

Carrying the Burden

Today was the day that Elar Monay, a decades-long councilman of the Joranum Empire, was to have the privilege of an audience with the Emperor. And as he was escorted through the halls of the Imperial Palace, he could not help but wonder why he needed an escort in the first place. After all, there had not been a reported crime in all the worlds of the Empire for hundreds of years. No war, no poverty, no famine. Interstellar trade was prosperous and flowed freely. Nothing to motivate anyone to commit a crime. Everyone in the Empire was happy and at peace, and the Emperor smiled down upon them all.

But when Elar received word that Emperor Laskin himself had requested an audience, he could not help but be puzzled.

“Elar, you’re barking up the wrong tree...” he muttered to himself as they approached the doors to Laskin's chambers.

The doors were opened, and Elar Monay half expected a blinding light of radiance to flood his eyes. But no such majesty occurred. The Emperor sat reclined in a chair, the same as any normal man. He was aged, but not too aged to rule. The flowing Imperial Robes covered his arms and legs. Elar bowed in reverence as the doors shut behind him.

“No need for formalities here. Please, sit. We are not Emperor and subject here; we are just two humans on equal footing,” Laskin said in a gentle voice. A cat jumped into his lap, purring loudly. “Would you like some wine?” he asked, motioning to a jug and set of goblets on the table. Elar helped himself.

“You are too kind, Sire. I must ask you, why have you requested to see me? I’m just an ordinary politician.”

Laskin smiled warmly. “I would argue differently. You are a career man, and I saw your speech last week on holovision. I had not meant to; normally I don’t trouble myself with watching council speeches, but I mistakenly turned the machine on when reaching for a different control,” he chuckled.

Elar also chuckled nervously and said, “Perhaps you should get controls for your machines that are easier to handle, Sire?”

“Not needed! I did that accidentally on purpose, you see,” Laskin said. It appeared to Elar that he fully meant it. If the Emperor himself believed that it had been more than coincidence that led him to watching his speech, then Elar knew that it must be true. Laskin stroked the black cat in his lap and continued. “I watched your impassioned speech and thought to myself, ‘That just

jogged my memory.’ It reminded me of myself when I was young, and still did not know the truth. That was when I decided. You, Elar Monay, are to be my successor, and the next Emperor.”

Monay nearly dropped his fine (and expensive looking) glass of wine.

“M...me? The next Emperor? Surely, Sire, you can’t-” he stammered, barely getting the words out. But Laskin, now standing and looking pensive, cut him off before he could finish gathering his thoughts.

“I know you must be shocked. But a man with passion is the only man suited for this job. Come with me. You will understand what I mean.”

Elar stood, and they strolled through the Emperor’s private garden. It was a pleasant spring day on the world of the Imperial Capital. As they walked, Laskin continued to talk.

“You know your history. For countless generations, the hundreds of planets of this galactic Empire have existed in complete peace. No war. No poverty. These do not exist on a single planet in all of the imperium. But the nature of humanity is cruel, and the nature of the universe is even more so. Have you ever wondered how peace is maintained, Emperor after Emperor?”

Elar thought for a moment, and said, “Yes, Sire. Quite frequently.”

They were now outside of a set of heavy metal doors. “Well, I’ll show you,” Laskin said as he opened them. The inside of the room was dismal. A mysterious black growth covered the floors and walls, all radiating out of an archaic machine in the center of the room. “The truth of the world is that all of the misfortune in the universe exists as a quantifiable force. And the duty of the Emperor is to redirect that force, and channel it into one vessel. There is no hardship anywhere in the Empire, except in this room. And, you see...” he rolled up the sleeves of his Imperial robes. His arms, too, were coated in the black growth of misfortune. “The Emperor must physically bear this burden, and my old body can bear it no longer.”

Elar was speechless. The machine in the center of the room pulsed with unknowable energy. It emitted a purple glow, and upon studying it further, Elar noticed that the glow flowed through all of the black growth with each pulsation.

“And nobody in the Empire has questioned this?” he asked breathlessly.

“Why should they need to? The citizens have everything they need to be happy. Think of it like this. The Emperor is a battery. So long as he has strength, he can continue to absorb the calamity of the world. Once the battery runs out of power, a new one must be installed. My battery is

dead. It is time for new shoulders to bear the weight. And your passion gives you the needed strength.”

Elar said nothing as he was overtaken by incredible pain. He fell to his knees. The growth was already embracing him, covering him. All at once, he felt the weight of the universe. Laskin smiled down on him radiantly as his body crumbled to dust. At that moment, Elar Monay, Emperor of Joranum, realized the beauty of life. Only one man had to suffer for the benefit of mankind. He shed tears of joy.