

Acqeli : Prelude to Bound by Honor

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To the memory of my husband, Gary Allen Sartin, the hero of my life's story. And to our children, Melissa, Angela and Eric.

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The Black Crystal

ONLY GELTHOR'S HIGH Priests and the scientists involved in the experiment knew what was about to befall their world and they were powerless to stop it.

Lotharko removed his robe and handed it to the cleric who had escorted him to the High Priest's chamber. It felt good to be free of the thin-spun material that denoted his status. Sighing, he stretched his body and absorbed the planet's life force. He envied most Gelthorians. They were not required to wear the suffocating garments of priests like himself, or physicians, or peacekeepers.

He walked to the temple balcony where his friend Pilaro, High Priest and chief executive of Gelthor, waited. The two were slim, their thick, blue-tinged skin smooth and hairless. Pilaro's coloring had faded with age, but he'd never seemed old—until today. He greeted Lotharko with a nod and weary half-smile, then turned to gaze at the planet Treah. "We should never have tried to be gods, and create a world."

"We weren't creating a world. We were reawakening a dead one."

"A project many questioned—"

"We're prisoners here, Pilaro, biologically tied to this planet. Eventually, our people would have needed a second Gelthor, one with identical biological markers—the same markers that bind us to this planet. Our short-range ships can't travel beyond this solar system. We can't go looking for another Gelthorian-type world—if one even exists.

"The idea of giving a dead planet new life was inevitable." He tilted his head toward Treah. "And literally within reach. It was perfect for our needs. Treah is dead—no magnetic field, no atmosphere, with a low gravitational field to prevent the sterilizing wave from rising above the planet as it gained momentum."

He laughed, a humorless, self-deprecating sound. "It's ironic. My team and I were trying to give our people a chance to survive if some catastrophic event threatened Gelthor. Instead, we *became* the catastrophic event."

"What went wrong?"

Lotharko grasped the balcony rail with both hands. "I went wrong."

"You can't blame yourself."

"Can't I? I'm Gelthor's chief science officer. That alone makes me responsible. Terra-forming the planet should have been simple—break down any remaining carbons into basic particles, and after the low-grade radiation became inert, reseed TreaH.

"You still haven't explained what happened."

We're not certain what initially occurred. Whatever the cause, the radiation wave splintered. Numerous waves circled TreaH and collided on the opposite side of the planet. The force of the impact projected the wave off TreaH in a wide, direct beam."

"Toward Gelthor."

"Yes."

"Why toward Gelthor?"

Lotharko shrugged. "Misfortune, coincidence. . ."

"Gelthor happens to be in the way?"

"It seems so."

Pilaro stared at the dead planet. "I can't see the wave. Are you sure it's still there?"

"I'm sure." He didn't bother to look up. "The wave is invisible, the debris field thin. It won't be detected until one, perhaps two days before it reaches Gelthor."

"One or two days." The priest ran a hand over the sallow skin of his head. "Our people will panic."

"Not if you convince them it's only a small debris field from a stray asteroid."

"You want to lie to them?"

Lotharko slammed his fist on the rail. "I want to stop that monster. I want to turn back time and make it go away." He took a deep breath. "But I can't have what I want. And all we can do for our people is let them live their last days without fear."

The priest nodded, then shook his head. "There has to be more we can do, deflect the wave, push it off course?"

"Pilaro, the wave is equal to the diameter of TreaH. If we had something large enough to deflect an object of that size—which we don't—it wouldn't matter. The wave isn't solid. Inorganic objects will simply pass through. Anything organic will disintegrate."

"And Gelthor?"

"The wave will enshroud our world so quickly our brains won't have time to process the terror or the pain."

"How long do we have?"

"Less than twelve days."

The old priest's shoulders slumped. "So little time."

Lotharko couldn't leave him without hope. "If the wave dissipates or changes course, I'll contact you."

"Then you believe there is hope?"

"There is always the possibility I'm wrong."

"I will remain in the High Temple if you need me. I assume you will spend these final days with your pod-mates?"

"I intend to visit my children tomorrow. The hatchlings won't know me yet, but the older ones will be pleased to see me."

"You have adult children as well, do you not?"

"Eleven, from my first spawn. The two males are anxious to finish their advanced studies and vie for pod-mates." *

Acqeli; The black crystal;

Lotharko of Gelthor refused to destroy it;

Riistren of Centallus discovered its dark secret;

Rhyel of New Centallus witnessed the total annihilation of his world because of it;

Acqeli; the crystal thread binding two dead planets to Earth, will change the destiny of one unsuspecting woman.

Experience the chain of events that bring Amber and Rhyel together in Rose Sartin's debut novel, Bound by Honor.

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