

Embracing His Empire

By

Sai Marie Johnson

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Chapter One

Cosmic Beginnings

I was born after the great Nebula Havannis imploded, just as the planet Saritys lost all sustainability, such to begin the weaving tapestry of my tale. I was said to be one of the most striking young girls born to my new planet, beginning a time of joyful abundance in our new homeland of Kanavisil. I had been most abundantly blessed with a life of esteemed privilege, born to the Senator of Daeja. My mother was doting, as was my nurse of equal merit, and with the proud insignia of my Servili clan, I had never experienced the cruelty that rested beyond the gates of our fine city. By every account, my father was one of the wealthiest of Daejians and he possessed more than two hundred slaves. He also owned some of the fastest and finest of the questri, what I later learned were called horses to the human tongue. The first memory I recall is my parents bestowing me with the gift of an elegant questri, possessing the sleekest of black fur. Much like the weaving arachnid, it seemed to shine like the night sky. They are majestic creatures, possessing eight legs with several beady eyes and they spin thread from their hind ends and the other, a four-legged animal with the ability to transport our kind. They had large eyes which reminded me of blackened slits with a starry gloss covering over them. Though they were mammalian and bore their babes by the very flesh of their bodies, they had an amphibious quality that made them capable of passing through watery terrain just as equally as they could land. The questri I was given stole my heart immediately. Father told me she was a radiant gem of a questri and that, one day, she would bear many beautiful babies to serve in battle, all while serving me fondly. A second gift was a rare Saritsi gem, set in silver. My mother told me once, long ago, our people had travelled from a planet in a distant galaxy—a planet called Saritys—and the gem had come from the planet, which had since become a barren wasteland. I wondered often if it had been something of importance, after hearing the horrifying legends of what had befallen our homeland. From one empire to the next, I watched over a thousand years of history's effect on our people. The many planets which housed us all by nature had died and we fled to Kanavisil as refugees, hoping to find domicile, though some rumored we were invaders who took over, we now controlled this land. My father did not worry much about an uprising amongst the natives, and safe in Daeja, we never had to give much concern to the outside activities occurring on our planet. My father only gave concern to one strong and virile empire—Pretus. I could never have expected my life would take a turn and the currents of my ocean would soon be shifting by the unexpected tempest my child-like mind could never comprehend. But as with all, it was only later that I came to understand why my father worried so much.

On a hazy summer evening of my sixteenth year, all I knew came crumbling down. I found myself peering out the windows of our palace as the warm summer's breeze slid over my skin. A sudden crashing sound broke me from my silence, and with a gasp, as the ruckus arose, I leapt from my bed in fright toward the balcony, where I hoped to see what was going on outside. What I found could not be defined by the word horror as orange and red blasted my irises. All that was visible was the neighboring estate in a roaring inferno. Even the trees had been set ablaze. I could

see the emanation of flames licking at the building, but what was even more terrifying was the view of what was coming toward *our* gates. There were already several soldiers over the walls and the guards were doing their best to fight them off with their spears. The men who fought them carried larger swords and spears. Black and silver breastplates adorned their broad, nude, and tanned chests, but each of their faces were shrouded by a black helmet. Already, they had slain four people in the courtyard before I even realized what was happening. We were being ambushed by a foreign invader and my father was most certainly their target. I rushed toward the doorway, where I lifted a vase and readied myself for the inevitable. The sudden sound of men's voices, barking orders to one another, filtered into my room.

"The senator is dead, sir. We will have his head on a platter for you!" one soldier bellowed with a triumphant voice. My heart sank instantly. My father was dead. These men had murdered him, and I was sure my mother probably would be taken as a slave or killed, also. I froze in terror as I leaned against the wall behind me to keep from falling to my knees in despair. I had no choice but to remain calm. I could do nothing. Nothing but wait. The soldier who had been addressed spoke in a cool tone, "Good, Larius, now move on to find Melina. I have a feeling their daughter will be in one of these upper rooms. If you come across anyone besides Melina, kill them. Especially the cocky Martus." He snickered to himself. "I would so love to see him hang!"

The sound of his feet echoing off the ground cued me that he was now making his way toward my room. In terror, all I could think was to grab for the closest thing to me, a vase filled with water and flowers. Maybe, if I quickly crashed it over his head, I could give myself enough time to flee the estate and warn the next senator what was coming. Someone had to survive this, or else, how many other estates would be ransacked? How I would save my mother, sister, and brother was beyond me for the moment, as all I could focus on was the sound of the petrifying steps resonating down the halls. I knew he was only a few feet from my room now, and I knew, any moment, he would come through the door in search for me. A shadow fell on the floor as he came to stand in the doorway. I cringed. To successfully do this would mean I needed to react at the perfectly opportune moment. Terror filling my heart did not help with my aim, however, when the soldier stepped into the room. A loud crash came down on the back of his head, but not enough to knock him out, as I miscalculated my reach by several seconds. My eyes widened and I knew that was it, instantly. Backing into a corner, I looked around for anything else to attempt to protect myself with. Nothing was found, but I now knew my demise was imminent. The soldier's lips widened into a wolfish grin, and I felt a shiver run the length of my spine. Eyes darted around me, and I began to shake my head with pleading eyes.

"Please, I beg you not to hurt me." My voice broke at the moment; my lips parted, betraying my courage instantly, and it seemed the man noticed it in a matter of seconds.

"You don't make friends by bashing them in the head, pretty one."

Surprisingly, he arose erect without a scratch, but at his feet, the shattered fragments of pottery were proof of my intentions. I could neither deny nor admit it, because my fear had arisen in my throat to the point of stifling my speech. What came out was a hoarse whisper, "No." I turned to run out the door, slipping into the corridor to find five other soldiers running towards me. At the opposite end of the hall, I spotted an open door and ran towards it, with the soldier I had attempted to injure calling out commands and rushing behind me.

"Go fetch Melina! This one is mine!" he roared. It was then, I was able to decipher his rank.

"As you wish, Your Highness!" they all agreed, turning to run in the opposing direction. I ran into the room and slammed the door, scanning the four corners for any sort of weapon. Again, I found nothing and ran towards the window. I pulled on the drapery and considered using it as a

rope to crawl outside. Suddenly, the door slammed open and in walked the predator in pursuit of his prey, myself.

"You are quite the fighter, and let me guess, you are Princess Caecelia. Are you not? Caecelia Servili of Daeja, whose beauty rivals them all?" he murmured. It became evident to me, at that moment, he knew of my family well and whatever disagreement he held with my father was something severe and political.

"Who are you?" I shrieked as my fingers tore into the curtains.

He grinned and pulled off his helmet, shaking his tousled locks in the process. Perspiration dripped down his rugged face falling in droplets from the stubble upon his chin.

"Oh, you think you get to make the introduction demands, girl?" He chuckled and kept speaking, "I am Lord Xenocrates Thernopae, King of Pretus, but to you, I shall be known as *master*. I think you will make a lovely addition to my chain, stripped of the finery you now wear and begging for my mercy. Don't you agree, Caecelia? Or shall I give you a new name? Yes, I think so." He stroked his chin and gave a nod. "How about Sass? You seem to be full of quite a lot of that." He chuckled to himself as he spoke.

I stood frozen in terror. Not a single muscle flinched as I shook my head, but the realization set into my heart like a piercing arrow of truth.

"What? No!" I fell to my knees as hot tears stung my eyes. "Please, please no!" My hands remained tightly grasping the curtain, but I knew my fate was sealed.

"Now I had not expected you to actually beg, Caecelia. It is quite unbecoming for an esteemed and educated woman. How easy this is; I see you already have your hands wrapped up in the drapes. They will work just fine for bindings."

In an instant, he crossed the space between us and drew his blade in an upward arc. The sound of shredding fabric filled my ears and, with his opposing hand, he grabbed the drape and proceeded to pull my wrists into the cloth as he wove it around my wrists. I lifted my gaze to look up at him. As I looked up at him, he jerked me to my feet and tilted his face to look me over. He had strong features and the angles of his face were jagged but handsome, nonetheless. On a normal day, I would have found him undeniably appealing, and yet now, I screamed like a heathen in his face. This was barbaric treatment of a lady of the upper class.

"Monster! You beast! I shall sooner see you burn alive! You murdered my father!" Tears swelled in my eyes. "I will never be yours! Never, Never!" Hot breath poured from my lips, and I spat directly into his eyes. It was a foolish thing to do, indeed, and he met the action with a sneer before shoving another piece of the drape straight into my mouth. I gagged and coughed as my face burned red.

He shook his head and chuckled at the sight. "I should have known as much. Apparently, your parents never taught you any manners, princess. No worries, I'll teach you plenty. The first, being when to shut your pretty little mouth." Xenocrates began pulling me by my wrists towards the door, and as we entered the hall, I spotted a soldier carrying my mother, Melina, over his shoulder, down the corridor. She appeared limp, and my heart sank in realization that she was no longer alive. Trembling, I now felt a fear that was unexplainable, and in an instant, I was lifted and carried over Xenocrates' shoulder. I kicked my legs as much as possible but it was to no avail. Xenocrates strode straight through the chamber and back out the door,

"You are going to prove to be quite the trouble aren't you, Sass?" He shook his head and began to run down the stairs. Everything flew past me like a blur and I was unable to decipher directions. My head was swimming with dizziness and all I could see, as he ran into the forest, was the blazing orange ember that was the remainder of my house. Whatever Xenocrates had come

for, he had succeeded in attaining, it seemed. I closed my eyes as the sounds of horror roared into a silence and my body fell limp. If I had only known, then, that I was the main spoil of this battle, perhaps I would have leapt from that window instead of hesitating.