiny pebbles taken from the beach near Lita’s home in Veracruz, Mexico. She found that not only did it bring her comfort, it attracted almost everyone who sat at her desk.

Mathias twisted the cube to one side, watching the sand tumble, forming multicolored layers of sediment. “So, I’ll be curious to see what Gap says at this meeting,” he said, never taking his eyes off the cube. He left the comment floating between them.

“I don’t envy Gap right now,” Lita said cautiously. “We’ve been through so much in this first year, but especially in the last two weeks.” She paused and stared at her assistant. “I know everyone’s curious about what he intends to do, but there’s not much I can say right now.”

Mathias shrugged and placed the glass cube back on her desk. “I guess a few of us just wondered if he was going to become the new Council Leader.”

“He’s temporarily in charge. But we don’t know for sure what’s happened to Triana. She’s still the Council Leader.”

“Well, yeah, of course,” Mathias said. “But . . .” He looked up at her. “I mean, she disappeared into a wormhole. Could she even survive that?”

Lita’s first instinct was irritation; Triana had been gone for forty-eight hours, and Mathias seemed to have written her off. And, if so, chances were that he wasn’t alone. It was likely, in

fact, that when the auditorium filled up in the morning, many of the crew members would be under the assumption that *Galahad's* leader was dead. It would have been unthinkable only days ago, but . . .

But they had stood in silence to pay their final respects to Alexa just hours before Triana's flight. Now anything seemed possible.

The realization cooled Lita's temper. It wasn't Mathias's fault; he was merely acting upon a natural human emotion. Lita's defense of Triana stemmed from an entirely different, but no less powerful, emotion: loyalty to a friend.

When she finally spoke, her voice was soft. "This crew has learned pretty quickly that when we jump to conclusions, we're usually wrong. I'm sure Gap will do a good job of explaining things so we know what's going on and what we can look forward to. Let's just wait until the meeting before we assume too much."

Mathias gave a halfhearted nod. "Yeah. Okay." Slowly, a sheepish look crossed his face. "And I'm sorry. Triana's your friend; I shouldn't be saying this stuff. I'm just . . ."

"It's all right," Lita said. "We're all shaken up. Now let me do a little work so I can wear myself out enough to sleep."

Once the clock in her room clicked over to midnight, Channy Oakland climbed out of bed, threw on a pair of shorts and a vivid red T-shirt, woke up the cat, Iris, who was contorted into a ball on her desk chair, and trudged to the lift at the end of the hall. Two minutes later, carrying Iris over her shoulder like a baby, she peered through the murky light of Dome 1. There was no movement.

Two massive domes topped the starship, housing the Farms and providing a daily bounty which fed the hungry crew of teenagers. Clear panels, set among a criss-crossing grid of beams, allowed a spectacular view of the cosmos to shine in and quickly became a favorite spot for crew quiet time.

It was especially quiet at this late hour. Channy could see a couple of farm workers milling about in the distance, but for the most part Dome 1 was deserted. She took her usual route down a well-trodden path, and deposited Iris near a dense patch of corn stalks. "See you in twenty minutes," she said in a hushed tone to the cat, then, on a whim, retreated towards the main entrance. She turned off the path and made for the Farms' offices.

Her instinct had been right on. Lights burned in Bon's office. She leaned against the door frame and glanced at the tall boy who stood behind the desk. "Something told me I'd find you here," she said.

Bon Hartsfield glanced up only briefly before turning back to a glowing workpad. "Not unusual for me to be here, day or night," he said. "You know that. The question is, what are you doing up here this late. Wait, let me guess: cat duty."

"Couldn't sleep. Figured I might as well let Iris stretch her legs."

Bon grunted a reply, but seemed bored by the exchange. Channy took a couple of steps into the office, her hands in her back pockets. "How are you doing?"

He looked up at her, but this time his gaze lingered. "Wanna be more specific?"

She shrugged, then took two more steps towards his desk. "Oh, you know; Alexa, Triana . . . everything."

He looked back down at his workpad. His shaggy blond hair draped over his face. "I'm doing fine. Sorry, but I have to check

out a water recycling pump.” He walked around his desk towards the door.

“Mind if I walk along with you?” Channy said. “I have to pick up Iris in a few minutes anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” he said without stopping.

His strides were long and quick. She hustled to keep up until he veered from the path into a thick growth of leafy plants. It was even darker here; she was happy when Bon flicked on a flashlight, its tightly focused beam bobbing back and forth before them. The air was warm and damp, and the heavy vegetation around them blocked much of the ventilating breeze. Channy felt sweat droplets on her chocolate-toned skin.

“You would have loved Lita’s song—”

“Why are you whispering?” he called back to her.

“I don’t know, it’s very quiet and peaceful in here. All right, I’ll speak up. I said that you would have loved Lita’s song for Alexa at the funeral.” When he didn’t respond, but instead continued to push ahead through the gloom, she added, “But I understand why you weren’t there.”

“I’m so glad. It would have wrecked my day if you were upset with me.”

“Okay, Mr. Sarcastic. I’m just trying to talk to you.”

“Next subject.”

A leafy branch slapped back against Channy’s face. “Ouch. Excuse me, is this a race?”

“You wanted to come, I didn’t invite you.”

They popped out of the heavy growth into a diamond-shaped clearing. Bon stopped quickly, and Channy barely managed to throw on the brakes without plowing into his back. A moment later he was down on one knee. “Here,” he said, holding the

flashlight out to her. "If you want to tag along, do something helpful. Point this right here."

She trained the light on the two-foot-tall block that housed a water recycling pump. One of the precious resources on *Galahad*, water was closely monitored and conserved. Every drop was recycled, which meant these particular pumps were crucial under the domes. After a handful of breakdowns early in the mission, they were now checked constantly.

"I guess Gap will try to explain at the meeting what Tree did," Channy said, sitting down on the loosely packed soil. She kept the flashlight trained on the pump, but occasionally shifted her grasp in order to throw a bit of light towards Bon's face. "Although I have to admit, I don't think I'll ever understand why she did it."

She waited for Bon to respond, but he seemed to want nothing to do with the conversation. She added, "Do you think she did the right thing?"

"Keep the light steady right here," he said. For half a minute he toiled in silence before finally answering her. "It doesn't matter what I think. Triana did what she did, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"Oh, c'mon," Channy said. "I know you like to play it cool, but you have to have an opinion."

Bon wiped sweat and a few strands of hair from his face, then leaned back on his heels and stared at her. "You don't care about my opinion. You're trying to get me to talk about Triana, either because you're upset with her, or because you're trying to get some kind of reaction from me about her. I'm not a fool."

"And neither am I. I don't know why you have to act so tough, Bon, when we both know that you have feelings for her. And, if you ask me, you had feelings for Alexa, too. Did you ever stop to

think that it might be good for you to talk about these feelings, rather than keep them bottled up inside all the time?”

“And why should I talk to you?”

“Because I’m the one person on the ship who’s not afraid to ask you about it, that’s why.”

“You’re the nosiest, there’s no question.”

Channy slowly shook her head. “If I didn’t think it would help you, I wouldn’t ask. I’m not here for me, you know.”

“Right.”

“I’m not. I just want to help. The two people on this ship that you had feelings for, and they’re both gone, just like that. Why do you feel like you have to deal with it by yourself? Are you so macho that you can’t—”

“Please put the light back on the recycler.”

“Forget the recycler!” Channy said. “Have you even cried yet? I cried my eyes out over Alexa, and I’ll probably end up doing the same for Triana if she doesn’t come back soon. You won’t talk, you won’t cry.” She paused and leaned towards him, a look of exasperation staining her face. “What’s wrong with you?”

He stared back at her with no expression. After a few moments, she tossed the flashlight to the ground, stood up, and stormed off down the path to find Iris.

Bon looked at the flashlight, its beam slicing a crazy angle towards the crops behind him. His breathing became heavy. For a moment he glanced down the path, his eyes blazing. Then, with a shout, he slammed a fist into the plastic covering of the recycling pump, sending a piece of it spinning off into the darkness. It wasn’t long before he felt a warm trickle of blood dripping from his hand.



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