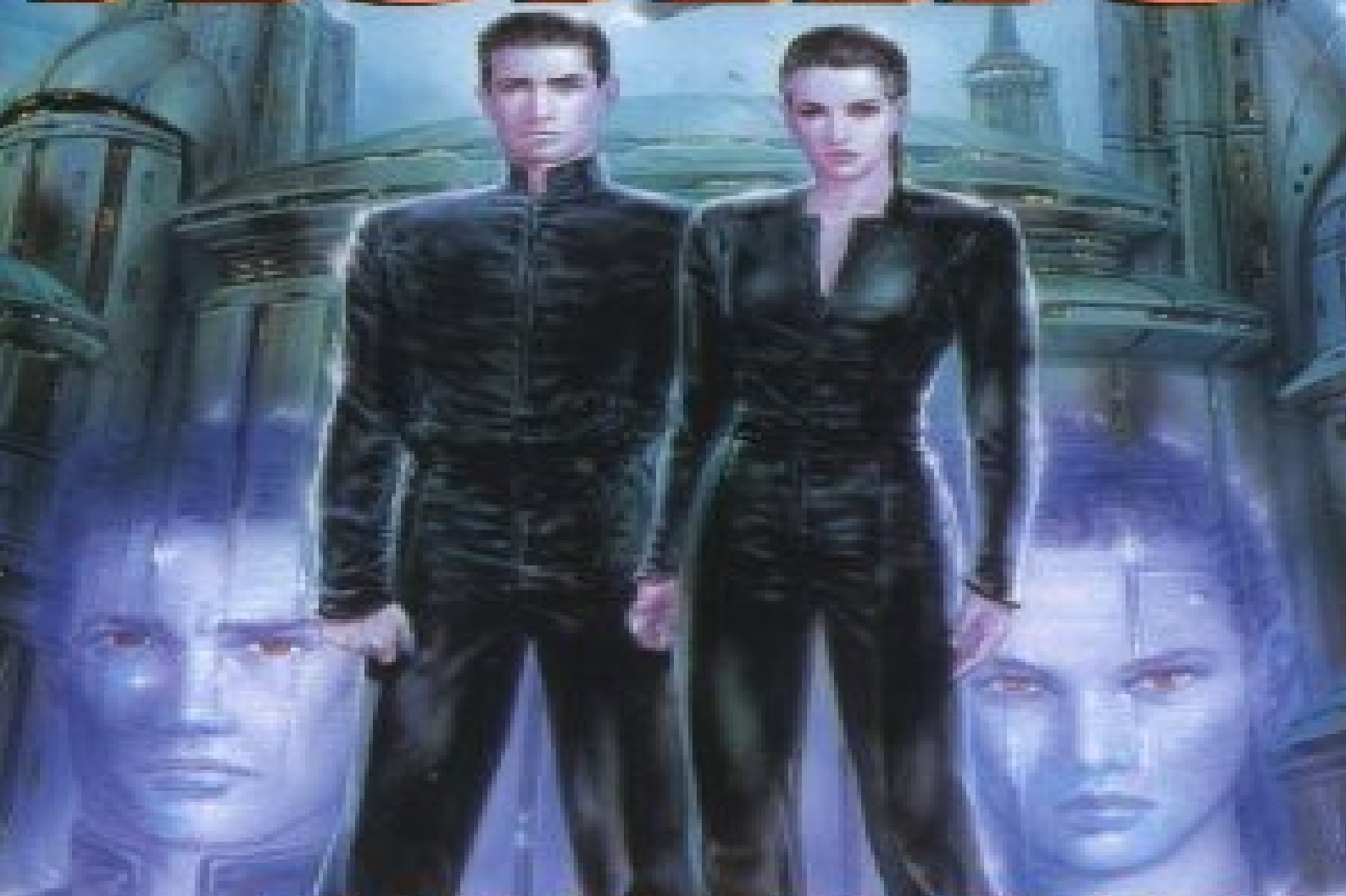


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NEBULA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

CATHERINE ASARO



THE MOON'S SHADOW

A NEW ADVENTURE IN THE SAGA OF THE SKOLIAN EMPIRE

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THE MOON'S

SHADOW

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The Quantum Rose

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The Moon's Shadow

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CATHERINE ASAR



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To my aunt and uncle,
Marie and Jack Scudder,

with love

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I

Throne

In his seventeenth year of life, Jai gained an empire and lost everything he valued.

Stately buildings faced a plaza tiled in white and gray stone. Clouds hung low in the sky, the drizzle saturating the air. Evening had come, a time when the heat of the sixty-two-hour day on the world Delos cooled enough to make the temperature tolerable for its human colonists.

Two young men walked across the plaza, coming from the embassy of the Allied Worlds of Earth. One wore simple clothes, a sweater and trousers. The other had on elegant garb with a severe cut, the cloth as black as shadows. Even in the misty air, his black hair glittered.

On the other side of the plaza, the embassy of the Eubian Concord stood in grandeur, large and solid, with many columns. Six men descended its stairs. Four were strongly built and moved like machines, their uniforms black and their eyes the color of rust. They were guarding the other two men. The larger of the two, taller even than the looming guards, had a shock of glittering white hair and a commanding presence. His patrician features and red eyes identified him as a Highton Aristocrat, member of the most powerful, the wealthiest, and possibly the most hated ruling caste ever known to humanity.

The other man had his wrists locked behind his back in slave restraints. The prisoner moved stiffly, his chin thrust out but his eyes glazed. A gust stirred his wine-red hair around his handsome face. A diamond collar circled his neck and diamond guards glinted on his wrists and ankles. His white shirt, costly and impractical, was tucked into his dark pants. He walked barefoot.

The groups approached each other.

The two youths from the Allied Embassy stopped in the center of the plaza. The one in black clothes was tall, with broad shoulders and an athletic build. His features very much resembled those of the Highton man with the glittering white hair and were subtly echoed in the faces of the four guards.

The prisoner bore no resemblance to him . . .

At least not at first glance.

Jai Rockworth waited with his friend, Mik Fresnel, as the group of Eubians crossed the plaza to their destination. A deep-seated fear within Jai urged him to run, but he forced himself to remain still. He now wished he had brought more people. Had he been naive, assuming the Eubians would treat this exchange with honor? Given the number of armed guards in their group, he would have little recourse if they decided to take him without relinquishing their prisoner. But it was too late for second thoughts. If he didn't go through with this now, he might never find the courage to try again.

He recognized the white-haired man in the center of the Eubian group: Corbal Xir. Jai had seen him on countless news broadcasts. As a cousin of the late emperor, Xir stood close to the Carnelian Throne of Eube. The emperor, Jaibriol the Second, had died without a known heir, and many expected Xir to claim the title. The ruby color of Corbal Xir's eyes disturbed Jai—for it exactly matched his own. During the last two years, Jai had hidden his with brown lenses. Xir showed no such

compunction about revealing his Aristo genetics.

Jai felt as if a band were constricting around his chest. He had no idea how to deal with a man like Xir. The Eubian group halted a few paces in front of him. The man in slave restraints stood with a numb expression, watching Jai with no hint of recognition. But Jai knew his face. Eldrin Valdori, Prince Eldrin.

His uncle.

If I could free you from your pain by taking it into myself, Jai thought, *I would*. Nothing he could do would change what his uncle had already suffered, but he could see to it that Eldrin endured no more. He tried not to think that it would take so little, so terrifyingly little, for him to end up exactly like his uncle.

Xir spoke to Jai in the language of the Highton Aristos, his voice a rumble of authority. “I propose a simultaneous exchange. You and Prince Eldrin walk forward at the same time.”

“Very well,” Jai answered in flawless Highton. But when he turned to Mik, he switched to English. “Thank you for coming.” He wanted to say so much more, but he couldn’t take the risk.

Mik glanced uneasily at the Eubians. When he gave Jai a questioning look, Jai shook his head, fearing Mik would ask for an explanation Jai could never provide. But Mik just offered his hand. Jai shook it with a gratitude he didn’t dare show, and also with sorrow, knowing he was saying good-bye to his friend forever.

“I’m not sure what you’re doing,” Mik said quietly. “But I will remember what you said.”

Jai wished he could say more: *Never forget. No matter what you hear of me from this day on, remember the Jai you knew*. But Mik couldn’t hear his thoughts, and Jai could say nothing in front of the Eubians. He nodded to Mik, his throat tight. Then he composed his face into a mask of Highton arrogance and faced Corbal Xir. Jai had barricaded his telepath’s mind, turning it into a mental fortress, and so he received nothing from the Eubians, no sense of their emotions or thoughts.

Prince Eldrin was staring at him—and suddenly Jai *felt* his uncle’s mind. Recognition went through him like a jolt of electricity: Eldrin was also a telepath. Even having known it ahead of time, Jai was still startled by the strength of his uncle’s mind. Either Jai was more attuned to him than to the Aristos, who had no ability as psions, or else his uncle’s mental barriers had slipped. Whatever the reason, the impact of Eldrin’s emotions staggered Jai. He knew the other man’s confusion and anguish as if it were his own. Another realization hit him: until this moment, Eldrin had known nothing about the exchange. The shock of realizing his captors intended to trade him had caused Eldrin’s barriers to slip.

When Jai spoke to Eldrin, he made himself show a calm he didn’t come close to feeling. “Shall we begin?”

“Yes.” The prince’s voice rasped with laryngitis so severe he had trouble speaking.

The raw sound of his uncle’s voice shook Jai. He feared to learn what had injured Eldrin’s vocal cords. Screams left scars that could haunt a man.

He and Eldrin walked forward. When they reached each other, Jai wanted to stop, to ask Eldrin the questions surging within him, to offer reassurance, to beg forgiveness for the life Jai was embarking on. But he could do nothing, show no hint of his roiling emotions. They passed in silence, Eldrin going to the Allies and Jai to the Eubians.

Jai stopped when he reached Corbal Xir. The older man nodded in acknowledgment, though of what, Jai didn’t know. A chill went through him at the soulless intensity of Xir’s gaze. Jai returned his nod, then turned to see Eldrin reach Mik. As the prince halted, he looked back. For an instant he ar

Jai stared at each other. In that moment, even the mist seemed to wait. Would Eldrin ask *why*? Would he curse his captors?

The moment passed, and Jai no longer felt his uncle's emotions. Eldrin's mental barriers had come up again. Jai didn't think his uncle even realized they had slipped.

The Eubians closed around Jai in a tight formation and swept him away, headed for their embassy. Jai set his shoulders and faced his future, though dread haunted him.

So it was that Jai Rockworth—also known as Jaibriol the Third—claimed his place as emperor of Eube, the largest empire in the history of humanity.

Advent

A portico with a high arch formed the entrance of the Eubian Embassy. As Jai entered the building, a muscle in his cheek twitched. The four guards loomed around him, bulky and silent, arms swinging precisely at their sides, their faces hard. He found it difficult to absorb the enormity of it, that he had walked with Lord Corbal Xir, one of the most feared men in settled space. When the great doors of the embassy thundered shut behind them, Jai felt as if he were trapped in a mausoleum. Jai Rockworth had died; from this day on he was Jaibriol III.

He protected his mind, strengthening his mental shields until no trace of his telepathic abilities could leak to the Traders with him. No, the *Eubians*. He had to remember; Eubians never referred to themselves as Traders. That name came from the people of the Skolian Imperialate, who abhorred the Eubians for basing their economy on a slave trade. For the rest of his life, Jai would have to maintain his defenses; he could never weaken, neither in his behavior nor his mental protections, lest it reveal that he who dared claim the Carnelian Throne was a slave. A provider.

Nausea surged in Jai and he nearly lost his composure. More than any other reason, Aristos were hated because they used providers to transcend. Providers were empaths and telepaths; Aristos were anti-empaths. An Aristo could pick up the physical or emotional anguish of a psion, but instead of registering it as pain, the Aristo felt pleasure. The stronger a psion, the more transcendence he or she “provided” the Aristo. Craving the experience with a need that verged on obsession, Aristos made psions into the slaves they called “providers.” Their pitiless culture allowed no exceptions; all empaths and telepaths were providers.

Jai knew he would have to protect his mind every day for the rest of his life. The immensity of it was more than he could absorb. If he slipped even once, revealing he was a psion, his life would become hell.

And yet—his claim to the throne was genuine.

To gain his title he had sent Corbal Xir a lock of his hair. Its DNA would show him as the true son of Jaibriol II, the previous emperor of Eube, who had died less than two months ago. The Eubians would undoubtedly check and double-check his DNA, but Jai knew they would find the proof they needed. His great-great-grandfather, Eube Qox, had founded the Eubian Concord and been its first emperor. Eube had been an Aristo of course, a Highton in fact, part of the highest Aristo caste. Only Highton could be emperor. Jai’s great-grandfather, Jaibriol I, had also been a Highton Aristo, as had been Jai’s grandfather, Ur Qox.

Or so everyone believed.

Only Jai knew the truth: his great-grandfather had bred psi traits into the imperial line. A powerful enough psion could use ancient technology that survived from the long-dead Ruby Empire, technology the modern age couldn’t reproduce—or defend against. But no Aristo could be a psion; the trait was considered a debilitating weakness, weren’t part of the Aristo gene pool. The genes that created a psion were recessive, which meant *both* parents had to contribute them to their child for the ability to manifest.

Jaibriol I had sired a son with one of his providers and forced his empress to acknowledge the child as her own, making the boy heir to the throne. It was an unspeakable abomination by Highton standards, but the emperor had been fanatically hungry for the power of the ancient Ruby machines.

The boy, Ur Qox, had been Jai's grandfather. Ur had the psi genes only from his mother, so he wasn't a psion. But he too fathered a child on one of his providers—and that son, Jaibriol II, had been a Ruby telepath, the most powerful of all psions. He possessed the mental power to use the ancient machines, which would have made it possible for him to conquer human-settled space. Through him the Aristos could have subjugated all humanity.

Jaibriol II had other ideas. He had fled his heritage, appalled by its brutality, and secretly married another Ruby psion, a warrior queen of the Skolian Imperialate, Eube's greatest enemy. Her name had been Soz Valdoria.

Jai's mother.

So Jai had been born a Ruby telepath, the first child of Jaibriol II and Soz Valdoria. No one knew his mother and father had hidden in exile for fifteen years. But ESComm, the Eubian military, had finally found Jai's father and torn him away from his idyllic life, never realizing he had a family. In secret, Jai's mother had left her children on Earth, to protect them. Then she had launched the Radiance War—a shattering conflict that brought two star-spanning empires to their knees—all to rescue her husband from his own people.

Jai's parents had died in that war.

One consolation remained to Jai, the knowledge that his mother and father had been reunited in an escape shuttle before a missile exploded it. They had died together. He struggled against the hotness of his eyes. The grief was too great; he had never been able to weep for their loss. He feared if he started he would never stop.

His parents had dreamed of a time when Eube and Skolia would know peace. Somehow, somehow, he would turn that dream into reality. He would find a way to ensure that the two people who had gifted him with their unconditional love hadn't died in vain.

Drizzle misted over Eldrin, dampening his clothes and hair. His body ached from his last "chat" with his interrogators. He stared dully after the Traders as they walked toward their embassy, two Highton Aristos surrounded by four guards. He wondered what game of cruelty they were playing with him this time.

The unfamiliar youth who had stayed here in the plaza spoke to Eldrin in stilted Highton, his accent almost too thick to understand. "Cold you are? We go back."

Eldrin narrowed his gaze. The youth looked about eighteen, average in height, a bit shorter than Eldrin, with brown hair and eyes, and a friendly face. If Eldrin hadn't known better, he would have mistaken his new tormentor for a schoolboy from Earth.

The youth glanced at Eldrin's bound arms, then raised his gaze quickly, as if he didn't want to look. "Like you to make your arms free?" he asked.

Eldrin stepped back, his head jerking. What new tricks had they devised? His jaw clenched. Hard, he felt tendons stand out in his neck.

"Okay, we don't have to do that," the boy said in English, more to himself than Eldrin. In his terrible Highton, he added, "Go we to Allied Embassy." He indicated a building. "Embassy. Allied Worlds. Earth. You come with me, yes?"

They picked a good actor. Eldrin readied himself to fight or run. Realistically, he knew he would lose either way; he could do little with his hands locked behind his back. But he had to try. He couldn't let them break him.

"Come, yes?" the boy repeated. "We remove restraints."

Eldrin had intended to stay silent, but he couldn't keep his hatred inside. "Go rot in a Tazon whorehouse." He spoke in Skolian Flag, a language of his own people. He would never willingly surrender to Highton, not if they tortured him for a hundred years.

The youth's eyes widened. He switched into Flag. "I'm not a Eubian, I swear it." He spoke the Skolian much better than High-ton. "You are free now, in the territory of the Allied Worlds of Earth. We offer you protection."

Eldrin said nothing.

The boy tried again. "My name is Mik Fresnel. I'm a volunteer with the Dawn Corps. We're a group from Earth helping with rescue and relocation operations now that the war is over."

"Mik" looked so earnest, he could have fueled a spaceship on his sincerity. Eldrin saw their game now: convince him that he was free, that the fighting had ended, let him taste it, believe it, revel in it—and then send him back to interrogation.

After another silence, Mik said, "It's warmer in the embassy." His lopsided smile would have been charming had it been genuine. "The dining room has some pretty good soup."

Eldrin tried not to imagine the soup. Cold was seeping into his body, weakening the emotional numbness he held around himself like a shield. His arms and wrists throbbed. He had been shackled during the trip he and Corbal had taken through space, or wherever, to reach this place. At least Corbal hadn't ordered any other restraints beyond what basic security required. Strange that only Eldrin's interrogators inflicted pain, never Corbal.

Eldrin struggled to suppress his memories of what he had endured from the intelligence officers of ESComm, Eubian Space Command. He hoped the bastards rotted in hell. They could have questioned him without savagery. Humane methods existed, but they had chosen otherwise.

He had expected even worse from Corbal Xir, a Highton lord high in the Aristo caste system. Corbal could have done whatever he wanted to Eldrin, yet he had held back. Had Eldrin been more gullible, he might have believed Corbal was showing compassion. But it was impossible.

Rain continued to soak his clothes. His feet had become so cold he could barely feel his toes. Muscle tremors shook his body.

"Please," Mik coaxed. "We can help you." For some reason he looked upset. "Let us help."

"Liar." Eldrin's voice rasped. So cold. He was so cold.

"No one will touch you without your consent." Mik stepped away, toward the purported Allied Embassy. "You have my word."

Eldrin didn't want to go with him. He had to resist. But he couldn't keep the image of steaming soup out of his mind. Almost against his will, he moved toward the embassy.

Mik gave him an encouraging smile. He continued to walk, looking back at Eldrin, his expression offering unspoken assurances. So Eldrin limped after him. A drop of rain coalesced in his eye and ran down his face. It had to be rain, not a tear. He refused to weep.

Mik led him around the side of the supposed Allied Embassy. But when they reached a recessed entrance, Eldrin froze. A soldier in fatigues guarded the door, a burly man standing ramrod straight with a laser carbine gripped in both hands.

"No." Eldrin despised the edge of panic in his voice. He jerked back and stumbled on the slick

flagstones. Unable to regain his balance, he dropped to one knee. Agony flared through his leg, and he bit the inside of his mouth to keep from groaning.

Mik was blathering, some gibberish in that damnable soothing voice of his. Eldrin bent his head and shut out the words. He willed his body to be impervious, trying to believe it would work today unlike all the other days. Even knowing they would soon pull him to his feet and take him away, he couldn't give in, couldn't let them see him weaken.

After a time, his mind began to clear. Focusing outward, he saw Mik a few feet away, also kneeling, his forehead creased with concern. Behind Mik, the soldier was still by the column, but he had lowered his gun and taken a less threatening stance. He looked troubled rather than implacable.

"Are you all right?" Mik asked.

Eldrin said nothing. He rose slowly, his battered muscles protesting the effort. Mik also stood, looking solicitous. The kid could have won an acting award. If he was a kid. For all Eldrin knew, the Traders had biosculpted one of their special operations officers to pass as an Earth boy.

Mik indicated the soldier. "Lieutenant Parkins won't hurt you. No one will." He spoke carefully. "We understand what you are."

"And what is that?" Eldrin could barely speak, his throat hurt so much. "Scum, according to your Aristo owners?"

"I'm not a Trader. I swear it to you. I'm an Earth citizen. You're on Allied territory." Awkward now, Mik added, "You're no longer a provider."

Eldrin sneered at him. "A provider? How could you know? I never told you."

"Your collar." An unstated horror lurked in Mik's gaze. "Only a provider would have one made from diamonds."

Eldrin would have touched the collar around his neck if his hands had been free. An Allied citizen might have guessed that he was a provider from his rich garb and restraints. More likely, "Mik" already knew. Although Eldrin couldn't pick up anything from the youth's thoughts, that meant nothing. Eldrin's mind was bruised. While interrogating him, his tormentors had transcended, and the anti-empathic link they had forced on him, using his pain for their pleasure, had wounded his mind.

Yet he couldn't quell the traitorous hope stirring within him. Watching Mik and the soldier, he limped across the flagstones. The ground felt like a furnace; the soles of his feet could no longer distinguish hot and cold.

Mik ushered him through the doorway, placing himself between Eldrin and the taciturn lieutenant who persisted in looking worried. Inside the embassy, they followed corridors of rose-hued marble veined in gold, with ceilings that arched high above their heads. Every now and then they passed a statue in a wall niche.

When Mik stopped at a door bordered by friezes, Eldrin stayed back. He could feel his feet a little now, perhaps enough to run. But to where?

Mik held open the door. "Would you like to come in? You can rest."

Eldrin meant to refuse; instead he found himself saying, "The soup . . .?" Images came to him, hot and savory.

"I'll have someone bring dinner." Another emotion showed now in Mik. Dismay? It made no sense to Eldrin.

Wary, full of mistrust, Eldrin entered the foyer inside. White walls surrounded him, with abstract holo-art in swirls of soft color. As he walked into a hallway beyond the foyer, his toes sunk into bone-white carpet. Just that slight relief was too much to bear. This was an excruciatingly effective

torture; even knowing what they intended, he would weep when they took this away.

The hall ended in a living room with white walls and more of the soothing holo-art. The opposite wall consisted of a floor-to-ceiling window; beyond it, outside, paths circled gardens planted with purple blossoms. In the central flowerbed, bushes sculpted like ships sailed a sea of blue-green foliage, their bases foamed with white flowers. The beauty of the scene lied, promising peace instead of misery.

A click came from the right. Eldrin spun around, tensing to defend himself. Mik was bending over a console by the wall, but when Eldrin moved, Mik glanced at him. Eldrin didn't know how his expression appeared, but whatever it was, it caused Mik to stop what he was doing and straighten up.

"I'm just contacting the dining hall," Mik said. "That's all."

Eldrin wished he could fold his arms across his chest for protection against the cold. It didn't matter that the air was warm; the chill came from inside him. He fought down his nausea.

When Eldrin said nothing, Mik went to work on the console again, but slowly, letting Eldrin see his every move. The boy appeared to do what he claimed, ordering food, but Eldrin had no doubt that ever-so-trusty Mik also notified his superiors that their prisoner had arrived. Their security would be monitoring this room.

Mik turned to Eldrin, then hesitated, seeming uncertain. He motioned at a sofa across the room. "Would you like to sit?"

Gods, yes. But Eldrin stayed put.

"Sir?" Mik gestured, offering the couch.

Eldrin wanted to refuse, but he knew they would play this game however they wished regardless of what he chose. He walked to the couch, more in defiance of his fear than in acceptance of Mik's invitation. He expected an attack from behind, but he reached the sofa unharmed. He sat on one end, lowering his body with care, ready to jump up if he had to defend himself.

Eldrin wondered when Corbal would arrive. The Xir lord often joined him for dinner, lavishing feasts on his exotic new provider. He treated Eldrin well, but as if Eldrin were a treasured art object rather than a human being. Except a collector wouldn't touch a work of art for fear of causing damage. Corbal had no such compunctions.

Eldrin shut away that thought. Safer to wonder who owned Mik. Although the youth wore no restraints, he had to have an Aristo owner. Of all the billions of Eubians spread across the Eubian empire, none was free except those in the three Aristo castes—Hightons, Diamonds, and Silicates—and they numbered no more than a few thousand. Most Eubian slaves were taskmakers and lived comfortable lives, some even rising to a certain amount of authority and wealth. Over a trillion taskmakers existed; with so many owned by so few Aristos, they had to have enough autonomy to run their own lives and maintain the riches and power of their owners.

Providers were different. As psions, they were rare almost to extinction and difficult to create in genetics labs. As a result, only a few thousand existed, most of them conceived naturally. Eldrin grimaced. He didn't want his "elite" standing. Providers had no status, no possessions, and no autonomy.

He thought of the Aristo who had switched places with him in the plaza. The exchange baffled Eldrin. Apparently they expected him to believe they had traded him to the Allies for some Highton youth. Did Corbal really think he was that stupid? No trade in the universe was worth giving up Eldrin Valdoria, their captive Skolian prince. The Traders knew it. The Allies knew it. Eldrin knew it. Even if Corbal had agreed to such a trade for some bizarre reason, the Allies wouldn't have sent two teenage boys to do it. What did Corbal hope to achieve with this charade? It was almost strange.

enough to believe it was real.

No. He couldn't weaken. They wanted him to believe, but he wouldn't be fooled. He couldn't be the pain of having his hope crushed.

Eldrin drew his feet up on the couch, pulling his knees to his chest, his limbs shaking from his inner chill, a coldness that had begun the night of his capture. He wasn't sure how long he had been prisoner—a month, maybe even two.

A rustle drew his attention. Mik was standing in front of him, holding a thermal quilt. Eldrin thought the boy had spoken, but he wasn't sure.

“What?” Eldrin asked hoarsely.

Mik offered the quilt. “You were shivering.”

“Cold.”

Mik tucked the blanket around him. Unexpected warmth spread over Eldrin like a benediction.

“Do you mind if I ask your name?” Mik asked.

“Who is he?” Eldrin whispered.

“He?”

The Aristo in the exchange, Eldrin wanted to say. But he didn't speak. His throat hurt too much.

Mik pushed his hand through his hair. “Can you tell me about yourself? I need to notify my superiors.”

“You already did.” Eldrin could barely manage the words.

“They do know you're here,” Mik admitted. “But no one will approach you without your permission.”

Eldrin shook his head. He knew he should stay alert, but he was so tired . . .

So tired . . .

Voices made Eldrin stir. Had he slept? He was lying with his head on the armrest, his body pulled into a ball, his hands clenching the quilt in front of his body.

Across the room, Mik stood talking to a woman with white hair and a dark-haired man. Two guards were posted where the hallway met the living room. Sweat broke out on Eldrin's forehead. These newcomers wore civilian clothes, but he knew military officers when he saw them.

Mik was speaking in a low voice. He seemed flustered now, confused, worried. “I assumed Jay was carrying out orders. It never occurred to me he would arrange a trade on his own, without telling anyone.”

“You're sure the trade was consensual?” the woman asked.

The dark-haired man spoke. “We've contacted the Eubian Embassy. They don't say much, but it's clear Jay isn't coming back.”

“You lied,” Eldrin whispered.

No one in Mik's group heard, but one of the guards by the hall glanced at Eldrin. Then the man turned to Mik's group. “Major Armstead, I think our guest is awake.”

As they all turned to look, Eldrin sat up, slow and stiff, pulling the quilt around himself, though his shirt offered plenty of warmth. Then it hit him: his arms were free. Mik had said no one would touch him without his consent, yet someone had removed the restraints. They had also treated his injuries; his lacerations no longer bled, and his welts had faded. For all that Mik's claim had been false, Eldrin was grateful they had eased his discomfort.

Grateful? His anger sparked. They extorted his emotions so easily, offering freedom from the pain if he would just talk. But he could tell them nothing. Even if the agony became unbearable and he screamed with the effort to speak, he could reveal nothing they would find useful. The Skolian military had put traps in his brain. If he weakened, those traps would disrupt his neural connections, erasing memories. Even knowing it was necessary, he hated that he would forget his family, his wife, his son . . .

“Sir?”

Eldrin focused outward. Mik was sitting on the table in front of the couch. A hearty aroma tickled Eldrin’s nose; behind Mik, a tray waited with a steaming bowl of soup. Eldrin’s mouth watered.

“Would you like to eat?” Mik asked.

Eldrin nodded, letting the quilt fall to his waist. He wanted to clench it around himself like a shield, but he refused to let his fear show. He regarded Mik with cool reserve.

The youth offered the tray. Eldrin balanced it on his lap, aware of everyone watching him. Then he ate. The soup warmed his throat, a balm to his ravaged vocal cords. His hope flared. Perhaps someday he could sing again. He might never regain his full voice, but he would have his music.

Sing for whom? Corbal? He would die first.

After he finished the soup, he drank the wine, grateful for its numbing effect. Then he slid the tray back on the table.

The two people with Mik had, surprisingly, stayed across the room. A realization came to Eldrin: the guard had called the woman “Major Armstead.” Only an Aristo, or a taskmaker with significant Aristo heritage, could become such a highly ranked military officer. This major, however, had blue eyes with no hint of red, and her face showed no sign of Aristo blood.

He steeled himself against hope. They had done this to him before, when they claimed they had his son and would let Eldrin see him. He had rejoiced to know his son lived—until they revealed it was a lie. He had died inside then. He couldn’t let them do that to him again. Never again.

Mik was waiting. When Eldrin focused on him, the youth said, “Colonel Yamada would like to speak with you.”

“Who is Colonel Yamada?” Although Eldrin’s voice was ragged, it didn’t hurt as much now.

Mik indicated the officer next to Major Armstead, a man with dark eyes, a smooth, golden complexion, and an aura of authority. He didn’t resemble an Aristo, and his mind lacked the hard edge of an ESComm officer. In fact, Eldrin sensed no deception in any of these people. He shook his head. This couldn’t be true. The Eubians would never trade him, not even for another Highton.

After a moment, Mik said, “Would you prefer if we came back later?”

“What does Colonel Yamada want with me?” Eldrin asked.

“Your name, for a start.” Mik sounded friendly.

Eldrin just looked at him. And then? Information about his family? Not only was Eldrin the consort of the Ruby Pharaoh, he was also, through his mother, in line for the Ruby Throne itself.

Mik tried again. “Can we do anything for you?”

The question confused Eldrin. They never asked what he wanted. It had to be a trick. He could call their bluff. “I would like to sleep.”

Mik indicated a door in the hallway. “The bedroom is in there. If you need anything, you can use the console.”

Eldrin inclined his head, his gesture contained and guarded. “All right.”

Unexpectedly, everyone left, true to Mik's word. After a moment, Eldrin went to the door in the hallway. ~~It opened onto a comfortable room with a holobook rack on one wall and a bed with a blue quilt against another.~~ Puzzled, Eldrin went back out to the foyer and tried the front door. To his surprise, it opened. The two guards were outside, and one nodded to him. It was too strange. At a loss, Eldrin stepped outside and waited. Incredibly, neither guard objected. He walked down the hall and they came with him; when he stopped, so did they.

"Can we escort you anywhere?" one asked.

Their behavior bewildered him, so much that he couldn't answer. The Traders had never let him leave his room. In truth, he had little wish to go anywhere; what he really wanted was the sleep his tormentors had denied him for days.

Probing their behavior now, Eldrin returned to his suite. The guards came, too, and took up the posts outside. Finally convinced they intended nothing dire, he went back into the suite to the bedroom, where he collapsed on the bed.

Eldrin's last thoughts, as he fell asleep, were of Dehya, her dark hair flowing. Dehya. Dyhian. Selei. The Ruby Pharaoh.

His wife.

They had told him she died.

The Gilded Cage

Corbal Xir poured the wine. It flowed into the crystal goblets, sparkling like rubies.

He offered Jai a drink. "It is from my vineyards, Your Highness." He said the title easily, as he had addressed Jai that way for years.

At a loss, Jai took the goblet. His inclination was to thank Corbal, but he had no idea how Aristo would respond. So he said nothing. He had been in the embassy for only a few minutes and already he felt as if he were treading water in an ocean where he could all too easily drown.

The room disoriented him. It was circular rather than square. Plush red upholstery covered the walls, and gold shone everywhere, from the moldings that bordered the ceiling to the onion-shaped arches above the doorways. Crystal sparkled on the chandelier, and the black lacquered table gleamed. It all made him feel suffocated.

He and Corbal were nominally alone; their guards had stayed outside. But Corbal surely had security watching the room. Jai was clenching the stem of his goblet so hard, his hand ached. He felt so far out of his league, he had no idea where to begin.

Corbal raised his drink, his smile as smooth as glass. "To your health."

Jai just nodded, afraid to drink. Corbal took a long swallow, then lowered his goblet. He glanced at Jai's glass with concern. "Does the wine not please you?"

"Yes, certainly." Jai waited longer, but Corbal showed no distress. Relieved, Jai lifted his own goblet.

Corbal caught the glass just before the wine touched Jai's lips. Without a word, he pulled away the goblet.

Jai stiffened. "What are you doing?"

Disappointment showed on the older man's face, though whether it was real or planned, Jai couldn't tell.

"Come," Corbal said.

He took Jai to an antique stand by the wall. A gold cage hung from a hook at its top, and inside a bird fluffed red feathers. Corbal opened the cage and set Jai's goblet inside.

The bird chirped. It dipped its translucent beak into the goblet, sipping the wine, and gave an appreciative trill. Just as Jai smiled, the bird went silent. Swaying on the perch, it tilted its head. With a harsh cry, it toppled off the perch and hit the bottom of the cage with a thud.

Jai stared at the bird, then at the wine in his goblet next to it. Without a word, he reached into the cage and picked up the bird. It lay inert in his palm. Dead.

"Gods," Jai whispered.

Corbal took Jai's glass and went to a pearly oval set into the wall, what Jai had thought was part of the decor. When Corbal opened the panel, Jai realized it was a disposal unit. Corbal dropped in the goblet, and the hum of its disintegration filled the room.

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