

“The Breaking”
by Michael Jan Friedman

It was one of those times when the whole world seemed to have come together in one place, when all faces lifted in the bright sunlight, smiling, a chant of celebration on their lips.

Really, it was only a select gathering of a thousand or so, each individual dressed in the traditional white frock of his or her slave-forebears, that cascaded from the high podium on which Jai was standing down the broad, pink marble Freedom Steps to the shrugging blue expanse of the Inner Sea. But from the podium, which extended like an open hand from the Liberator’s Palace behind it, it looked like more than a thousand. Much more.

Especially to the remote-controlled cameras the Window networks had strategically positioned to cover the ceremony. But then, the Breaking was supposed to be for the whole country, not just for the Liberator’s closest supporters and their families.

“I’ve waited a long time for this moment,” Jai confided in his father. “Nine years, in fact. Since the day of your death.”

If Meno Cobwalker had survived to serve a second term as Liberator, Jai would have been happy to serve him, content to remain in the background while his father basked in the well-learned adoration of his people. But Meno’s death from Kalliko Fever, just two years before a cure for the disease was discovered, had changed everything.

Jai turned to his left and saw his father’s face looking back at him. Meno’s eyes were closed as if he was asleep, but the rest of his face looked very much awake. The high cheekbones, the expressive lips, the cleft chin . . . much of what made him Meno Cobwalker was still evident.

It was only right that Jai’s father attend this ceremony, that he stand between his handlers in a place of honor at his son’s side. After all, Meno had left Aristaya better than he found it. *By half*, Jai thought. If Meno could not attend the Breaking ceremony as one of the Living, the next best thing was for him to attend it as one of the Dead.

That was why he’d been cleansed and scented with cinnamon cloves earlier that morning, shortly after he was exhumed. But it hadn’t really been necessary to prepare him that way. His coffin was pretty much airtight, and his embalming had been a work of art, performed by the most skilled preservers in Aristaya in keeping with his people’s ancient custom.

And Kalliko’s one virtue was that it didn’t ravage its victims on the outside. It ate them from within, leaving good-looking corpses.

Not even the ground had dared to be unkind to Meno Cobwalker. He didn’t seem to have deteriorated a bit since his first two exhumations, once for the wedding of Jai’s cousin and once for the death of Meno’s aunt. Hells, there were Living who wished they looked as good.

The only part of Jai's father that hadn't worn particularly well was his hair. When he was alive, it had been a thick, silvery cascade. In death it had lost its silkiness, its weight, so it now looked now more like a puff of cotton than a mane.

Jai smiled at the old man, glad to have him around. With his knuckles, he brushed the skin of his father's cheek, felt the strange, leathery texture of it. But it didn't make him love the man less. If anything, it made Jai love him more.

Father, I get my strength from you, Jai thought. All the strength I need. I may never rise to the height you did. But no one in Aristaya is ever going to be disappointed in me either.

He scanned the crowd on the steps, seeking a figure in black. He didn't see one. But really, that wasn't a surprise. If Jai had been Mikal Niyosei, he too would have found an excuse to avoid showing his face at the Breaking.

A ten-year earlier, Jai's father had appeared at Niyosei's Breaking ceremony. He'd stood there politely, deferentially, in his white robe, while Niyosei took his place as Liberator.

In the rain, Jai recalled. The weather had been pretty bad that day. A bad omen—we all should have known then. But rain or no rain, Jai's father had been an honorable man, a statesman. Niyosei was a fair sight less than that.

He'd had his chance during his ten-year, and by all accounts he'd squandered it. He had alienated those he should have befriended, more and more of them as years passed, and as a result left Aristaya in a difficult spot. Everyone said so—not just Jai's people, the Sachi, but also those among the Fojoa who were honest enough to speak their minds.

Jai wouldn't be thought of that way when his ten-year was over. His father, who'd had enough experience to know, had told him the secret: *Cultivate friends, he had said on his deathbed, as if they were the most fragile of plants. Keep them in the sun. Share your successes with them. Help them thrive and they'll help you thrive.*

Jai had every intention of doing that. Niyosei had insisted on doing everything his way, no matter who he'd had to plow under in the process. He'd been single-minded, unrelenting. And where had it gotten him?

More importantly, where had it gotten Aristaya?

To a place of technological inferiority and economic uncertainty. To a fragile, mutually hated state of affairs in which Fojoa distrusted Sachi and Sachi distrusted Fojoa. To the brink of disaster, in Jai's opinion.

But Jai would bring his people back from that brink. With the help of the turbine field his father had planted ten years earlier, which had taken forever to begin operation under Niyosei, he would bring back their economy and their technological edge and their hunger for independence, and set them on the right road again.

The trail to the future that his father had paved for them when he stood where Jai was standing. The trail the people were desperate to follow, as desperate as they'd been a ten-year ago.

"Liberator," said Pigga, "it's time."

Jai glanced at the Overwatcher, who stood on his right. Pigga had kind eyes for someone in his office, and they'd grown kinder with age. "It's time," Jai agreed.

Pigga had served Jai's father for most of his ten-year, and served him well. So when Jai was picked by the Sachi Council to become Liberator, he'd considered only one man for the job of Overwatcher. A man with experience. A man who'd known Meno Cobwalker's mind.

Taking Pigga's advice, Jai turned to his people and, aware of the power of the gesture, raised his hands skyward. The multitude before him in its white robes roared its approval. In keeping with tradition, one of them walked up the pink marble steps. A girl, in this case, no more than five years old.

Well-trained by whoever took care of such things, she took her time negotiating one step after the other. Finally, she reached Jai's podium. The first thing she did there was raise her hands to him, palms up, her forearms pressed together from elbow to wrist—not an easy position to maintain, especially for someone so young.

When Jai responded in kind, the girl turned to Meno, smiled, and repeated the gesture. As she looked into Meno's staring eyes, her smile widened. She took his stiff, claw-like hand and pressed her lips to it as the ceremony demanded. Some children might have rushed that part of the ceremony. As much as they relished the presence of their ancestors, they often cringed at the idea of touching them.

But not this child. *Which, Jai acknowledged, is no doubt one of the reasons she was chosen.*

He nodded to her. "Well done, little daughter."

The girl giggled despite her training, reminding him that she was still five years old. Then, obviously pleased with herself, she went back down the steps to her waiting parents.

The people cheered her. Jai waited until their enthusiasm had died down a bit. Then he held his hand out to Pigga, and the Overwatcher filled it with a paper chain. Jai held it up. It was made of the sort of thin, crinkly paper that children loved. One link was pale blue, the next a deep red, the ceremonial colors of the Fojoa and the Sachi. A symbol of the unity that had endured since the days of Fehir and Ripogo.

"Without the blue links," Jai said, his voice ringing all the way down to the water, "there's no chain. Without the red links, there's no chain. It's only when blue and red are linked together that we're strong. It's only when blue and red are linked together that we're free."

Despite his lack of respect for some of the Fojoa, he said the words of the ritual with as much conviction as he could muster. Judging by the faces of his assembled people, all of whom were Sachi, it was more than enough.

Jai was about to say more, about Fehir and Ripogo, and how their Breaking had opened the gates of freedom to their captive peoples. After all, that was the next step in the ceremony. But he never got the chance.

Because as he opened his mouth, the sea water along the coast began to erupt. It rose first here and then there in great, bubbling gouts of blue fury—three of them before Jai could tear his eyes away and turn to Pigga, and ask what in gods' names was happening.

“The turbines,” Pigga said, his kind eyes gone hard as stones.

Horrified, Jai turned back to the sea. *The turbines*. As he watched, helpless, there were six more explosions, six more eruptions.

Then something bobbed to the surface. At first, Jai didn't know what it was. It was only when he saw the bright red of blood that he understood. It was a body. Not the embalmed form of an elder who'd succumbed to Death in his or her bed, but the bloody, torn corpse of someone who'd breathed and talked and embraced Life just seconds earlier.

A body claimed by whatever had happened under the surface of the water.

But it was only the first. As Jai watched, unable to move, another body bobbed to the surface. And another. And another, in quick succession.

He counted five of them before he could get out an order. Not that Pigga had been waiting for him to say something. The man knew his job.

The Sachi on the marble steps cried out in confusion and terror. They hugged each other, fathers and mothers draping their arms about their children. And they looked to Jai, the Liberator, for clarity.

To his shame, he had none to give them.

* * *

Don't panic, Jai thought as he retreated into the cool, high-ceilinged interior of the Liberator's Palace, Meno and his attendants scurrying after him. *Panic will get you nowhere*.

Outside, the city-state peacekeepers were evacuating the ritual crowd. The celebrants would be all right. Aristaya was another matter.

Jai understood what had just happened, understood it fully and completely. It wasn't just that the turbine field had been attacked, which would have been bad enough. There was also the timing

of the matter to be considered. *The symbolism.* Clearly, whoever had attacked the turbine grid had meant to diminish Jai and his prospects as Liberator.

It was an attack on me personally, Jai recognized. *And on my father, who began the construction of the turbine field when he was Liberator.* But more than anything, it was an attack on their city-state, because without the turbines Aristaya's future would be a dim one.

As Pigga worked the telespeaker, convening the Sachi Council, Jai glanced at his father. Meno, at least, looked calm in the face of what had happened. *Father,* Jai thought.

As far as he could tell, Meno had escaped undamaged by the rush of people that had followed the explosions. *Only his reputation was ravaged,* Jai thought. After all, the turbines had been Meno's legacy.

As the Liberator inspected his father more closely, he made a promise: *Don't worry, old man. I'll find the guilty parties and I'll see to it they pay for what they've done. I won't let you down.*

But in the hours that followed, Jai came no closer to fulfilling his promise. The turbine field had been sabotaged, no question—the debris recovered from the sea floor made that as clear as a late-summer sky. However, the video surveillance tapes that would have identified the saboteurs had—remarkably—gone missing, and none of the technicians had seen anything unusual before to the explosions.

That is, none of the technicians still among the Living.

“The tapes . . . missing?” Jai asked Pigga. “How can that be?”

“I'm trying to figure that out,” the Overwatcher told him dutifully.

“As soon as I have an answer, I'll let you know.”

Hours later, Pigga reported in. But not because he had more information on either the saboteurs or the tapes. “Liberator,” he said, “I have a list of the deceased.” He paused. “You know one of them. A turbine engineer.”

The hairs on the back of Jai's neck prickled. “It's a holiday. There shouldn't have been any engineers on duty.”

“True,” Prigga said. “But with all the preparations, the diagnostic report was overdue. Someone had to see it done or cycle down the system.”

And the last thing she would have wanted was to see the system go down. Especially on Jai's Day of Breaking.

Numbly, he held his hand out and received the list. Her name was the third of five. There was no denying it, no room for hope. His throat tightened.

“I’m sorry,” Prigga said.

From the background, Meno seemed to scrutinize his son. *You’re not a child anymore*, he appeared to say. *You’re the Liberator*.

Jai nodded. “Thank you, Overwatcher.”

I’ll mourn her later, he resolved, as hard as that would be. For the time being, he had other matters to attend to.

More than three hours after the explosions had shattered the peace of the Breaking ceremony, Jai was informed of a call from Mikal Niyosei.

The Liberator was sitting with his Council, trying to predict where else an organized ring of saboteurs might strike. His jaw clenched at the mention of his predecessor’s name. Niyosei was the last person he wanted to see now. Unfortunately, it would’ve been disrespectful to turn the man away.

“Put him through,” Jai said.

A Liberator seldom looked as good at the end of his tenyear as he did at the beginning. However, few looked as bad as Niyosei. Broad and bald, he filled the closed-circuit video screen.

There were dark bags under his lidded eyes that hadn’t been there when he took office. Though he was no longer Liberator, he wore a ceremonial rope around his neck.

“How many fatalities?” he asked, as graceless as ever.

Jai told him.

Niyosei looked appalled. But then, he’d become expert in presenting emotions, only some of which he actually felt. “Have you found the guilty parties?”

“Not yet,” Jai said. “But,” he felt compelled to add, “we will.”

Niyosei grunted. “I warned your father that this would happen if we went ahead with the turbine installation. Why didn’t he listen to me?”

Jai ignored the rebuke. “Because we needed to become energy-independent. We still do.”

Niyosei made a sound of disgust. “Even though energy independence was going to alienate our friends on the Plains? And result in a tragedy of immense proportions?”

Jai frowned. “You think it was our allies on the plains who sabotaged the turbines?”

“Who else?”

“They’d be taking a chance. If we found out they were responsible—”

“They’re desperate,” Niyosei insisted, “as I’ve pointed out so often that I’ve lost count. The day we became energy independent is the day they’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Or the day they lower their prices.”

“They *have* lowered them, again and again. Maybe you’re too young to remember.”

Jai smiled, refusing to let such talk anger him. “Now you sound as if you’re *their* Liberator.”

“Our fate and theirs are tied together,” Niyosei said. “Or maybe I should say they *were*.”

“I don’t believe the Plains nations did this. They had to know they would be the first ones suspected.”

“Then tell me who it was. I can’t wait to hear it.”

Jai felt like saying, “Maybe it was *you*.”

After all, Niyosei couldn’t have just ignored away Meno’s turbine plan. Not after it had received so much support from the Fojoa faction as well as from the Sachi. From the beginning of his ten-year as Liberator, Niyosei had been forced to build something he clearly opposed. It couldn’t have been an easy thing for him. If the turbine field succeeded, Meno would get the credit. If it failed, Niyosei would be held responsible.

But if it were destroyed by saboteurs? That turn of events could hardly be laid at Niyosei’s door. Especially if it happened after his ten-year was over.

Nonetheless, Jai wouldn’t accuse the man. He was the Liberator after all, and the son of Meno Cobwalker. He wouldn’t lower himself to insult trading.

So instead he said, “In due time. My investigation is far from over.”

“Or maybe it’s over and you simply don’t know it yet.”

Jai frowned. “I have work to do.”

“More than you think . . . Liberator.”

It was an impolite remark, to say the least. “Maybe,” Jai said, “we’d do best to terminate this conversation.”

“Your father and I wouldn’t be having a conversation at all. We’d be working together to find out who was responsible for the tragedy.”

“Forgive me if I’m skeptical on that count. Contrary to what you may think, my father didn’t place a great deal of trust in—”

In you, he’d been about to say. But if Niyosei felt comfortable slinging barbs, Jai didn’t.

“—in those outside his Council,” he said instead.

“Not true,” Niyosei said. “I wish he were alive now to tell you so himself. Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

And with that, he ended the connection.

That night, Jai dreamed of Powacti.

They weren’t gentle dreams. They were fierce, tormented.

Mercifully, he woke before too long and went to stand by his window, letting the winds cool the sweat on him.

He and Powacti had met at a music fair up the coast, near the border with Truktain. He had told her his name was Jai, which was common enough among the Sachi.

Powacti was beautiful in a strange, exotic kind of way. When Jai asked her about her looks, she explained that she was of mixed parentage—one of her grandfathers had been Fojoa. An unusual situation to be sure. Even now, centuries after the two peoples were brought to Aristaya as slaves, one almost never saw a child who was part one and part the other.

Even knowing that little bit about her, Jai was certain they had no future together. Not when he was to represent the Sachi as Liberator some day. But he had asked her to dinner anyway, and she had seemed happy to accept his invitation.

At first, it had only been a physical attraction. Or so he’d told himself. Then it became more than that, a melding of hearts and minds such as he’d never experienced. Unable to wait any longer, he told her who he was.

She didn’t seem surprised. “Your father was on the Window all the time,” she explained, “every day and night. And you bear a striking resemblance to him.”

“But if you knew . . .”

“Why would I pursue a relationship with you? Because I wanted to. Why else?”

If it was good enough for her, it was good enough for him.

Jai was tired the next morning. He hoped Pigga had discovered something overnight that would point to the identity of the saboteur. He was disappointed.

And his father's appearance at the door of his bedroom didn't do anything to ease his mind.

"The Liberator must be returned to the Earth," said one of the two attendants holding Meno up.

Jai nodded. "Of course."

He embraced his father's unyielding flesh, wishing Meno could have stayed with him a little longer. He could no longer give Jai advice but his presence had been a source of great comfort, a touchstone in this time of trouble. And now even that would be gone.

"May he find peace in the embrace of the Earth," Jai said, "until we again have need of him."

Then he watched Meno's attendants take him away.

Jai shook his head. He felt alone. So damned alone.

But he didn't have time to ponder the feeling—because a moment later, he received a call from Gawin Grimm, the Firstman of Hajawi. Grimm was fair-haired, with hard, angular features and an almost white fringe of beard. When he spoke, it was with the twang of the northern plains. Jai had seen the man on state occasions from time to time.

Meno had made a show of valuing the man's friendship, but privately he'd always expressed resentment for Grimm and his kind.

"They bleed us and they always have, because we're at their mercy," he'd complained to his son. "But the turbines will change all that."

And now they were down. And they would stay down for some time if reports of the damage were at all accurate.

"We had nothing to do with the destruction of your turbines," Grimm said without preamble.

Now, Jai thought, *I can look elsewhere, secure in the knowledge that you and your people are entirely innocent of wrongdoing.*

But what he said was, "I appreciate your candor, Firstman."

Grimm scowled. "We don't appreciate sarcasm here, Liberator."

"I assure you," Jai said, "I didn't intend any sarcasm." And he hadn't. Not when it would have gone against his father's advice. The Firstman eyed him for a moment. Then he said, "Sorry. I thought for a moment I was dealing with your friend Niyosei."

“Some of us in Aristaya are more diplomatic than others.

Though,” Jai added, “you have to admit that if our positions were reversed, you’d make me a suspect in your investigation.”

Grimm laughed. “Damned right I would.”

“You’d think I was trying to strip you of your energy source.”

“I might at that. Except that crop was harvested a long time ago, Liberator. We don’t expect it to grow again.”

“Of course, you’ve got other crops in other places. And to the extent we were successful with our turbines, they might have considered the same option.”

“That’s their right,” Grimm said. “We wouldn’t have wrecked *their* turbine fields either.”

Jai nodded. “Again, thanks for your candor. Now I know why my father respected you so much.”

“The feeling was mutual,” said the Firstman.

They exchanged a few other pleasantries. But none of them got Jai any closer to solving his mystery.

Six months after Jai began seeing Powacti, she took him diving.

They explored the wreck of a Candian sailing ship, one that had sunk off the coast of Aristaya three hundred years earlier.

She was a better swimmer than he was. In fact, it wasn’t even close. When they came up, he told her how impressed he was.

“You hate it,” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“That someone is better than you at something.”

Stung, Jai asked, “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true. You’ve been raised to think you’re superior to everyone else.”

He began to protest, then stopped himself. After all, she was right, “A hazard of being raised in the house of the Liberator.”

“Oh, right, you’re the Liberator’s son.” Powacti’s eyes twinkled like gems in the sun. “I’d forgotten.”

“You’re making fun of me?”

“It’s not a difficult thing to do.”

Jai almost told her that Liberator’s sons were due respect. But again, he stopped himself. “Weren’t you taught decorum?”

“I was,” she said. “It took me years to forget it.”

Yet another reminder that she wasn’t like other women.

At the time, Jai had believed it was because of what she did. Turbine engineers were known to be rough around the edges.

But in time, he realized it had nothing to do with her work. It was just the way she saw the world. Not as a solemn responsibility, but as something to be enjoyed at every opportunity.

He didn’t remember when he began loving her. He just knew that he wanted to be with her all the time, every day if possible.

Eventually, she fell in love with him as well. It just took a bit longer.

By midday, the media were pounding the Liberator’s office with requests for information. Unfortunately, there was little that Jai or his people could give them. So what the media disseminated to the people were questions—and more questions—never a good thing after a disaster of such magnitude.

Jai wished his father were alive to advise him. He felt sure that Meno would think of doing something that Jai hadn’t. Then he thought: *Father’s memoir!*

Meno had begun writing it before he fell sick. He had asked Jai to go over “the thing,” to see if what he had written was any good. But before Jai could tell him, Meno died.

Jai went over the memoir now, this time to see how his father had dealt with the crises he’d faced as Liberator. As it turned out, there hadn’t been many crises during Meno’s ten-year. Certainly, none on the scale that Jai was facing.

He did learn *something* from Meno’s memoirs. Something that surprised him. Something radically different from the way Jai remembered it.

That night, Jai left the Liberator’s Palace on his own.

He wasn't used to being outside the Sacred Precinct at such a late hour. Or wearing a hood so people wouldn't recognize him.

But on this occasion, he made an exception.

The wine house was on the wharf, not far from where the ships came in from Peleor and Gallamastra. There was no sign outside to identify the place. But then, some establishments didn't need signs.

Inside, there were at least a dozen patrons. At that hour, it was a good number. But then, the place was known for its exotic vintages, even in the Sacred Precinct. Or rather, for one exotic vintage in particular.

Jai crossed the room and sat down at the bar. No one looked at him—except, of course, for the serving man. A scar ran from his brow to the line of his jaw, interrupted only by the ruin of an empty eye socket.

Jai remembered the incident that had claimed that eye. The assailant. The intervention.

At first, Ocojo had been a hero. Then, just a few months later, something happened. Jai still didn't know what it was, exactly. But just like that, the man's name became poison.

The next day, he was replaced by Pigga. And Ocojo wasn't spoken of again.

“What will you have?” he asked, his voice as gravelly as Jai remembered.

Jai pulled back his hood—just far enough for Ocojo to see him. The man's good eye widened and he went pale.

“No matter what you've heard,” Ocojo said, “I didn't do anything wrong.”

“I've never believed otherwise.”

Ocojo's brow furrowed. “Then what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to ask you a question,” Jai said. “And maybe sample some of your wine.”

Ocojo tilted his head. “The Aristai used to torture us with promises of freedom before they had us executed. I didn't know our Liberator had adopted the same practice.”

“He hasn't. You've got nothing to fear.”

The old fellow eyed him a moment longer. Then he said, “All right, we'll play your game. What's the question?”

“First the wine,” Jai said. “The kind with the oranges.”

Ocojo turned to the woman at the other end of the bar. “The Perlovian. For my friend here.”

Now that Jai got a look at her, he saw the resemblance. “Your daughter,” he said as she retreated into a back room.

“My daughter. You played with her when you were little.”

Jai didn’t remember. But then, his father’s officers were always bringing children around for him to play with. The names and the faces blurred.

“Whatever you have in mind for me,” Ocojo said, “leave her out of it. That’s all I ask.”

“I told you, I’m not going to do anything to hurt you.”

“So you’ve said.”

A moment later, Ocojo’s daughter emerged with the glass of wine. She handed it to her father, who in turn handed it to Jai.

He swirled it about in the glass, then took a sip. He could taste the oranges right away. “It’s s good as they say. Maybe even better.”

“Your father liked it too. It was why I decided to carry it in the first place, expensive as it is. Because he liked it, and because it’s not easy to find it in Aristaya. I thought some day he might forgive me and come here looking for it.” He grunted. “Fool that I am.”

Jai smiled. “Well, it was my father’s loss.” He put his glass down on the bar. “You’re familiar with what happened in the harbor?”

“Isn’t everyone?”

“I suppose so. What you don’t know is that the surveillance tapes—the ones that would have shown us who sabotaged the turbines—have disappeared.”

Ocojo laughed softly. “No surprise.”

“Really.”

“I’d be a poor Overwatcher if I couldn’t have predicted *that*.”

Jai nodded appreciatively. “It seems I’ve come to the right place. Here’s my question, then: Is there another way to identify the saboteur?”

“*That’s* your question?”

Jai felt his face flush.

“What you should be asking,” said Ocojo, “is who sold the tapes.”

“You think they were stolen so they could be sold?”

The older man shrugged. “Not for that reason, maybe, but once they’re in someone’s hands they’re as valuable as anything on Earth. What price couldn’t somebody ask for those tapes—from you or anyone else? What kind of leverage could you deny that person?”

Jai saw what he meant. “Then who—”

“It could be anybody. Whoever ordered the sabotage would be my first suspicion. But if they couldn’t get their hands on it directly, they’d be happy to buy it from somebody else. And then there are your enemies, outside Aristaya as well as inside.”

“Enemies . . . inside,” Jai said, trying to understand. “You mean Niyosei?”

Ocojo laughed a little louder this time. “Niyosei may be guilty of a lot of things, but he’s not your enemy. Didn’t your father teach you *anything*?”

Jai didn’t like the man’s tone. But he didn’t dare to offend him. Not when Ocojo was proving so valuable. “These people you speak of, who would sell the tapes . . . I need to identify them.”

“Yes. You do.”

“Then you don’t—”

“Know who they might be? If I were still Overwatcher, I’d know. In a heartbeat. But I pour wine now. It’s been a long time since I had my ear to that particular patch of ground.”

For just a moment, Jai saw the pain in Ocojo’s soul. The misery of having served so long and so well and then being stripped of his office.

“A long time,” the older man rasped.

“I know you’ve got no love for my family,” Jai said. “Not after what we did to you. But you must know how important that turbine field was to Aristaya. If you could tell me where to start looking, at least . . . not for my father’s sake or for mine, but for the sake of your city . . .”

Ocojo scowled. “You’re begging. Your father would never have begged.”

“I guess I’m not my father,” Jai said.

For a long time, that single eye bore into him like a drill.

Then its owner said, “Whatever you say.”

In the end, it wasn't Jai who cut Powacti loose. It was the other way around.

"I want you to be my mate," he'd told her. "I don't care what anyone says."

"You will," she'd said. "In time, you'll care a lot."

They were walking through a marketplace late at night, as the last few merchants were packing up their wares. More than likely, no one was listening to them. Still, Jai kept his voice down.

"You're wrong," he'd said.

"Am I? Then why are we whispering?"

"Because—"

"Because you're too smart to throw away your future as Liberator. *That's* why."

"I'll shout it if that will make a difference to you. I'll shout it so everyone hears it."

"You mean a handful of merchants?" Powacti had laughed.

"They'll think you're drunk and ignore you."

"What would you have me do, then?"

"Nothing. Which is what you *should* do. You'll be Liberator of Aristaya some day. And you'll have enough problems without your people turning on you—which is what they'll do if you marry a woman who is part Fojoa."

"Then I'll renounce my claim to the Liberator's Palace."

Powacti had shaken her head. "You won't. You'll do what's best for Aristaya, what your father would have wanted you to do."

"What about what's best for *us*?" he'd asked.

"There is no *us*," she'd insisted, her tone hard and unyielding.

"There never has been." And with an air that told him it would be unwise to follow, she'd walked away.

For a moment Jai had thought about following her, insisting that she marry him no matter the cost. Then the moment passed.

Jai joined the turbine engineers in the Tea Room, where Liberators had entertained dignitaries from Kashedel and Zecoyah since the Breaking a thousand years earlier. There were other meeting rooms in the Palace, modest ones more appropriate for a meeting of this sort. But Jai felt that by honoring Powacti's colleagues in the engineering corps, he was also honoring Powacti.

There were three engineers present. The only woman in the group, a short, powerful-looking individual, was Sachi. The two men, one slender and one more muscular, were Fojoa.

They all had teacups in their hands when Jai entered the room, with its lofty view of the Sea. "I see you have been taken care of," he said.

They nodded. "Yes," said the woman, "thank you."

The Liberator looked from one face to the next. He didn't know any of these people. But they had known Powacti so he *felt* as if he knew them.

In fact, Powacti may have spoken of them. He just didn't remember. So much had happened since she and Jai had parted company.

"No doubt," he said, "you're wondering why I called you here."

"I have to admit," the slender man said, "I didn't expect when I woke up this morning to be having tea with the Liberator."

"You want to know about the explosion," said the woman.

The more muscular man held his hands out, palms up. "We told your security people everything we know."

"I'm not here to ask you about the tragedy," Jai said. "I want to talk about something else—the security tapes."

Powacti's colleagues looked surprised. Jai understood. Engineers had nothing to do with security tapes.

"What about them?" the woman asked.

"They're missing," Jai said.

If they were surprised before, they now looked positively incredulous.

The muscular man spoke first. "Then you don't know—"

"Who carried out the sabotage," Jai said. "That's right. We have no idea who was responsible for the biggest calamity to befall Aristaya since the Breaking."

It wasn't an easy thing to admit. And yet, Jai wanted these people to be honest with him. He had to be honest with them in return.

"I don't believe," he continued, "that the tapes were lost by accident. I believe someone took them."

"To hide the identity of the saboteur?" the woman asked.

"No," Jai said. "For the purpose of selling them to the highest bidder."

The slender man made a face. "Selling them? What kind of Aristayan would do such a thing?"

"Exactly," Jai said. "And with no less than the future of his city-state at stake. I share your disgust for such a person. Nonetheless, the tapes were taken. And if the motive was really a matter of coin . . . who might place it above his or her loyalty to Aristaya?"

The three of them thought about it. But after a while, it was clear they had no idea. Jai was disappointed. Barring Powacti, these three were the closest to the turbine field on the day of the tragedy. If they didn't know . . .

"Wait a moment," said the woman.

"Yes?" Jai responded hopefully.

"What if it's not a matter of enrichment? What if it's a matter of desperation?"

The Liberator saw what she meant. "The need to repay a debt, maybe?"

"Yes."

"And if that's the motive?" Jai asked. "Do you have someone in mind?"

The woman frowned. "I . . . I think I might."

Jai had met Desanthis before. Just once, a couple of years earlier, when the turbine grid went into operation. There was a ceremony and Niyosei had invited Jai to attend—not because he wanted to but because the grid had so clearly been Meno's brainchild. Desanthis was the number two man in charge of the surveillance system. He was tall, as tall as Jai himself, and athletic-looking in a lean, rangy sort of way. He was also the stepson of Kelton Vinick, who sat on the Fojoa Council, which was how he had gotten his job in the first place.

"Liberator," Desanthis said when Jai showed up in the surveillance center unannounced. "What can I do for you?"

Jai hadn't brought Pigga with him. What he meant to do, he would do alone. "I don't suppose there's been any progress in finding the tapes," he said.

"None, unfortunately," said Desanthis. "But rest assured, we'll find them. I've made it my mission."

"That's good to hear."

"And if there's anything else you need, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask. I admired your father, you know. Quite the Liberator, he was."

"Also good to hear," Jai said.

Then he reached back and drove his fist into the man's face—drove it hard, breaking Desanthis's nose. Jai could tell by the cracking sound and the sudden, red spurt of blood, both of which he found unexpectedly satisfying.

Desanthis clutched at his nose and staggered backward, finally coming up against the wall in back of him. He looked at his hand, saw the blood there, and snapped at Jai, "You're insane!"

"Am I?" Jai asked. He advanced on Desanthis, wishing Powacti could be there to see him—to see that in the end, she'd been wrong about him. "Am I . . . traitor?"

Jai's father had been a man of great gentility, great subtlety.

He would never have struck someone in his city-state's employ, no matter how great a crime that individual might have committed—especially when the individual didn't dare hit him back. But Meno had never had to deal with the sort of disaster Jai was dealing with. And Meno had never suffered the kind of loss that Jai had suffered.

And Jai, it turned out, wasn't Meno after all.

"Get away from me!" Desanthis cried out, sounding like someone with a very bad cold. He turned his hands into fists and held them in front of him, no doubt hoping to make Jai think twice about hitting him again.

"Or what?" Jai demanded, still advancing, just the way his fight tutor had taught him when he was growing up. "You'll tell your friends in high places? And what will those friends say when I tell them you've been selling our missing surveillance tapes?"

"I didn't sell them!" Desanthis blurted.

"Not yet," Jai said. "But it hasn't been for lack of trying, has it?"

You've amassed quite a mountain of gambling debts, Desanthis.

When the explosions started, you saw a way to get out from under them. It would be easy, you thought. But it's difficult to contact prospective buyers without exposing yourself at least a little."

And a little was enough, Jai thought. Once Pigga knew whom to investigate, he had identified Desanthis's go-betweens and wrung the truth out of them. But getting the truth out of Desanthis . . . Jai had reserved that pleasure for himself.

That in mind, he smashed the man in the ear, this time with his other hand. Again, Desanthis staggered. But this time, he managed to recover and strike back.

Fortunately, Jai was ready for him. He took the blow on his shoulder and slugged Desanthis in the mouth. The man sank to his knees. But Jai wasn't about to let up on him.

That is, until Desanthis moaned, "Enough. Please . . ."

"You'll give me the tapes," Jai said. It wasn't a question.

The man nodded, blood dripping in a long red goblet from his nose. "Yes . . ."

Jai sat in Pigga's office and watched the recovered surveillance tapes on a small video screen, his jaw clenched with grief and anger and bitter guilt. For the third time, a dark shadow slithered through the water, came up behind a colleague, and slit that person's throat.

The corpse sprawled on the current, a banner of red blood issuing from its wound. Like the other casualties, this one never suspected she was about to die.

Why should she? She was surrounded by her colleagues.

What she didn't know was that one of them had smuggled a short, sharp knife into the underwater installation.

"Dead," Jai spat. "Even before the explosions."

"So it would appear," Pigga said soberly.

"Why?" Jai asked.

"So the saboteur could get unrestricted access to the turbines."

"No, I mean why sabotage at all? Who was this person working for?"

"I wish could tell you," Pigga said.

Jai glanced at him. "You've seen the rest of this tape. There's no clue?"

“No clue, Liberator.”

How could this have happened? Jai asked himself. How could I have allowed it to happen? “But you say the identity of the saboteur . . .”

“That much becomes clear,” Pigga confirmed.

Without anyone around to impede the saboteur’s plan, the dark figure moved to the nearest turbine. Then it took something small, black, and oval-shaped from a compartment on its belt.

“An explosive,” Jai observed.

“Yes, Liberator.”

The saboteur attached explosives to ten turbines, one after the other. “I saw only nine explosions,” Jai said.

“One device failed,” Pigga said. “We just recovered it.”

“Then we’ll at least know what kind of device was used.”

“Yes.”

Pigga looked grim. But then, the saboteur hadn’t claimed his last victim.

Jai wasn’t sure he could watch that. *No*, he thought. *I have to.*

She’d want me to see her death, study it, so I can better avenge it.

So he continued to watch the screen, waiting for Powacti to appear. Waiting for the saboteur to dispatch her as he had dispatched the others.

Suddenly, the saboteur did the last thing Jai expected—he swam up to the camera, looming large in its lens. *He knew where the camera was? Of course he did. If he prepared thoroughly, he must have known that the whole time.*

But why approach the camera now? To mock whoever was watching the tape?

Suddenly, the saboteur began to remove his breathing mask.

What? Jai thought. Then, out loud: “Doesn’t he know he’ll drown?”

“Clearly,” Pigga said, “this person doesn’t care about survival. In fact, this person has every intention of dying even before the explosions take place.”

As the mask came off, the face behind it was hidden in a mess of tiny, white bubbles. But not so many that Jai didn't recognize it.

He felt as if someone had driven a nail into his chest. It was hard for him to breathe.

"Are you all right, Liberator?" Pigga put his hand on Jai's shoulder. "Liberator?"

Jai didn't answer. He shrugged off the Overwatcher's hand and sat there until his throat opened and he could pull in air again.

And all the while he stared at the face of the saboteur. A face he knew.

Powacti's face.

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