

# *ESCAPE*

Zack A Tack

Written and Published By:

Zack A Tack

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## ESCAPE

### Chapter 1

Jed stood in front of the shimmering doorway, the silver energy lines in his arms sparking with alarm. He struggled to keep the horror he felt from infecting his little sister's mind. Jyari was already terrified. If his thoughts leaked through to her mind by the telepathy that Jeddons often used, there would be no reasoning with her.

Beyond the doorway was the Control Room of Jedd. The room was taboo to all except his father, King Ankzar and the elders of the council. Anyone found trespassing could be put to death, for not only did the room control the entire planet, but much of Jedd's wealth was stored there, too.

He was King Ankzar's only son and he had been sternly warned away from it. Why on Jedd had Jyari gone in? And how?

*"Come out, Jyari!"* he sent urgently, communicating via mental telepathy. *"There is danger for you in there."*

Waves of Jyari's terror and longing for the safety of his presence flowed into his mind, but she refused to budge.

Jed scowled. He knew the entrance code. He had received it from his mentor, Xanor just days ago, while absorbing the Fourth Knowledge Bloc. He could get in, but he'd be breaking his solemn oath not to enter. How Jyari had managed to get in was beyond him.

His hesitation was momentary. He had to get his sister out of there before she was discovered - disgraced. Raising his hand to the control panel, he tapped in the code. Abruptly the shimmering light dissolved and Jed stepped through the doorway into forbidden territory. He caught his breath at the strangeness of the room. Yet it was not so strange, because somehow it was all there in his mind.

Those colored flashing strobe lights automatically controlled the coming and going of the space shuttles and starships. And the glowing spheres were for light and power to the whole planet. In this room was almost total control of Jedd. No wonder only a chosen few were allowed in. In the gloom beyond the lights, huge flags, dark statues and massive golden chests created blocks of light mingled with dark shadow. They too seemed familiar. But how could they be?

*"Jed!"*

Jyari's whimpering cry filled his mind and he hurried forward to where a sliver of scarlet broke the gloom. Jyari's favorite cape was scarlet.

"Quick, Jyari," he hissed urgently, as Jyari darted from her hiding place and clung to his waist. "Let's get out of here before we're discovered. Tell me your troubles later."

"No, Jed! It's not safe! You must run away! Vexson plans you harm. He is evil - "

"What? Hush." Jed knelt and brushed tears from her face. "You've fallen asleep in here and had a bad dream. Our uncle isn't evil. But if we are caught in here we'll be punished

severely. Why on Jeddon did you come into this room? And how did you get in?"

"I hid and watched Vexson tap the little box. But Jed -"

"You've done wrong. Don't you know the punishment for entering this room?"

He grabbed her hand and hurried towards the door, but Jyari pulled back.

"This is the only safe place, Jed. They won't think to look here. Vexson is going to k-k-kill you!"

"Rubbish! Vexson's a stubborn idiot sometimes, but not a murderer. Now come *on!*"

He yanked Jyari forward but she struggled against him; her outflung hand knocked against a glowing sphere. Deep in the palace, alarms began to shriek. They both froze.

"Run, Jyari!"

She fled, not to the door, but further into the deepest recesses of the room. Jed leapt after her, but whirled around at the sound of voices.

Vexson headed the rush of guards and elders as they poured through the doorway.

"Seize him!"

No sooner was the order given than Jed's arms were grabbed. He struggled uselessly as the guards dragged him over to his uncle. The shrill alarms ceased as the elders adjusted the sphere that Jyari had knocked over.

"I see you couldn't wait to explore forbidden ground, boy. Just what did you expect to gain by coming here? Control? No..." Vexson's eyes narrowed. "You could have no knowledge of this room. Or have you?"

Jed was hardly aware of the question. He was too busy trying to protect Jyari by blanking all thought of her from his mind. His head snapped back as Vexson hit him across the face. The blow numbed his senses. He could taste blood from his bruised lips.

"Answer me! Did that old rascal Xanor give you knowledge of this room?"

"What - knowledge?" Shock and outrage at such treatment from his uncle flooded over him. "How - how dare you -?"

"Huh! I dare easily. You've broken your solemn oath to never enter the Control Room without permission." Vexson thrust his face close to Jed's. "You know this means death?"

"My father would not have me put to death! Exiled perhaps, but -"

"Ankzar is dead, boy. And so are you. I am the new ruler. And I declare you guilty of treason!"

His father - dead! Jed sagged with the shock of it. He felt as if a burning shaft had entered his heart. "But - how? And what of my mother?"

"Seret is mine!" Vexson roared with laughter, then turned to the guards. "Take him away - and keep a watch out for the brat, Jyari. She's in thick with this one. Have you seen her boy?" He grabbed Jed's hair and stared into his eyes. "The truth!"

Jed gasped with pain as Vexson's mind invaded his. He managed to fragment his thoughts as Xanor had taught him, and leaked a distorted image of Jyari running to find him on the mountain.

"So she's outside still." Vexson chuckled. "Didn't learn much, did you, boy? Xanor must be getting feeble. That's why you're back so early! You - guard, wait at the door until she comes in. Go!"

Jed lay limply on the cold stone floor of the dungeon below the palace, his mind still

spinning with shock. How could his father be dead? But dead he must be, for Vexson had executed the perfect coup. And he had walked right into his uncle's hands; being found in the Control Room was excuse enough for Vexson to execute him.

Was it only an hour since he'd come running down the mountain from Xanor's dome, joyful in the new Knowledge Bloc he had just absorbed? He'd been so eager to share the triumph of his early return with his father. Now he would never see him again - nor the orange skies and two suns of Jeddou. Thoughts of all he had lost made him feel sick.

He groaned and pushed himself up with an effort, the cold stone wall prodding his back painfully. What had gotten into his uncle to behave like this? He had always served Ankzar faithfully, in spite of their frequent clashes. Jed frowned. Vexson had never before treated him so roughly. It was almost as if his uncle were a different person.

He shook his head. Thank the planets Jyari had not been found. At least his mother and sister would be safe, for what could they do to depose Vexson?

He was the only one who had the right to challenge his uncle - or would have had, only for his disobedience to the Oath. Perhaps he deserved to die, since he had broken such a solemn vow so easily. Would his execution be tomorrow? Vexson would want it to be soon, he was sure.

*"Jed?"*

In spite of his weariness, he opened his mind to speak with his sister.

*"Jyari? You escaped unseen?"*

*"Yes. I'm sorry they caught you, Jed. You must escape!"*

*"Oh sure, Jyari."*

He *sent* her an image of his surroundings, regretting it as her distress and sorrow came through.

*"My fault, Jed."*

*"Would have happened anyway, Jyari. I should have listened to you. You were right about Vexson."*

He smiled wryly as she agreed firmly with him.

*"But how could he have planned such treason? Ankzar's own brother! How could he have fooled us for all these years? We thought him loyal..."* He sighed. *"My punishment will be execution, Jyari. Do not grieve for me. Tell our mother goodbye - tell her I'm sorry."*

He broke off, unable to *send* through her shock and outrage.

*"Exile on the Isle of Zarr! We'll visit you there once a year as is permitted, Jed."*

Painfully, Jed blanked her out. If only his punishment could be exile - but Vexson could not afford to let him live. If he lived he would soon be old enough to challenge his uncle's claim to rule.

He tried to shut out thoughts of impending death with sleep and managed to achieve some sort of semi-conscious state filled with rustlings, whisperings and creakings. But a rough hand shaking his shoulder rudely awakened him.

"Up, boy," the guard commanded. "Quick, now."

Jed stumbled to his feet, stiff with cold. Was it time for death already? He glanced at the tiny black square of window. A lone star twinkled there still. A shadow blocked out the dim light from the doorway.

"Jed!"

"Mother?"

The shadowy figure paused, her silvery cloak glinting with reflected light from the guard's glowsphere. Then she stepped into the cell with an imperious gesture for the guard to

leave.

“I’m sorry, Seret.” Obviously discomfited, the guard stepped back, but only to the doorway. “He is not to be left alone with anyone - Vexson’s orders.”

Seret frowned, then ignored him. “Vexson agreed – a final goodbye, Jed.”

She made no move to touch him and Jed stood stiffly before her. He wished she had not come. He had managed not to think, not to feel any kind of emotion. Now he wanted to weep.

“Why did you go into the Control Room?” she asked harshly. “There could be nothing for you in there.”

He shook his head; it was too late for explanations. Besides, that would endanger Jyari.

“What happened to Father?” His voice was low - urgent. “I’ve a right to know!”

“An accident, Jed; his space-shuttle exploded.”

“It had to be sabotage! Vexson was too well prepared.”

Seret was still for a moment. “How can you know that? What do you know of Vexson’s plans?”

“How can I know anything? I’ve been away for weeks with Xanor.” Jed frowned, puzzled at her questions. “But if Vexson told you it was an accident, he lied. How long since any space shuttle exploded? Never in living memory! But if Father is truly – dead, I should be Ruler, not Vexson. You know that; the elders know it!”

“But you are guilty of treason.”

He searched the pale oval of her face. There was nothing in her expression to indicate that she even cared. Was this person his mother? He swallowed.

“Am I to have a trial?”

She seemed consider it, then shrugged.

“Who knows what Vexson will do? Since so many saw you in there -”

Hurt beyond bearing, Jed stepped back. “Goodbye - Seret.”

He stood rigid, staring at the door long after she had gone. Why had his mother acted so strangely? It was as if she did not care what happened to him. Like Vexson, she seemed to have changed into a different person. Surely Vexson must have some hold over her to make her act this way.

With a moan, he slumped back onto the hard bunk, but found his gaze drawn to a white blob that gleamed dully on the floor near the doorway. What was that? Paper? Curiously, he picked it up and smoothed out the creases, peering at it in the dim light. There was a rough diagram of a square, with a dome shape on one side - rather like a child’s drawing of the palace.

He shrugged and let it drop, then with a frown, picked it up again. It hadn’t been there before, he was sure. Had his mother dropped it - on purpose? Could it be a message of some kind? Something she dared not say aloud, or even telepathically, for fear of it being intercepted by the guard. He frowned and turned it around.

The light was still too dim to see properly, but he could just make out a curved line going from the edge of the dome to a little squiggle in one corner of the paper. He turned it around, examining it from every side. Perhaps it was nothing to do with him at all. Still, it *might* be.... He stared blankly at the far wall of the dungeon trying to puzzle it out. The light increased gradually and he examined the paper again. The squiggle looked something like a tree.

His heart did a sudden flip and began to thud with excitement. A tree meant outside! If the dome shape was the palace, then the square would be the dungeon underneath it. Could the curved line

be a tunnel? An escape route? His gaze searched the walls of the dungeon. There was nothing there that looked remotely like a secret door. If there were anything it would have to be in the floor; a trapdoor or something. Without moving, he let his gaze drop to the filthy floor. A trapdoor could easily be hidden -

With a quick, indrawn breath, he sprang to the corner of the cell and raked his fingers across the floor. There was nothing there. It was stupid to hope for escape. Still, he hurried to the other side and searched – and his fingers scraped painfully against a sharp metal corner. Jed’s heart thudded with excitement.

It took him several minutes to scrape the trapdoor free of the grime that concealed it, but the hinges were rusted almost solid. He could raise it only enough to get his fingers under one edge. There was nothing to use as a lever!

Impatiently he scraped away more dirt and spat on the rusty hinges, hoping to loosen them. Then he heaved with all his strength and managed to raise it the width of his hand. He strained until he felt sick, but the rusted metal would come no further.

Suddenly, the door clanged open behind him. He whirled around; the trapdoor fell back with a thud. The guard stood in the doorway, laser-gun in his hand.

Jed’s wild hope of escape died. Guards were licensed to shoot escaping prisoners. Once again he had played into his uncle’s hands. Despair squeezed his heart. Silently, the guard stepped forward and wrenched open the trapdoor, using his gun as a lever.

“Go, Jed,” he urged. “And one day, return.”

Jed leapt to the hole. “Your name?”

“Suumin.”

“Come with me, Suumin.”

The guard shook his head. “It is almost time for your execution. When your escape is discovered, I will be the first to follow. I may be able to save you. Go, quickly!”

Jed nodded and descended hastily, stumbling into Stygian blackness. He hoped there were no obstacles in his path. Then a tiny glow-sphere bounced down beside him. Suumins! Jed caught it and turned to thank the guard, but the trapdoor was already closing.

Holding the faintly glowing sphere high, Jed plunged forward into the black tunnel. He could hardly see more than a step in front of him, but it was better than nothing.

He ran where he could, slipping and stumbling and sometimes falling. He crawled where he had to, grazing his hands and knees on sharp gravel. He clambered over large boulders that almost blocked his passage and he wriggled through low openings on his stomach. And he looked over his shoulder frequently because he could hear echoing footsteps. Were they his own, or the guards’? He could not tell; there was no time to stop and listen.

Then he fell yet again and his arms were elbow deep in freezing black water. Panting, he scooped the bobbing glow sphere out and forced himself to his knees. The circle of light cupped in his wet hands was growing dimmer. He could not swim. How far – how deep was the water? There was no way to tell. He edged forward and lowered his feet in. The water came up to his knees. Relief surged through him. He waded forward and immediately plunged down almost out of his depth.

He came up choking and gasping, straining to balance on his toes so he could breathe. The water was so icy it almost paralyzed him. His movements were slow and erratic. The glow-sphere flickered and went out.

Jed thrashed about in a panic. He couldn't go on without a light! His thrusting feet explored the uneven, rocky bottom. He slipped and went under again and when he spluttered back to the black surface, splinters of light glimmered across it. Now he could see which way to go.

"There he is!"

The hiss and spit of laser-fire galvanized Jed into action. He lunged forward, gulping and retching as the water flooded into his nose and mouth. He ducked as nucleon rays fizzed over his head. Water splashed behind him. A hasty backward glance revealed one guard was in the water; others waited with lights.

Jed forced himself on, though his arms and legs were sluggish with cold. Finally, his outstretched hands grappled with rock and he struggled out of the water's icy grip, slipping on the wet surface as he ran.

There was a lull in the firing. Perhaps they were afraid of hitting the guard in front. He hoped it was Suumin catching up to him. There was still a faint chance of escape if it was.

He looked back and tripped again, jarring his head against a rock as he fell. He could not get up and go again. He was too dazed; too exhausted. The splashing behind him ceased and rocks clinked. A fainter splash told him a second guard had entered the water.

A sense of unreality engulfed him. This could not really be happening to him. Surely if he went back to the guards and said, Enough! They would shake his hand and tell him that this had been a testing, devised by Ankzar to prove his courage. Yet if this was his testing he would have to go along with it, or how would he face his father?

"Go, Jed!" Suumin's gasp thrust into his exhausted mind. "*I won't shoot to kill, but they will.*"

Nucleon rays fizzed about his head again, spattering dirt and gravel from the ceiling overhead.

"Don't fire into the roof," Suumin yelled. "Rocks are falling!"

Jed forced himself up. Being tested was one thing; dying was another. He stumbled on until he was at the absolute end of his strength, then fell again. There was a bead of light ahead. The end of the tunnel? The end of his testing? A pity to fail in sight of the end. He began to crawl.

There was a sudden roar. Gravel and rocks thudded down painfully over Jed's back. He fell flat on the ground and covered the back of his neck with his hands. It was little protection. Behind him were muffled shouts, a scream and then silence.

## Chapter 2

A long time after the dust had cleared, Jed pushed his face from the ground and spat the dirt from his mouth. Up high, dust motes danced in the tiny finger of light from the first rising sun. Behind him a glow sphere shone dimly in the rubble. Crawling over to it, he brushed the dirt from its smooth surface. The faint glow was barely enough to see by.

Pebbles clinked as a hand scrabbled through the dirt beside him. Jed scraped frantically at the gravel and uncovered Suumin's head and shoulders. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth.

"My legs..."

Jed held up the light and saw the huge rock crushing them. Bile rushed into his mouth.

With an effort, Suumin jerked his weapon from its gravelly grave. He pushed it towards Jed.

"It's all I can give you now," he gasped. "Don't forget to come back one day – Prince of Jeddon. You owe it to - your people." His breath rasped harshly. "Now don't let me - die in agony."

Jed stared at him, then as horrified understanding dawned, slowly pointed the laser-gun at Suumin's head, but his finger on the trigger seemed paralyzed.

"I – I can't!"

Suumin grasped the barrel and jerked it forward. There was a bright, hissing fizz and his head jerked back, the grimace of death twisting his lips into a macabre smile.

Finally Jed accepted the truth. This was no testing. This was for real. He dropped the weapon and stumbled towards the light at the end of the tunnel.

It was as well there were no guards waiting for him. He staggered out into the cold dawn of a new day and walked towards the mountains, forcing himself to keep going even though his weary muscles shrieked for rest. Finally, when Jeddon's two suns were high overhead he could stay upright no longer. He crawled under an overhanging rock and pulled handfuls of dead grass and leaves over himself. What was he to do? He couldn't run from Vexson for the rest of his life.

He would have to find some of his father's loyal elders to advise him; Garaan – or Jaxel, maybe. They had served his father faithfully for many years. Surely they could be counted on to help him. The Prince of Jeddon should not have to hide amongst rocks like a feral. He pulled another branch across himself and fell asleep with the rustling sounds of the mountain in his ears.

When Jed woke it was dawn again. He had slept half a day and all the night. Now he was so stiff and cold he could hardly move, but a burning thirst drove him to seek water. With an effort he crawled from his rocky niche and forced himself upright. Leaves crunched underfoot and the huge trees towering above dwarfed him. Water! He stumbled downhill through shreds of mist until he found a small brook, almost hidden from sight by looming rocks and overhanging branches. Thankfully he knelt beside it and scooped the water into his mouth, but the buzz of a sunflyer in the distance heralded danger. He scrambled for the cover of nearby rocks. Only guards were allowed sunflyers. They must be looking for him.

The buzz soon grew into a roar and the branches above him were whipped into a frenzy by the down-draught. Shredded leaves danced madly on the water. Jed flattened himself against the rock face, his body taut against the expected fizz of nucleon rays. After what seemed a lifetime, the roar finally receded to a buzz. Gradually, the branches stilled. Jed wiped perspiration and dust from his face.

Beyond the rock a girl's voice exclaimed. "Did you see the sunflyer, Grandfather? It was so low!"

It was ironic that those who were searching for him had saved him from being found by others. He crept silently into a mossy crevice until the faint scraping of footsteps faded into stillness.

This was as good a time as any to Farseek. To find the help he so desperately needed. He sent his mind out, thankful that his Fourth Bloc had given him the knowledge to Farseek telepathically.

*"Garaan... Jaxel...?"*

There was no reply from either of them. Wasn't he doing it right? Puzzled, he tried again. No answering voices filled his mind. Could they possibly be Vexson's allies? Alarmed at the thought he considered his options. There must be someone else who could help him, but whom? Xanor! Surely his old friend and mentor would prove to be an ally. But perhaps it would be best to go and speak with him in person. Yes, that's what he would do. Climb the mountains to Xanor. His old friend was wise and would surely advise him. But this was unfamiliar territory. He looked around. Which way should he climb? Which mountain? He had lost his bearings completely.

With difficulty, he climbed the steep bank above the brook, intending to head for a thick grove of trees. But he was weaker than he realised, and dizziness overtook him. He slipped, tumbled back down the steep bank and plunged headlong into the cold water.

The shock of it took away his dizziness. He dragged himself out onto the lower bank and lay face down, shivering and coughing.

It was a while before he realised he was not alone. His head jerked up and he looked straight into the barrel of an old-fashioned gas-gun.

This was it, then. Whoever owned the gun was certainly not friendly. That would be expecting too much. Despair overwhelmed him. His head dropped back on to the hard rock.

"You win, Vexson," he whispered, and passed out.

Dizzying darkness pressed him to the ground when he came to. His hands were bound in front of him and his feet tied. He struggled uselessly against his bonds. Where was he? Why had Vexson extinguished the glowsphere? Surely prisoners were allowed a little light. Exhaustion came quickly; he let his limbs relax and closed his eyes. The next time he looked, faint light had dispersed the darkness. Moisture glistened on the moss-covered walls of the cave that surrounded him. The light strengthened and the rays of Sirac, Jeddor's first sun picked out the emerald cape of the only other occupant, a girl about his own age. Her cape had fallen back to reveal the high boots, leggings and tunic that most Jeddorite youngsters wore. But they were shabbier than most.

She was sitting cross-legged on the ground with a gas-gun across her knees. Her head rested against a rock. Fair curls tumbled like a waterfall over one cheek. She was sound asleep.

Cautiously Jed rose to a sitting position and edged towards her. If he could get the gun

...

He could have sworn he'd made no noise, but suddenly she was awake, her hand tightening on the weapon. He sighed and slumped back, tiny rocks sharp under his head.

She smiled uncertainly. "Do you want a drink?"

Laying the gun aside, she held a flask to his lips. He gulped most of the drink down, dismayed by his lack of strength, for his eyes seemed to close of their own accord. He forced

them open in time to see the threat of steel above him.

With a cry, he threw up his bound hands and sent the knife spinning. The girl jumped back and grabbed the gun.

“Go on, then!” He glared at her. “Shoot me!”

“I was going to cut you free!” she wailed. “I tied you up in case you ran out into danger while I slept!”

“You know who I am?”

“Of course I know. I saw your armbands.” She retrieved the knife and hacked through the stuff that bound him. “You’re the prince. I don’t believe those things they say about you.”

“What things?” Jed asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Zarine,” she told him. “They say you’re a dangerous criminal. A – murderer.”

“A *murderer*?”

“A guard was found shot – in the tunnel below the palace. Your fingerprint was on the trigger of the gun.”

Jed began to massage his ankles. Zarine was between him and the cave entrance. And she still had the weapon.

“There’s a rumor that you even sabotaged the king’s space-shuttle.”

Jed was still, despair and rage twin daggers in his heart. How could he ever prove his innocence?

“Of course, not everyone believes that,” Zarine’s soft voice went on.

“They - don’t?”

“No. And some don’t believe about the guard.”

“It’s not true!” Jed cried angrily. “Vexson caused my father’s death. He wants to rule – only he has to get rid of me first.”

“Challenge him, then. Those loyal to the king would support you.”

“Grown men will not be led by a boy of fourteen, especially now I’ve been denounced as a traitor and murderer. Besides, I haven’t received my Fifth Bloc of Knowledge. I can’t rule without that.”

“Fourteen? You look older.” She studied him critically. “Are you hungry?”

“You have food?”

“I can get some wild-fruit from the mountain. You must stay hidden. Grandfather is out there somewhere. I’m not sure what he would do about you.”

“Who else is there?”

“Only my brother; he’s away until this evening.” She stepped to the cave entrance with the gun in her hand.

“Why don’t you leave the gun?” Jed challenged. “Don’t you trust me?”

“If I meet Grandfather, he will expect me to have my weapon,” she replied. “There are many ferals in the mountains. The constant drone of sunflyers will have disturbed them. The knife I need to cut the wild-fruit down.” She smiled briefly and vanished.

Jed paced around the small cave. Common sense told him to flee while he could, but he was still desperately tired - and hungry. And this seemed as good a place to hide as any, for the moment.

Briefly, he wondered what kind of feral inhabited the mountain. He was not afraid of meeting a feral. Not since his last bloc of knowledge had taught him the art of subjugation – how to bind a feral’s will with the power of his mind. Those much younger than he could not do this;

their minds did not have enough power. Zarine was younger; she obviously did not have the knowledge since she relied on her weapon.

Perhaps he could give her the knowledge as thanks for her help. It could save her life.

She was a long time coming and Jed's throat felt like a piece of rough carpet was tacked to it. He could hear no sun flyers. Surely it would be safe to drink from the brook.

He slipped out of the cave, noting its position as he left. The entrance was hardly visible from outside, thanks to the thick tumble of vines dangling from trees nearby. But the drag marks from his heels were plain in the leaf litter. Zarine hadn't thought to hide them after dragging him to safety. He followed them back to the pool, swishing at the marks with a leafy branch as he went.

The hidden pool gleamed invitingly under the hot sun. Without bothering to shed his clothing Jed waded in and ducked his head under the water. It was good to get the filth of the last few days off his body and clothes – and the cool water soothed his bruises. What had happened to him seemed unreal. He felt he might waken any moment to find it all a dreadful nightmare.

His head jerked up at the distant drone of sunflyers. The nightmare was real. He froze, ready to dash back to the cave, but the sound faded into silence. Relieved, he clambered from the pool, pulling off his wet tunic to dry in the sun.

“You shouldn't have left the cave.”

He spun around, startled by Zarine's soft voice. What was wrong with him, being so careless? It could have been a guard. He must remember to think like a criminal.

Zarine propped the gun against a rock and passed him ripe, blue wild-fruit from her tunic pockets, watching while he ate ravenously.

“Why do you stare so?” he asked, at last. “Have you never seen anyone eat before?”

The silver lines in her arms flickered as her face went pink. “It's just – your arms.”

“What of them?” He continued eating, more slowly now. “Apart from the bruises.”

“I mean – the bands.”

Puzzled, he glanced at his gleaming armbands. They were a part of him. Put on every royal child at birth, they grew with the flesh, becoming a part of it. They reached from his wrists halfway to his elbows

“You – were so ragged and dirty before,” Zarine went on in a low voice. “You didn't look like a prince. Now you do.”

Abashed at this second proof of carelessness, Jed grabbed his damp jacket, but before he could get it on a fierce growl rent the air. He froze.

The feral crouching on the rocks above them was a huge borjon. The rippling muscles of its powerful, leathery body were tensed ready to spring. Its short, pointed ears were flattened against the ugly head. Black, leathery wings – used for balance, not flight – began to vibrate; a sure sign that it was about to attack.

### Chapter 3

Zarine made a dive for her gun, but Jed thrust the barrel down.

“No!” he whispered urgently. “The noise might bring your grandfather.”

“But –”

“Sshh!” He opened his mind to snare the creature’s will.

Gradually, the lashing tail stilled and the wings folded. The growling ceased. The creature was in his power. He should have been able to make it turn and leave, but the trauma of the last few days had exhausted him mentally as well as physically. Carefully, he backed away, pulling Zarine with him.

Back at the cave, Zarine looked at him in awe.

“What you did I have heard of but never seen. Subjugation! Even my grandfather cannot do this. Truly, you are great.”

She dropped to her knees. It took Jed a moment to realise she was offering her allegiance.

“Anyone can do it, given the knowledge,” he said uncomfortably, thrusting his arms into his jacket at last. “There’s no need to kneel.”

“But – you *are* Prince of Jeddou.”

“I haven’t been invested with the Badge of Ruling,” he reminded her gloomily “I’m a fugitive with no subjects.”

“You have one.”

Moved by her simple dignity, Jed touched her shoulder in acceptance. He had seen his father do this many times.

“You must flee tonight - to the Desert of Rocks,” Zarine told him eagerly, as she rose. “It is the only place that won’t be searched.”

“It won’t be searched because no-one can live there!”

“My grandfather did when he was young. He has given me some of his desert knowledge. With that you will survive.”

Jed’s eyes gleamed with hope. “You would give me this knowledge?”

“I’ll - try.” Zarine swallowed. “I’ve never given knowledge before, only received. Grandfather is very gentle.”

Jed nodded. “I’ve seen minds shattered by giving knowledge incorrectly. But I know how to do it, and how to lessen the pain. In return, I’ll teach you the art of subjugation. Come!”

“Wait! Wait until – this evening.”

She turned and ran from the cave and he dared not call her back.

Did they actually trust each other enough to exchange knowledge? He had only ever done it with experienced mentors – and with Jyari, but she was different. She trusted him completely and her mind was quick and agile. How else could she have remembered the code to the Control Room just from watching Vexson?

What would she be doing now? Was she still safe? He sat down on the floor of the cave and opened his mind to her, but nothing came in through the throbbing that was already there. Subjugation had used up all his energy. Holding his head to ease the ache he sank back and finally, slept.

The buzz of a sunflyer woke him and he saw that Sirin, the second sun, was sliding slowly behind the mountain. The sunflyer spiralled downwards and disappeared behind the trees beyond the brook.

Zarine ran up the hill towards him. “Don’t worry. It’s only Goden, my brother.”

“Your brother is a guard? Why didn’t you say? If he finds me -”

“He won’t; trust me. He’ll eat and sleep and in the morning fly back to work.”

She handed him more wildfruit. “Come, eat or you won’t have enough energy to receive knowledge.”

He knew she was right, yet he could not help feeling uneasy. Could Zarine truly be trusted not to betray his presence?

“Won’t you be missed?” he asked at last, tossing away the husks of the wild-fruit.

Zarine shook her head. “Grandfather never notices me when Goden is home. I come and go as I please.”

“You don’t mention parents.”

“They died when I was a baby.”

“I’m sorry.”

Zarine shrugged. “I don’t even remember them.”

They settled into the correct positions for exchanging knowledge, facing each other with their legs crossed. Zarine placed her hands on his shoulders; the kinetic energy lines in her arms flashed silvery pink in the near dusk of the cave.

Jed thought they were very pretty, but he didn’t say so for fear of embarrassing her. They both needed to concentrate. He placed his hands over hers, then slowly slid them up her arms to her shoulders. She was trembling, though whether from excitement or fear he could not tell.

“Don’t be afraid. Concentrate.” Staring into her eyes, he began the soft chant that would relax them both and permit their minds to mesh without pain. “Open your mind – now.”

“*The Desert of Rocks,*” he *sent* to her mind, for words spoken aloud would break their mental contact. “*Instruct me.*”

Slowly his mind filled with the awesome images of the Desert of Rocks. Rocky, arid stretches filled with choking gas gave way to black marsh and quicksand that could suck down a feral without trace, should one dare enter. In the centre was a freezing lake filled with poisonous gonts, waiting to shoot their long, thin tentacles around the unwary. Jed shuddered at the thought of being stung to death and eaten by such creatures.

Electrical storms and sudden vicious whirlwinds abounded. They could easily pluck a man into the air and fling him down again onto jagged rocks. On the far side of the desert, there were giant waves of hard, black rocks that were the Cliffs of Ebor. Tiny, red-hoofed ibiline skipped fearlessly along their crests.

It was an uninviting place, but secret paths wandered through the dangerous landscape – Zarine showed him where. And tiny springs of fresh water trickled amongst the jagged rocks. There were sleepy lizards to catch for food and the flesh of huge, thorned plants was sweet and good. All the same, he would only shelter in the desert if there were no other choice.

The images gradually faded into nothing and he thought perhaps she was too exhausted to receive, but then the feral image began to build in his mind from hers. Slowly he began to instruct her in the art of subjugation. She was an eager pupil and he admired her tenacity, for she was nearing total exhaustion. It would have been better to do this in two sessions, but there was not enough time. Finally it was done and he began the chant – silently this time – to relax them as their minds withdrew. He was nearly finished when the silence was shattered by a strange voice.

“Zarine! Where are you?”

Startled, they both jumped and Zarine fell back with a cry, clutching her head. She

couldn't have helped it, but the cry gave them away.

His own head pounding with pain, Jed sat still, half-hidden behind rocks, as a glow-sphere bobbed into the cave. The man holding it was dressed in a guard's uniform. It must be Goden.

He knelt beside Zarine. "What happened? Are you hurt?" He saw Jed and suddenly there was a laser-pistol in his hand. "Who are you? What have you done to her?"

"You did it yourself," Jed replied wearily. "We were exchanging knowledge. Your voice broke our contact too suddenly."

"What knowledge - and why here? A cave is no place to exchange knowledge." Jed was silent. He could not think straight - could not think what to tell Goden.

Zarine groaned and tried to sit up. "Jed, what happened?"  
"So you *are* Jed!"

Jed found himself staring into the barrel of Goden's pistol. Zarine's face was a white blur of dismay behind her brother. Goden jerked back one of Jed's sleeves to reveal his armband.

"You're just a boy!"

Jed sighed and closed his eyes. Royal children were generally not well known to the public. Most people would not know him by sight, except for the armbands he could never remove.

"It is my duty to take you in," Goden said, more sternly. "If you are not guilty of - of all those things, then you will surely be freed."

Arguing with Goden would be a waste of time. How could he escape the guard? Suddenly, he sensed the presence of the borjon outside the cave. If he could just summon it -

He concentrated, hardly aware of Zarine pleading for his freedom. His head was splitting, but the feral was coming closer. Then with a fierce growl, it exploded into the cave.

With a hoarse cry of alarm, Goden whirled to face the beast. It leapt at him as he fired. Galvanized into action by Zarine's scream, Jed flung himself towards the cave entrance. There was another flash of pistol fire and a burning pain seared his arm as he ran to freedom.

Jed stumbled up into the mountains, using the thick bushes to hide his flight. The wound was painful, but not as bad as it might have been. His armband had deflected the full force of the ray, so it had scattered and burned instead of slicing into his flesh.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the borjon bound out of the cave, followed by two figures, tiny in the distance. Obviously unharmed by the borjon, Zarine ran down past the pool towards the dome-shaped building that glistened in the distance. Her brother climbed upwards, his face a pale blur in the dusk as he examined the mountainside. If he kept on his present course, Goden would miss him altogether. Taking care to keep the thickest bushes and trees between them, Jed climbed on.

What he had to do now was find Xanor, his friend and mentor. Xanor would be able to advise him.

The next time he stopped to look, there was no sign of Goden. Thankfully, Jed slowed down to pick wildfruit. The vines on which they grew were tough and he had to swing on them to get them off. He grimaced in pain as the sudden movement sent darts of pain through his injured arm.

Before he had wrenched more than two from the vines, a deep drone in the distance alerted him to the danger of hoverers. Goden had wasted no time in alerting Vexson to his presence, then. A line of bright searchlights swung in arcs above the darkening mountain. Jed slithered hastily

down the side of a steep gully, tripping on tangled vines and rotten logs. He landed in muddy water at the bottom where he crouched, listening. The hoverers didn't come too close. Good, Goden must have misdirected them.

He scooped up the water at his feet and drank thirstily, grimacing at the muddy taste. Deep darkness had covered the mountainside now. Not even starlight could penetrate the tangle of trees and bushes that hid this gully. It would be as good a place as any to spend the night.

Clambering out of the water, he scraped out a long hollow in dryer soil and scattered it with dead leaves. With a sigh he lowered his aching body into it, but he slept only fitfully. The throbbing pain of his burned arm was enough to make him restless, let alone the cold and discomfort. At last dawn lightened the sky. He drank from the pool again, and then raked his footprints from the mud with a stick. It was an effort to clamber back up the steep side of the gully, especially since he tried to do it noiselessly. There was no sense in taking risks.

He paused at the top and looked out over the flat plains, still blanketed in fog. Wind swirled the pink-tinged mist to reveal a distant, silver spire - the top of the palace. He could guess what direction to head in now. The sky was empty of sunflyers as yet. They had to wait for the sun to rise for their power.

Xanor's dome should be on top of the next mountain peak. He could be there before dark. With grim determination, he plodded on.

Feet dragging wearily, Jed finally emerged onto the familiar flattened ridge where Xanor lived. Then he stopped short, horror freezing his soul. Before him was a black mound of charred, twisted rubble that had once been Xanor's dome.

How had this happened? Numbly, Jed kicked through the ashes, looking for some sign of his old friend. On the other side of the charred circle he found a fresh grave. With a groan, Jed fell to his knees beside it. How could such a terrible accident happen to the old man right when he was most needed? An accident? No, it couldn't be. It had to be Vexson's doing.

Jed brushed at the tears on his cheeks and vowed revenge. But how could he do anything? He was helpless against his uncle. Vexson was the one with all the power. Vexson wore the Badge of Ruling; the badge that was Jed's by right of birth.

There could be no justice until he secured it for himself. But how? It seemed an impossible task. He had no idea who he could trust and who would betray him. Where could he start? What about some of the elders? They surely couldn't all take Vexson's side. Garaan, the head elder had given a lifetime of faithful service to his father. He could surely be trusted to see justice done. He must try once more to contact the elder.

In spite of his tiredness, he sent his mind out in a Farseeking circle to contact the elder, but again there was no reply. Had Garaan deliberately blanked his mind to Jed's questing, or was some other reason he did not reply? Perhaps he had met with the same fate as Xanor.

Jed lingered by Xanor's graveside, making various plans and discarding them. The only way he could get the Badge of Ruling from Vexson was to return to the palace. Surely some of his friends would be loyal to him. Perhaps he could sneak in a side door and see Girren. He had played with Garaan's son since they were both little. Girren would be able to tell him what was going on.

What a pity he couldn't contact Girren by mental telepathy. The youth had not taken his Fourth Bloc yet. He wouldn't be able to Farseek.

The buzz of a sunflyer interrupted his thoughts. He jumped up and looked desperately for cover. There were no trees or rocks nearby. In desperation, he made a dive for the twisted remains of the dome wall. Charred wood collapsed over him as he burrowed under a curled remnant and buried his face in the ashes. The acrid odour made him cough. Soon the rotors of the sunflyer beat the air just above his head, churning ash into a thick cloud. They had surely seen him.

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