



PAUL KANE

# TRIGGERS

The dream always started the same way.

In it, he was surrounded by riches, being showered by them. Precious gems and metals; jewellery. All the finery he'd become accustomed to, that he increasingly felt he needed to accumulate. The things that gave him the most pleasure, the most comfort: tokens, trinkets, charms from all the planets he had ever visited.

And he, Tobias Grail, would revel in it. At first.

Just as it always began with the same scenario, it would inevitably twist and turn. He'd find himself growing uncomfortable – that tingling sensation which always seemed to warn him, that he always relied on. Was somebody coveting the wealth he'd amassed, and was continuing to accrue? Did they want to take it away from him? Steal the fortune he had been working so hard to compile? If so, he would not let them! Grail would grab handfuls of the coins, the gems, the bracelets that he'd had specially made, gathering everything up so it would not be wrenched from his grasp.

Then he would stop, peer into the blackness that surrounded him. He caught flashes of movement there, heard whispers and shuffling. Someone watching, marvelling at his wealth, almost

definitely. The more he acquired, the more he felt the need to protect it. Often he would caution whoever it was to get back, threaten them, for they were getting closer and closer the longer the dream endured.

‘Stay away! I’m warning you!’ he snarled. But this would only be met by more of the whispering.

Then things would change again, and Grail fancied that he heard snatches of those words. If anything, they were apparently encouraging him to add to his collection. But why? So they could take even *more* of his riches from him?

*More, you can have even more!*

Grail always squinted, attempting to make out exactly who this figure was in the shadows; that apparently *was* the shadows. But just when he thought he had them in focus they would move again, becoming vague, indistinct, and the whispers began once more. He was, by turns, excited and terrified by all this. His mind would flit from the possibilities they were suggesting, the outrageousness of the plans and schemes which would enter his head, to the sheer terror of putting them into effect. Of getting caught or, even worse, losing all that he had managed to stockpile thus far. Of going back to being in the Guard. Or even before that, to the gutters of his homeworld, desperate to escape and knowing there was only one way to do so. To become the scavenger he still was at heart.

*More, always more!*

Look how far he’d come, at how he’d earned his place and position; paid for it with blood and tears. He was not about to lose all that to anyone. However, this wasn’t what the figure wanted – he sensed that much at least. In fact, sometimes Grail wondered if it had even been his idea to begin all this. Was it his or someone else’s? Didn’t matter in the end, the result was the same. Now he craved more, needed to make more, to secure his position.

And the dream would always end the same, that rush of exhilaration and fear as the figure moved closer, whispering, yet still out of sight. Or was it? Could he see... something?

*Finish your work!*

The heady cocktail of emotions caused him to sit bolt upright in bed, panting for breath. Gasping, and reaching down to prop himself up, Grail felt the wetness of the bed sheets beneath him, already slick enough because of the shiny fabric they were made from. He wiped his forehead with the back of his other arm, staring out at the space in front of him.

Something moved out there. A carry-over from the dream, the nightmare? Something shifting about in the darkness, whispering. Coming closer and closer. In a panic, Grail called for light and because he hadn't been specific the bedside glow-globe came on. It illuminated the massive bed he was in, but didn't really stretch far enough out to reveal who else might be present. He had no family here; no wife or children. The many guards and servants that resided in his home did not have access to his most private chambers.

Another whisper, and a tall figure stepped into the circle of light. Grail let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, his body visibly relaxing, shrinking as it did so.

'Russart,' he said, voice catching. 'It's you!'

'Who were you expecting?' asked the man, striding forward, the material of his form-fitting bodyglove causing the whispering now as its folds rubbed together. Grail took in his features, the thick dark hair and eyebrows, which arched over a solid brow. The squareness of the rest of his face, especially his equally strong jaw. The intensity of the man's stare, those steel-grey eyes throwing back his own gaze. And finally, that well-muscled body stretching the bodyglove tight, a physique that Russart had maintained in the years since they'd served together while Grail had let his own grow fat and soft. Even as he thought about it

now, Grail pulled the covers up more around himself, in spite of the fact this was the one person he trusted most in the world... in *any* world.

Russart's right hand was on the hilt of his sidearm, nestled in its holster: a laspistol that Grail had seen him use without hesitation or mercy in the past. He was taking his hand off it, removing his finger from the trigger, now that he could see they were alone in the bedroom. Grail thought about the question his second-in-command, his bodyguard, had asked: who *had* he been expecting? Russart was the only member of security he *allowed* access to his inner chambers, and he was always on duty, even at night-time. That was something Grail very much insisted upon, in case he should require the man at a moment's notice.

But Grail hadn't been expecting anyone *real*, had he? Just a shade from the dream, somehow here in his bedroom.

'No... no one,' he said, more than a little embarrassed. 'What are you doing here, anyway?'

Russart nodded towards the surveillance pict recorders in the room that must have alerted him. 'You were screaming for help.'

'I wasn't *screaming*,' Grail argued.

'I could hear it even as I entered the room. I thought you were in trouble.' Russart stepped a little closer, concern etched on that face. It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility; Grail did have his enemies after all, though how they would have reached him inside his fortress was anyone's guess. 'Dreams getting worse?'

'I'm fine,' Grail assured him, clicking his fingers for Russart to pass his robe over from a nearby chair. Quickly, he pulled this around him, swinging his legs out of bed at the same time. He hadn't gone into any kind of detail with Russart about the dreams, had let the man assume they were of the battlefield: of Fennan's Pass and the hulking green-skinned xenos.

'But you—'

'I said I was *fine*,' Grail snapped. 'You're dismissed.'

Russart looked like he was about to say something else, then thought better of it. Questioning Grail when he was in this mood was not the wisest thing to do. Instead he nodded, concern turning to... what, resentment? Just a fleeting glimpse of it, but there.

'I'll see you in the morning for the inspection,' Grail added, his tone lighter. Because he *was* thankful for all that Russart did. Furthermore, Grail did not know what he would do without the man who kept so many of his secrets. It was the reason why he was paid so handsomely, although Russart didn't get much of a chance to spend that money. Apart from when they periodically played games of chance in various backstreet establishments, that was. Even then, Grail's luck was invariably better than his companion's. Better than most people's.

Russart nodded again, withdrawing from the room. Grail waited for the click of the door before reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table, desperately parched and needing to rehydrate himself. His hand shook as he brought the liquid to his mouth and gulped it down. Then he set it aside, rose, and wandered over to the far side of the room, out of sight of the pict recorders. He passed a mirror on the way, catching his reflection; though neat and well-groomed in his appearance, he couldn't help noting that the face staring back was a lot rounder than it had been a few years ago. His hairline was rapidly receding as well, and once again his mind turned to Russart, the difference in their appearances, comparing himself to his friend. Grail shook his head and continued on to his destination.

There he pulled the covering off a box that had been made to look like a bench, but was in fact a chest coded to his handprint. Grail looked about him, then opened it, gazed at the contents old and new. Quickly, he closed the box again, covering it up.

He just needed to check it was all safe. Just needed to be sure.