

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Ten: ...Et Mea Salvea
by Havoc

“Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.”

- William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

“All fighters, prepare to launch on command from the deck officer.”

The commander of the 27th Fighter Squadron, known amongst the armed forces as the “Black Falcons”, adjusted his controls and made one final check of his gauges. His fuel levels were at maximum, his shields and armor were in fighting order, and he had a full load of weapons. The colonel was at the controls of a one-man fighter, sleek and streamlined with forward-swept wings, the space- and atmosphere-capable F-66 Raptor III. The fighter was a few years out of date, like a lot of weaponry in human arsenals these days, but its internal bays carried ten high-explosive guided missiles and two recessed gun mounts held one charged particle cannon and one rotary cannon each. The particle cannons were designed for the vacuum of space, but no human had yet invented a weapon as lethal and accurate in atmosphere as the old-fashioned six-barreled 20mm cannons. Loaded with tungsten-jacketed, uranium-cored rounds, the guns and the fighter they were mounted on had both been top-of-the-line five years prior, designed specifically for the purpose of ripping through Ailian fighters and armor. Today they'd be given that task yet again, though with a very different goal in mind.

“This is the deck officer. All pilots and weapons officers, you're receiving new data now. Pay attention to your targeting data. Friendlies and enemies are mixed in out there. Let's not fire on anyone who isn't asking for it. Keep your assignments in mind.” There was a brief pause, and the colonel tensed up. “All fighters, launch, launch, launch.”

The colonel keyed up his radio on his squadron's frequency. “Falcon Lead to squadron, punch out as soon as the path is clear.” He throttled his engines, waiting for the carrier bay exit in front of him to clear out, and then he led the way for his pilots. Eleven F-66s followed after him as he roared out of the bay into space. He gave a quick look around him. The massive carrier was behind his fighter, and all of its bays were boiling over with human fighters and other craft of every imaginable variety. Turning his head for a quick assessment of everywhere else, he saw numerous human and Ailian vessels, as well as those of the Nuretans and the Pteryd. This was his first time seeing any of the latter two species' ships in person. The heads-up display in his helmet marked each ship he looked at as either friendly or enemy, like normal. What wasn't normal was that this time a lot of alien ships were marked as “friendly”, and a lot of human ships were marked as “enemy”.

“This is a clusterfuck if I ever saw one, boss,” one of his younger, more freely-tongued pilots commented on the squadron frequency.

“Yeah,” the colonel agreed. He put his eyes forward. His squadron's assignment, like several others, was to link up with Ailian and Nuretan fighters and break the atmosphere of the desert planet down below to support ground operations. He swiveled his head around to find where he was supposed to be, and his sharp eyes quickly located a route to take through the ever-intensifying battle. He switched to a broader radio frequency. “Black Falcons, Edelweiss, Schwarzblitz, on me.” The other two names he called out belonged to squadrons which were German in nationality, unlike his American one, and they were equipped with newer, faster EF-5X Hurricane two-man interceptors. Their commanders, under his authority for this operation, acknowledged his order and formed their squadrons up with his.

The colonel's radar pinged, and he looked back over his shoulder as best as he could. Two additional squadrons of fighters, larger models than any of theirs, were coming up fast behind him. He had a moment of panic until his heads-up display reminded him that the Ailian craft were friendlies this time. The data took a moment to load, but they were identified as XF-867 and XF-869, the numerical designations for the Ascendancy squadrons they belonged to. He had faced fighters like them before in battle, but as crazy as it seemed to him, they would now be flying together as allies. He only hoped that the language barrier wouldn't be too big an issue; he knew only a few words of Ailian and he presumed they knew just as little of his language. As he watched, a third squadron of the vaguely aquatic-looking Nuretan fighters joined the group, too.

“Alright, boys,” he said. Despite the fact that many of the pilots in their group were women, and that he knew the vast majority of the Ailian pilots would be as well, that bit of soldier lingo had remained unchanged for centuries. “Hot and fast, make for the planet. Outer wing pairs, do your best to keep the enemy off of us. Command will transmit our targets to us as we descend. Let's get to it.” He opened his throttle all the way and made good on his words, diving for Lirna as the seventy-odd ships with him did the same.

Aria was decidedly not having a good time. She was trying to keep her cool while some of the Nuretan Imperial Marines were going into a panic, and a few of her Royal Guards weren't far behind them. The transports they'd ridden almost the whole way to the palace were in flames now, some of them hit by multiple shots from the rebel walkers, and their assembled forces were scattered among the buildings, grabbing cover wherever they could. The Ascendancy naval troopers were attempting to get clear shots at the enemy walkers with their anti-armor weapons, but they were having difficulty finding the opportunity to do so. Whenever any of them poked their heads out from behind cover, they were

subjected to a barrage of fire from the swarm of Pteryd airships. The troopers had managed to take down two of the walkers, but that still left four which were undamaged and fully capable of making things a nightmare for them. They had the option of retreating, but that would have meant exposing their backs to the walkers, and Aria liked that prospect about as much as she liked the idea of turning away when their objective was in sight. She was determined to get inside the royal palace. She had come too far to turn back now.

-Captain Me'lia, we aren't going to last very long at this rate,- General Soumaren said over the radio. She was with a squad of her marines and a few of the naval troopers near Aria's position, inside one of the tall buildings. They'd made a break for it once the walkers had spotted their group, and had taken a few losses getting inside, but now they had a relatively safe location from which to observe the enemy. That was more than Aria could say for herself. She was hunkered down with Lieutenant Ayalis and two other Royal Guards, behind a chest-high wall that offered decent protection against small arms and the guns on the airships. Aria was all too aware of the fact, however, that the walkers would have no problem blasting her to pieces if they figured out she was hidden there.

-We need reinforcements,- Aria radioed back. -And we need armor support. Can we get some of our air assets in the area to help us out?-

-That's negative,- the general responded regretfully. -They're all occupied supporting other areas of the conflict, and they can't break away. The Pteryd are flooding the skies with airships and our forces are having trouble holding airspace as it is.-

Aria snarled in frustration. -Well there has to be something we can do! The Empress is counting on us! We can't just roll over and wait to die here.-

She poked her head up over the wall to see what she could. Two of the walkers were striding in her direction, though they hadn't seemed to have caught on to where she was just yet. She was a little more worried to see Pteryd soldiers on the ground, mixed in with Ailian rebels. The captain could see at least fifty soldiers in her field of vision, and there were certain to be more of them. If she had been the rebel ground commander, she would be preparing to sweep the nearby buildings to root them all out. They had precious little time to come up with a plan of action before they'd be overrun.

Just then, Aria's radio squawked and a voice came over the air. -Guard One, this is fleet command. You have incoming. Keep your heads down and prepare for some noise.-

Cursing, Aria kept her ears keen for what might be coming. After a few seconds, she could hear a rhythmic chopping sound over the chatter of gunfire surrounding her. She recognized it all too well: helicopters were coming nearer to them. She flattened herself to the ground behind the sheltering wall. Human helicopters were dangerous in their precision and speed, and she hoped that by remaining

motionless she could avoid making herself a target for them. She turned her keen eyes up to the sky, waiting for them to appear.

She didn't have to wait long. The chopping grew louder, and then a formation of eight small attack helicopters came around a building five blocks behind them, flying low and fast as they followed the road straight towards where Aria and her soldiers were hiding. She thought she had a good chance of hitting them with her weapon if she aimed carefully, and the heavy rounds her weapon fired might actually cause some damage, but she wasn't sure she wanted to take the risk of giving away her location. As she watched the single-rotor craft get closer, she saw fiery puffs on their stubby wings and knew they were launching missiles.

-Incoming!- Aria called out. -Brace yourselves!- She clutched her rifle tightly, waiting for them to get a little bit closer before chancing a shot back at them. Her eyes tracked the paths of the missiles as they streaked closer to her. At the last second, she gritted her teeth and waited for the explosions she was sure would be going off around her.

To her surprise, the missiles overshot her completely. She whipped her head around to see where they were going, and was astonished to see the missiles strike the walkers that were bearing down on her. The projectiles impacted the sides of the cockpits, where the armor was thinner, and punched through, several of them detonating inside the two-legged hulks. Then her ears were flattened by the wash of the helicopters' rotors as they flew over her head. Six of them peeled off from the formation and gained altitude, heading up towards the Pteryd airships. The remaining two flared and began sideslipping. Hanging underneath their noses were two-barreled gun turrets, and those opened up on the rebel foot soldiers on the ground, shell casings raining down as they peppered the enemy with well-aimed fire. The line of soldiers began to fall back, returning fire ineffectually as they scattered in confusion. Aria was just as dumbfounded as they were, and she tried to understand why the humans would have turned on their allies like that.

-What's going on?- Lieutenant Ayalis asked her. She had her head up now, watching the scene, and even as she asked that there came a screaming roar as a flight of human fighters came shooting over the tops of the buildings. They joined the helicopters in going after the Pteryd airships, and before long it was a fully-involved aerial battle, while the walkers still standing on the ground began moving for shelter from missiles being fired at them periodically.

-I'm not sure...,- Aria responded. -But I think we should take this chance and get some better cover. On me!- She got to her feet and made a break for the building where General Soumaren was holed up, with her soldiers close on her heels. They had just made it inside when the sound of another helicopter, different from the ones before, reached her ears. Aria turned to look out the open door as it

set down in the middle of the nearest intersection. This helicopter was larger than the others, obviously some kind of troop transport, and a side hatch slid open as soon as its wheels hit the pavement. Three humans stepped out. One of them was a male dressed in dark blue fatigues, another in a mottled brown-and-green camouflage pattern, and the third a female dressed in a drab green.

Lieutenant Ayalis came up to Aria's side, her sniper rifle tucked in to her shoulder. -Should I fire, Captain?- she inquired.

-No, don't,- Aria said warily. The blue-clad human was in the lead, and he spotted her standing in the open doorway. They locked eyes for a moment, and then the trio began jogging towards them. She kept her weapon at the ready, but from their stance and the way they seemed unconcerned about her, she didn't think they had hostile intentions in mind. For the moment.

As they got closer, Aria could tell that they were not used to being on the planet, which fairly ruled out the possibility that they were part of her mother's rebel group. All three of the humans were sweating heavily by the time they came up to her and Lieutenant Ayalis. Had they been on the planet for as long as the rebels had been in control, they surely would have been acclimated to the desert heat. All that really did for Aria, though, was raise the question of where exactly they had come from, if they weren't with the rebels. The male in the lead and the female seemed unfazed by Aria's intimidating appearance, though she towered above them and was heavily armed. The other male, the one in the mottled camouflage, gaped at her with his mouth slightly ajar. He seemed much younger than the other two, and perhaps he had not seen an Ailian up close before. The trio were all armed with battle rifles, but they had their weapons slung low in front of them rather than gripped in their hands. They clearly wanted to present as non-threatening an image as possible.

When the humans were close enough for their voices to be heard, the one in the lead opened his mouth. "I'm looking for General Kalma Soumaren," he said.

Aria gripped her weapon more tightly. "You are?" she growled, baring her teeth at the human. He didn't flinch, which she regarded as highly impressive. Not many humans could look at a fully-outfitted Royal Guard officer without showing fear, but this one showed not a hint of trepidation.

To her surprise, in fact, he looked relieved. "You speak English?" the human asked. "That's good, my Ailian is crap. I need to speak with General Soumaren right away."

"That is me." Aria looked over her shoulder to see General Soumaren coming from within the building. Her uniform was torn in a few places, but she looked unhurt. She was flanked by several of her marines, all of whom were looking at the trio of humans with just as much suspicion as the Ailians were. "I am General Kalma Soumaren of the Imperial Marines, and this is Captain Aria Me'lia of the Lirnan Royal Guards. Who are you, and why do you seek me?"

All three of the humans saluted her, though there was some hesitation as they did so. This was clearly something that none of them had ever thought they would be doing. “I’m Lieutenant Commander Joseph Carswell with SEAL Team 8.” He gestured to the other man and the woman standing with him. “This is Lieutenant Nikolai Kozlov of the 57th Guards Spetsnaz Regiment, and Captain Angela Drechsler of Twelfth Company Kommando Spezialkräfte. Our home fleets have been sent by command on Cerelis to offer our assistance.”

General Soumaren and Aria looked at one another, before the Nuretan general crossed her arms. “Perhaps you should explain, Commander.”

“I don’t think we got a lot of time for that, but I’ll give you the quick version,” Commander Carswell said. “I don’t know a lot of it myself. What I do know is that our respective governments have been negotiating behind the scenes for a while now, which you probably knew also.” He looked up as there was a roar overhead, and another squadron of human fighters flew by. “Our diplomats came to a few agreements a week ago...before your Empress was kidnapped. The United Nations wasn’t happy about it, but I think losing Earth a few months ago put things in perspective. We’re not pleased with these rebels of yours, General, especially since some of our people have taken up with them. And since it turns out the Ascendancy had nothing to do with Earth, I guess some folks are willing to put aside a few differences.”

Aria frowned. “Are you?”

“We’re not friends by any stretch of the word,” Commander Carswell cautioned her. “There’s too much bad blood between humans and Ailians. Maybe there always will be, maybe not. But we’ve learned more about the Pteryd in the past few months than we ever knew before, and we like them even less than we like you.” He shrugged. “We’re not here as peace envoys or diplomats. We’re here as soldiers. Our job for right now is to help you take this planet back. Whether we go our separate ways and get back to our war afterwards is up to the politicians. But compared with the Pteryd or these ‘Outer Colony’ people, I think pretty much everyone back home agrees we’d rather deal with the Ascendancy. What do you say to that, General?”

General Soumaren looked back over her shoulder, where her soldiers and the Ailian troops had gathered. Those who could understand the human’s words were relaying them to their comrades, and while there was a fair amount of confusion and suspicion to be found on all of their faces, a fair number of them were nodding in agreement. Aria knew exactly what she wanted to say, but it really was up to the general right now. The captain wanted her homeworld back, and she wanted her mother to pay for what she had done. She also remembered what the late Empress Solan had wanted to accomplish for her people, and though perhaps her plans had not gone exactly as she would have wished, humans were

now standing with Ailians for the purpose of something other than fighting with each other. In the end, that was all that really mattered.

“Very well, Commander,” General Soumaren finally. She reached forward, extending a hand to the human officer. “The Nuretan Empire has never had any quarrel with humanity, but I believe I speak for the Ailians present when I say I am glad that we can be allies. Perhaps the politicians are not all in full agreement, but on behalf of the alliance of the Empire and the Ascendancy, I will gladly accept your offer of assistance.”

Commander Carswell took her hand with a firm grip. “Done.” After shaking on the agreement, he placed his hand on his rifle. “My people are at your disposal, General. As we speak, I have SEALs, Spetsnaz, and KSK in position nearby, with Special Air Service and GIGN on the way, as well as some sniper/observer units from the Cerelan Federal Police. We've also got about fifteen thousand regulars from various nations tasked to our area, along with armor. I think altogether we have about two hundred thousand soldiers coming down planetside. They'll be linking up with your units to help out wherever they're needed.”

Aria was surprised. “So many?” She wouldn't have thought that the humans could spare that many soldiers in the middle of a war, but as she thought about it she realized it made sense. If there was a temporary ceasefire between the Ascendancy and the humans, they would no longer have to worry as much about defending their borders.

“Excellent,” General Soumaren said, and she looked visibly relieved. Though only a fraction of the total soldiers the alliance had brought with them, two hundred thousand would be a great deal of help and much better than nothing at all. “Our top priority is the royal palace. We know that the Empress is being held there, and that is also where the rebel command is located. The palace must be taken at all costs.”

Captain Drechsler, quiet up to this point, spoke up. “Your people provided us with some basic information about the area just prior to our departure,” she said. “We have had time to look it over. It's a difficult target, but not impossible.”

“What you plan?” Aria asked. “Assault from front is not good, yes?”

“I've thought about that,” Commander Carswell said. “You're all Royal Guards and Imperial Marines, right? We'll treat this as a straightforward commando assault. Our air assets are softening up the enemy armor and keeping those Pteryd fliers busy. I'm thinking we'll put SEAL and CFP snipers on the tops of these buildings for overwatch. While they keep us covered, we'll let the KSK, Delta, and Imperial Marines hit the perimeter and then SAS and Spetsnaz can go in through the roof. You Royal Guards will go with them.”

“It is a better plan than we had before,” General Soumaren said. “I will let our troops know.”

Aria nodded. “Yes.” She looked to Lieutenant Ayalis. “*Mari, te'lek pa reshta aran ke maza. Sefe cha'ra ke ran are, cha?*” The lieutenant nodded to her, and Aria turned back to the humans. “Lieutenant Ayalis is best sniper. Will go with you, show you best spots, yes?”

“Sounds fine,” Commander Carswell said. He finally gave a grin as he looked up at the tall Ailian. “I never thought I'd be fighting alongside a cat.”

Aria narrowed her eyes, but her muzzle widened to show her rows of sharp teeth as her tail flicked back and forth. “And I only ever see one human not scared to fight,” she said. “Is new thing for us both.”

-Tell me what is going on out there!- Ara'lana barked at the holographic image of her field commander. The pitiful excuse for a male had called her in a panic, not that she really needed him to tell her that something was going seriously wrong. The flurry of explosions outside in the past fifteen minutes had let her know that the enemy had arrived, but she had expected superiority in numbers right from the start. Things should have been over out there in a matter of minutes, but it seemed a more prolonged battle was raging. To say that she was unhappy would have been a gross understatement. She vowed that as soon as she had the chance, she'd kill that man for daring to be so lax in his command of her soldiers.

-I don't know what happened, Admiral,- the officer told her. -At first there was only a handful of Royal Guards and Imperial Marines, and we had them pinned down and about to retreat. Then a group of helicopter gunships came out of nowhere, and now there are human attack fighters engaging the Pteryd. My forward observers tell me they've spotted human tanks moving towards the royal palace, and we've intercepted radio traffic from United Nations special forces.-

-How dare you tell me such lies?- Ara'lana snarled. -You are making excuses, Commander! Our intelligence sources assured me that the United Nations was staying out of this matter.-

-They must have been mistaken...-

Furious, Ara'lana cut off his transmission and put in a call for Admiral Kris. The response was delayed, but eventually her admiral's face came up on the communicator. -Selina, give me a report on your situation.-

Admiral Kris opened her mouth to reply, but the image shuddered and static clouded it for a moment. When the picture cleared she was gritting her teeth. -Admiral, the Pteryd deployed as planned to encircle the royalist fleets. We were prepared to deliver our final blow, but then a large human fleet entered the system along with the Tenth Fleet. I'm afraid the battle up here is somewhat evenly matched

again.- There was the faint sound of alarms in the background of Admiral Kris' transmission. -The humans are landing soldiers and armor on the planet, and have penetrated the atmosphere with fighters and helicopter carriers.-

Her anger rising into a real rage now, Ara'lana stood up and screamed at her naval commander. -Selina, why did you not inform me as soon as they arrived?-

The other admiral allowed annoyance to creep into voice as well. -With all due respect, Ara'lana, we have been rather busy up here! My fleets are taking damage and so are the Pteryd. I am doing all I can not to lose control of things!-

It took everything that Ara'lana had to get her temper back under control. -Please do me the courtesy of keeping me better informed from now on. I trust that you can defeat these new forces?-

-I will do my best, m'lady,- Admiral Kris said. -But perhaps we should put a call out for reinforcements, all the same.-

-Unacceptable,- Ara'lana growled at her. -The nearest ships would take hours to reach us, and we could not assemble a fleet of any significance for a day at least. You will have to make due with what we have in-system right now.-

Admiral Kris took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. Ara'lana could tell from the way her ears were pointed in different directions that she was thoroughly frustrated with her. She'd have to just grow up and get over it. -I can but try, m'lady.- She cut off the transmission without further comment or even the courtesy of formality.

Quivering with barely suppressed anger, Ara'lana shut off her communicator. *So...those damned humans decided to interfere with my plans. That will be the first and last mistake they will ever make. When I am through with subjugating the Ascendancy, I shall make sure they never forget the errors of their ways. Earth and Cerelis will burn for this...*

With that, she came from behind her desk and strode out of her office. If her field commander was not up to the task, then perhaps she would just have to take matters into her own hands.

High above Lirna, Admiral Kris suppressed a roar of frustration. Her leader had been a brilliant tactician and a masterful fleet admiral, but three years gone from managing any kind of large space battle seemed to have clouded her judgement somewhat. She was not thinking clearly in the face of changing combat dynamics.

-Increase shields to as high a level as possible!- she ordered her crew. -All weapons at full power, regroup our battle formations, and prepare for frontal assault!- The Ailian admiral watched out of the front viewing window on her bridge as a flight of four human MiG-97 attack fighters made a run

on the forward section of her ship, launching a barrage of explosive rockets, most of which were stopped by her shields. -Recall our fighters and assign them to protect our ships. We are going to need them. Who knows if more enemy reinforcements are on the way...-

The admiral leaned forward in her chair, still seething. This was supposed to have been a relatively easy battle, had it not been for the unexpected appearance of the United Nations ships. However, all was not lost. Though the battle lines were more evenly distributed than they had been before, the forces of the New Ascendancy still retained a slight numerical advantage. Even so, that advantage was not as large as Selina would have felt comfortable with.

Pressing a button on the armrest of her command chair, Admiral Kris called to one of the officers in her communications section. -Put out a call to any forces we have in neighboring systems,- she said. -Inform them of the situation and direct them to respond to Lirna immediately.-

The officer hesitated for a few seconds in her response. -But...Admiral Me'lia said...-

-I know what she said,- Admiral Kris interjected. -I am altering those orders. Admiral Me'lia may be correct that we have enough assets to win this battle, but I will *not* allow the slightest risk to the contrary. Call for reinforcements, Lieutenant, on *my* authority. Ara'lana will just have to be cross with me later.-

“Wh-What's going on out there?” Brooke asked, her voice wavering. She was sitting on the floor, shaking with renewed fear as the ground underneath her trembled. For the past little while, the sounds of muted explosions and thuds had reached her and Jack's ears, and they had heard talking from out in the hall, presumably from the human soldiers guarding them.

“I don't know,” Jack admitted. He was standing near the door, his hearing keen to try to decipher what was going on. The hallway outside of the storage room they were being kept in was quiet now, though he could still hear rumbling from above. His heart was pounding. Clearly something of great importance was going on. Could it be that the Ascendancy had already begun its attack to retake Lirna? If that was so, then it was good because the Ascendancy would surely make an effort to rescue the Empress, who was likely being held here in the royal palace as well. But it could also mean that their lives were in even greater danger than before. Perhaps now was as good a time as any to make a break for his own freedom. “Brooke, I have an idea, but I need you to do something for me.”

“Wh-What?” Brooke asked. She looked even more fearful, with her eyes going wide. “Wh-What am I supposed to do?”

“I'll tell you,” Jack said. He went over to her and knelt on the floor, lowering his voice to a whisper. “The first thing you'll need to do is...”

The guard out in the hall was growing anxious. After the Ailian leader had departed, he and his companion had resumed their duties, but then a frantic call had come over the radio and his comrade had been called away. Now he was all alone, and he knew that there was some kind of fighting going on aboveground. He wanted to go join the fight, but he knew that leaving his post now was a sure way to find himself in front of a firing squad later. The Ailians had told him that these two prisoners were quite important ones, though he didn't see what sort of value two slaves had. His orders were clear, however, and if he knew what was good for him he wouldn't move from this spot.

“Hey, guard!”

His ears caught the sound of the older male prisoner, not the first time that the man had tried to talk to him. The guard ignored him as usual. The cries of a prisoner weren't worth his time, but the constant pleas for information from him were starting to get annoying. He had half a mind to go in there and bash the guy's face in to get him to shut up, but he didn't want to risk damaging someone that the boss wanted to keep alive. He knew that she wanted that pleasure for herself.

“Listen, asshole, I actually need your help this time! I think she's sick!”

He rolled his eyes. Not likely. The girl had seemed in perfectly fine health when she'd been brought in there. He was probably just trying to get a rise out of him. He wasn't going to give the guy the satisfaction.

“Hey, I'm serious! Come on, man, she's not moving and I think something's actually wrong!” There was a pause. “Look, your boss is gonna be pretty pissed at you if you just stand there and let her die. You wanna think about what'll happen to you if she does?”

Now his attention was grabbed. What if the guy wasn't just messing with him? Now that he thought about it, she was a slave, and he'd heard stories all through the war about how Ailians treated some of their slaves. Maybe she was in worse shape than she'd looked. It couldn't hurt to just have a look through the little window in the door, could it? Turning towards the door, he got up on his toes to look through the window. The male prisoner was standing just inside, quite near the door, but he looked past him to see the girl laying on the floor. He watched her for a few seconds. She wasn't moving. He wasn't even sure if she was breathing. Then, a second later, he saw her take a slow, labored breath before letting it out and going completely still again. She sure didn't look normal.

He bit his lip, trying to decide what to do. He could call for someone to come down to help, but from the sounds of things they had plenty to deal with aboveground already. Distracting them would probably get him chewed out and punished somehow. He could deal with two unarmed prisoners by himself, no problem. Pulling his keyring from his belt, he stuck the appropriate key into the door and

unlocked it.

“Back up!” he ordered the male prisoner. The man did as he was told, and the guard swung the door in. He quickly got his rifle in both hands, aiming it directly at the other man. “Up against the back wall. Now!”

“Hey, easy, man,” the man said, holding his hands up in front of him. “I don't want any trouble. But I think there's something really wrong with her. She didn't eat much last meal time, and then she just sorta passed out.” He backed up to the rear wall of the storage room, watching as the guard went to where the girl was laying.

Keeping one eye on the male prisoner, the guard knelt beside her. He placed a hand on her neck. She had a pulse and she felt warm, but she wasn't responsive when he nudged her. She was breathing very shallowly. Maybe he'd have to risk calling for help after all. He slung his rifle back behind his back and touched his ear, keying up his radio. “This is Red Five on prisoner detail. I need a medic in the cellar. I have a female prisoner down, adolescent, unknown cause.” He waited a few seconds, but he received no answer. Either everyone was too busy, or nobody felt like it was important enough to bother with. “Repeat, Red Five has a prisoner down. Requesting a medic.”

While the guard looked over Brooke, Jack was watching him carefully. Ever so slightly, he inched forward from the wall, making sure that the soldier was still only half paying attention to him. He seemed oblivious, for the moment. As soon as the guard took his hands off of his rifle, Jack started creeping towards him at a quicker rate. It was now or never. When the soldier opened his mouth to make a third attempt with his radio, Jack launched himself at the man.

The guard was taken completely by surprise. Jack remembered well the lessons in Ailian hand-to-hand that Aria had been giving him. He cupped one palm around the back of his other hand and jabbed them both at the underside of the man's chin. The guard gave a grunt of pain as his head was snapped back sharply, and he fell over backward onto his back. There was a louder shriek of pain as the man landed on his rifle, which pressed into the base of his spine. The soldier kicked up at Jack, and managed to land a solid blow right in his groin. Sickening pain washed over Jack, and he had the urge to throw up, but he did his best to ignore it and split his four fingers down the middle. He thrust them forward, two each aimed for the man's eyes, and he hit them hard. The soldier screamed again and raised his hands up reflexively to protect his face.

Jack took the opportunity to get back up to his feet. As the soldier realized his mistake, he started to sit up, but Jack kicked him in the chest, rolling him away from Brooke to protect the girl from being trampled underneath them. The guard wound up on his back a few feet away. Jack followed along and swung his leg back, lashing forward to kick him in his side. He heard a muffled crunch as

one of the man's ribs broke. The guard started to curl up, and he rolled over onto his stomach to protect his center of mass from a similar kick. That wasn't Jack's goal now. He had been waiting for the soldier to do just that.

Once the guard was turned over enough, Jack put one foot on either side of his and got down on his haunches, basically sitting on the man's back. He looped one arm down around the soldier's neck and put the crook of his elbow against his throat. Leaning down, Jack grabbed the back of his own neck with that hand, and he brought his other arm down and around to clutch the back of the elbow around the guard's throat. Using his body weight to keep the man from getting up, he leaned back and tightened his grip around his neck. The guard began struggling, but Jack kept increasing the pressure, cutting off both the guard's air supply and the flow of blood to his brain. He held the chokehold for a long time, as the soldier's struggling grew gradually more feeble, until finally the other man stopped moving altogether.

When Jack was sure that the soldier was dead, he let go of him and felt his body sag into the floor. He got to his feet, wiping sweat from his forehead. He'd never killed a man with his bare hands before, and it took a minute for him to stop shaking from the rush of adrenaline. As soon as he trusted his voice enough, he turned to check on Brooke. She was sitting up again, and her eyes were as wide as moons as she stared at the dead soldier.

"You okay?" he asked her, concern in his voice. He would have liked nothing more than for the young girl to not have to see what she just saw, but it couldn't be helped.

The slave girl made a hoarse sort of squeak, and then she swallowed a few times. She looked as ill now as she had been pretending to be a few moments ago, and he hoped she wouldn't be sick for real. Then she shakily got up from the floor. "I...I...I think I'll be alright..."

"Good," Jack said. He got down next to the body and began grabbing stuff. He unfastened the guard's gun belt. He had been carrying a pretty hefty combat load for a prisoner guard. There was a sidearm and spare magazines on his belt, along with a knife, binoculars, a compact flashlight, a water bottle, and a small emergency trauma kit. Jack removed the binoculars and the water bottle, since he wouldn't likely need them and they'd just be added weight, and fastened the belt as securely as he could around his waist. Then he removed the guard's armor vest and put that on as well. The vest was equipped with ten spare magazines for the guard's rifle, which he looped around his shoulder using the single-point sling. He left the guard's radio, which could have been used to track his movements, but kept his keys. Those might come in handy later.

When he was prepared, he turned back to Brooke. "We're getting out of here," he told her. "If there's a battle going on up there, we might be able to get away in the confusion. But we'll need to be

careful. I need you to follow all my instructions, no matter what. If I tell you to follow me, you stay right with me. If I tell you we're going to run, you run as hard as you can and keep up with me. If I tell you to run without me, you do it without asking why. Can you promise me that?"

Brooke looked hesitant. "I...I promise," she said. Jack could see in her eyes that she didn't like the idea of leaving Jack, even if it meant saving herself. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm going to get you out of here," he said solemnly. "You have my word on that." He squeezed her shoulder and then started walking towards the door. "Come on, now. Let's go."

Aria was finding her first flight inside a human helicopter to be a singularly uncomfortable experience. Besides the noise, the motions of the craft were a lot different from those of her own peoples' flying machines. The rotors imparted a subtle vibration through the helicopter that was just enough to make her feel slightly nauseous, and besides that it was cramped, at least for someone of her size. The humans riding with her seemed comfortably seated. Aria and her Royal Guards and Ascendancy naval troopers were spread out among three of the larger, double-rotored helicopters, accompanying Lieutenant Kozlov's Spetsnaz troopers and SAS commando teams. If the human soldiers were uncomfortable being with Ailians who, until just recently, would have killed them in combat, they hid their discomfort well. There wasn't a lot of conversation going around, but they were showing mutual respect to each other, which was about as much as could have been hoped for.

Lieutenant Kozlov, who was seated next to Aria, leaned over so that he could be heard over the chopping of the rotors. "Captain, I just got word from the leader of our 27th squadron. The enemy air units have been spread out thinly enough that we can begin our approach to the palace. This will have to be quick, however. We can't stay out in the open for too long."

"Yes," Aria agreed. "Is good. We go now."

Barely five seconds later, the helicopters increased their speed. Aria looked out the open doorway of the craft she was riding in, seeing the buildings of Hayikwiir rushing past as they flew towards the palace. Twenty seconds after the word had been giving, they were over the palace perimeter, and she was gazing down at the expansive palace gardens. Beyond the walls surrounding the palace she could see human armor on the ground. The blocky, bulky tanks were much different than Ailian or Nuretan armor, tracked instead of wheeled, with swiveling turrets that housed one or two gun turrets each. As she watched the pitched battle below, she observed the wrecks of one of the rebels' walker, and she also saw several burning hulls of human tanks. It seemed that the rebels were still putting up a good fight, though the addition of the human forces evened the odds dramatically.

Aria's field of vision was soon occupied by the roof of the palace, and the helicopters reduced speed drastically, coming to a hover over the building. Rebel soldiers, a mixture of Ailian, human, and Pteryd, were hunkered down on the flat surface. As soon as the helicopters came overhead, some of them began firing up at them. High-pitched clangs began sounding out as incoming rounds struck the outer skin of the craft. Two of the Spetsnaz troopers leaned out of the doors, shouldering their weapons and returning fire. At the same time, several of the rebel troops were hurled to the ground, struck by sniper fire from the SEALs who had taken positions on the upper floors of the buildings overlooking the palace.

With no time to waste, the troopers at the helicopter doors dropped lines down to the roof. This was something Aria had never done, but it had been explained to her briefly by Commander Carswell. As one, the soldiers inside the helicopter stood and lined up at the door. Aria took the lead, grabbing onto the rope with both hands and jumping out of the door. She let gravity take hold of her, and she slid all the way down the rope until her feet hit the surface of the roof. As soon as she touched down, she jumped away from the bottom of the line so that the next soldier could follow. The Ailian captain lifted her weapon in both hands, going down to one knee and firing at the rebel soldiers all around her. One by one, she was joined by her allies from her helicopter and from the other two, until there was a furious firefight going on atop the palace. The lack of cover made things hairy, and soldiers began going down on both sides, but the advantage was with the arriving commandos as the snipers did their part.

While the Ailians and the Spetsnaz troopers dealt with the rebels, the SAS commando teams got to work placing explosives in several positions on the roof. They didn't have the time to bother with forcing through any of the doors which accessed the top of the palace, and intended to blow holes directly into the building. Once the explosives were in position, everyone moved as far away from them as they could, and then the commandos detonated their charges.

The whole building shook as the roof was blasted inward, and the rapidly-clearing dust and smoke revealed that the charges had done their job correctly. Three wide holes now provided access to the upper floors of the palace. The soldiers divided into their teams, and still under fire from the remaining rebel troops they dropped down through the holes to get to their tasks inside the palace.

"What was that?" Brooke whispered frantically.

"No idea," Jack hissed back. He tightened his grip on his stolen rifle, looking up at the ceiling. Both of them had felt the vibration and heard the muffled booms. Jack knew it had been explosives of some kind, but his hearing wasn't finely-tuned enough to let his perception be more specific than that.

For all he knew, somebody could have been dropping bombs on the royal palace.

After leaving their cell in the basement, he and Brooke had not yet encountered any rebels. They were moving carefully through the halls, alert for any sounds that people were ahead, but so far they had been lucky. Whatever was going on above, probably the rebel forces were more worried about what was going on outside than what might be occurring inside. Evidently the calls of the guard before Jack killed him had gone unnoticed or been ignored. The two humans had gradually made their way out of the cellar and up to the next underground level. He was assuming they were still underground, anyway, because he hadn't seen any windows. Jack was uncomfortable in that he had no idea where he was going. When he had been given a tour of the palace by Li'ren the first time he'd been here, what seemed like years ago now, she had only shown him the more public areas of the palace: the gardens and the first and second floors. He was totally lost in the basements, relying on the guidance of Brooke, who herself had limited knowledge of other parts of the palace.

"Let's just keep moving up," Jack told her. They were walking down a long hallway now, doors on either side of them, heading for a T-intersection. "We'll get to the top eventually if we keep going, and maybe then we can get outside and find some friendly-"

Just then, as they rounded the corner, Jack gave a startled yell as he was faced with a frightening sight. He had never seen anything so terrifying in his life, and that was including any of the worst encounters he'd had with wildlife after his crash. As soon as he came around the corner, he got his first face-to-face view of a Pteryd. The insectoid alien seemed just as surprised to see him. This was clearly a soldier, its iridescent carapace clad in black-and-crimson armor and wielding a rifle. Apart from the weapon it was carrying, the arms of the Pteryd sported natural blades that looked to have been sharpened into fine edges. Its bulbous eyes focused on him and Brooke, and it clacked its mandibles in alarm as it recognized a human carrying a weapon. Because of the stolen gear he was wearing, it seemed for a few seconds to think he was one of its allies, but then it leveled its rifle in his direction.

Not waiting for what came next, Jack threw his arm back and pushed Brooke back into the hallway they'd come from, and he pulled the trigger on his rifle and fired a few rounds at the Pteryd. That made the alien jerk back as it dodged his fire, but it was quick to respond with a shot of its own, and a charged energy beam sizzled through the air millimeters from his head, close enough that he felt the heat from the shot. Jack immediately retreated around the corner, but quick skittering sounds told him that the alien was in pursuit.

"Get in there, get in there!" he yelled at Brooke, reaching for the first door handle he found and pushing it open as fast as he could. He shoved the girl inside just in time for the alien to come into view. This time Jack was ready, and he held his trigger down at point-blank range. The Pteryd came

crashing into him as multiple bullets tore into its body, enough of them finding gaps in the armor. They both toppled to the floor, with Jack clenching his eyes shut as he waited for the soldier's blades to slash into his skin. But when they came to rest, he felt the Pteryd twitch violently for a few terrible moments, and then it lay still on top of him.

Realizing he was still alive, Jack heaved with all of his strength and managed to roll the corpse off of him. He sat up, shaking and confused, feeling himself all over for signs of injury. Miraculously, he seemed unhurt. Then he looked through the doorway, panic rising up as he saw Brooke lying prone on the floor, but then he sighed with relief as he saw the girl pick herself up. Though she looked just as shaken as he was, she also didn't look injured.

"Come on," Jack said to her, getting up and helping her to her feet. He noticed that his rifle's bolt was locked back, empty, and he reloaded it. "You're okay, you're okay. Let's keep going." He was all too aware of the perilous situation they were now in. He remembered everything that Aria had ever told him about Pteryd, especially that they were a telepathic species with something of a hive mind. He was one hundred percent certain that any Pteryd in the area now knew that there were two human prisoners loose in the palace. "We need to get moving before this place is crawling with Pteryd."

Breathless, Brooke nodded. She looked shocked enough that she didn't seem to have the ability to feel fear anymore, just blind acceptance. Dragging her out of the room, Jack began to run with her, his only aim right now to get as far away from the dead Pteryd as possible. They could worry about stealth again once they were clear of the area.

Aria was surprised to find very few rebel soldiers inside of the palace. It seemed as though the arrival of the United Nations forces had been totally unanticipated by the rebels, with most of the soldiers having been caught outside by the sudden attack. But she wasn't about to let her guard down. From the sounds of things, the enemy outside was getting hammered by sniper fire and the circling attack helicopters, and they were liable to retreat inside at any moment. As Aria knew, fights inside of buildings could be nasty affairs.

Upon entering the palace, Aria and a squad of her Royal Guards had split off from the Spetsnaz and SAS troopers. Their primary goal in the palace was to find the Empress, but ever since arriving on the roof, Aria had realized she had a much different objective in mind. She reasoned that there were plenty of friendly troops around, and someone was bound to come across the Empress if a thorough search was conducted. Aria wanted much more to find her mother, or better yet, to find Jack. She doubted that her mother would have bothered to have him taken to a different location.

They'd started their search, naturally, on the highest floor of the palace, but Aria knew that the

best places to search would be the lower levels, down where the throne room, meeting halls, and more private residential areas of the palace were. Leaving the top to the rest of her allies, she brought her group to one of the side stairwells to head for the floors below. The Royal Guards moved swiftly but carefully, all of their senses heightened as they descended. The palace corridors reeked of the stench of Pteryd, but so far they had encountered none of them.

-Be careful,- Aria growled to her soldiers. -There will be trouble, of that we can be sure. They will not have left these halls totally unguarded.- She was walking in rear guard, keeping an eye on their backs as her soldiers walked in front of her. Their heads were turning in all directions, watchful for anything that might signal an attack.

Most of the doors in the palace seemed to be unlocked. Upon coming to a door, one of the guards would stand off to the side and push it open, keeping back so that the rest of them could sweep inside and clear the room beyond. Of the people they had encountered, all of them had been palace servants hiding from the commotion outside. The Royal Guards instructed them to remain where they were, of course after checking them to make sure they weren't rebels in disguise.

After clearing most of the second floor, with no signs of any enemies or prisoners, Aria's team descended to the first floor. Her fur was bristled up. She knew that they ought to have been faced with some kind of resistance by now, and the calm inside of the palace was becoming unnerving. The bottom of the staircase they were in would lead them directly into the main meeting hall of the palace. Before making entry, Aria keyed up her radio.

-Anyone on this channel,- she called. -What's the situation outside?-

The first voice to answer her was General Soumaren's. -We are being held firm outside,- the Nuretan commander informed her. The background of her transmission was filled with scattered bursts of gunfire. -Rebel soldiers have good cover in the gardens and at the entrances to the palace. We're not able to break through without heavy losses, even with our air support, but the Pteryd airships have been mostly cleared out. What's your status inside?-

-We are clearing the palace floor-by-floor,- Aria replied. -We're about to enter the main hall. No signs of our primary objectives yet.- She put her ear up against the door that would open into the meeting hall. She heard nothing. -Mari, what can you see from where you are?-

-Very little,- her executive officer radioed back. -There are perhaps one hundred rebel soldiers scattered around the outside of the palace.- After a brief pause, Aria heard the very loud crack of a rifle shot over the radio channel. -Ninety-nine. But I have no view inside. The windows are shuttered.-

Aria nodded, though the gesture could not be seen over the airwaves. It sounded as though things were fairly well in hand outside, though she would have liked it if the allied troops outside could

breach the ground entrances to the palace. But for now, that was of little concern. They were held down out there, so for the moment there was little worry of enemy troops coming back in. She clicked off her radio, considering her next move. The meeting hall was one place that needed to be checked, but she had been hoping that Mari or one of the other snipers could have given her some idea of what was inside. The lack of view through the windows was problematic. She pressed her ear against the door again. Again, she heard nothing.

-Alright, what do we do?- she asked her soldiers. -We can go in, or look for a better way around. Let me hear your thoughts.-

-I say go in,- the most senior soldier, a sergeant, with her said. -We shouldn't risk the delay of finding a longer route. Push in now, clear the room, and keep going. That's my vote.-

-Concur,- another soldier said.

Aria looked at the other two Royal Guards in the squad. They also looked as though they wanted to push forward. She didn't have the best feeling about it, but they were right. Time was of the essence. Reluctantly, she agreed with them. -Very well.- She stepped back from the door. -Sergeant, take the door. Two left, two right, I'll cover from the entryway. Let's go.-

The soldiers all snugged their weapons tight to their shoulders, as the sergeant reached for the door. She tested it once, and found it unlocked like most of the other doors they'd come to. Holding up one hand, she gave a slow countdown from three, and then grabbed the door handle and twisted. Just as she pushed the door in and the soldiers began moving, Aria got a jolt of premonition shooting up her spine that made her tail stand out straight.

-Wait!- she shouted, too late. All four of her soldiers went through the door just as they'd been trained to, and as soon as they did so they were met with a hail of gunfire. Taken by surprise, the guards barely had time to respond with a few shots of their own before they were cut down. Aria hunched against the wall on the stairway side of the door, feeling thuds through the walls as bullets struck the opposite surface. In a matter of seconds, the gunfire stopped, leaving the area eerily quiet apart from the lingering ring in Aria's ears.

She was almost afraid to do so, but now that she was here it was likely just a matter of time before someone came after her. Preferring to meet them before that point, Aria slowly and carefully poked her head around the edge of the doorway. Her eyes flashed as she peered inside the meeting hall. Standing on the far side of room, weapons raised, were five crimson-clad Ailian rebel soldiers. And standing behind them...

-Ahh, Aria,- Ara'lana said, a falsely welcoming smile on her face. -How nice of you to join us. I was so hoping you would live long enough to find me.-

Lieutenant Kozlov and his Spetsnaz troopers were facing their own set of problems in the meantime. After they'd come in through the roof, the Royal Guards had headed downstairs and the SAS had set about securing the highest floor to prevent enemy troops from following them, leaving the Russian commandos to go about searching the rear portion of the palace, where a lot of residential and office areas were located. The palace was like a maze, and the human lieutenant had to really focus on where they were going to keep from getting lost, which was no easy task since he and his soldiers had been given barely an hour to look over the layout before making this assault. They'd split up into five groups of four commandos each, taking a sector of the palace to cover. Going room-to-room, exactly as they'd trained so often, they cleared each room one by one. It had been uneventful at first, but they had run into a snag once they'd gotten deep into the back of the palace.

That snag had Kozlov's squad pinned down in the crosshalls of a T-intersection, taking the form of seven crimson-clad human soldiers near the end of the long hallway that ran off of it. Any time they tried to get a look down the hall, they were met with bursts of rifle fire that chipped marble and wood paneling off of the walls and peppered their faces with splinters. The rebel soldiers seemed to be determined to hold that hallway, and it was making the lieutenant no less determined to clear them out.

"Popov!" he called across the hall to one of his soldiers. The other trooper, a corporal, nodded to him to indicate he heard. Kozlov pulled a small, cylindrical canister from a strap on his gear vest, a compact but potent stun grenade. The corporal did the same, and they both pulled the pins at the same time. The lieutenant counted down from three in his head, and then he lobbed it blindly down the long hall. His subordinate did the same a split second later. They clenched their eyes shut and huddled behind cover to minimize the effects on themselves, and then the hallway erupted into a cacophony of light and sound as the seven-banger grenades went off.

The last burst from the flashbangs had barely sounded when the Spetsnaz popped around the corners, their submachine guns raised. The rebel soldiers were staggering and looked shocked, stunned by the intense light and noise they'd just been subjected to. The Russian commandos took quick and careful aim, firing short, methodical bursts from their weapons as they worked their way through the group of enemies. Several of them recovered from the flashbang grenades just as it was too late to do them any good, and they were downed by shots to the head and chest before they could get their rifles all the way up.

Now that the hall was clear, the commandos returned to their task of clearing the area. Kozlov kept one eye on the fallen enemy soldiers as his men went down the hallway, shaking his head a little. It had been centuries since the last conflict that had pitted humans against each other. What seductive

promises could have been made to these men to make them go against that which had been striven for nearly all of human history?

They reached the place where the rebels had been dug in, near a heavy wooden door indistinguishable from all the others in this area of the palace. When one of the soldiers put his hand out and twisted the handle, he received a surprise.

“This one's locked,” he reported to his lieutenant.

“What?” Kozlov asked, blinking. This was the first locked door they had encountered since entering the palace. Why would this one be locked, out of all the others? “Try it again. Maybe it's just stuck.”

The Spetsnaz trooper tried to twist the handle again, and he threw his shoulder against the door with a grunt. It didn't budge even a millimeter. “Locked tight, sir. Move on to the next for now?”

“Negative,” the lieutenant said, his curiosity roused. This had to have been why the rebel soldiers had held their ground and put up such a fight. Something important had to be behind this door. “Stoli, breaching rounds.”

One of his commandos came up to the door, slinging his main weapon down to the side as he pulled a compact shotgun from his back. The shotgun was loaded with shells containing powdered titanium and wax slugs. He chambered a round and held the barrel close to the top hinge of the door and fired, splintering wood off of the door and destroying the hinge. He repeated this action twice, doing the same to the bottom hinge and to the edge of the door between the handle and the latchpiece. As he pulled back, Kozlov slammed his boot into the door just above the handle, and the door tipped inward and hit the floor inside with a booming thud.

The squad of commandos rushed in, their weapons raised for any sign of trouble. The first thing that Kozlov saw was that this was some sort of living area, not unlike a luxury hotel suite. Furnished richly, it looked like an area meant for guests to reside in. The second thing he saw was two female Ailians, one of them much more well-dressed than the other, huddled together on a couch inside with alarmed expressions on their faces as they perceived the invading humans.

The smaller of the females, with dark blue fur and stripes of gold, rose shakily to her feet as Kozlov approached. He held up a hand to stay his men, and lowered his weapon slightly. The other female, taller and with light orange, black-striped fur, cowered in fear.

“Who are you?” the darker-colored Ailian asked him. “What do you want?” Kozlov was impressed by her poise. She was clearly frightened, but her accented English was firm and unwavering. And at that moment Kozlov recognized her from pictures he had seen.

The lieutenant lowered his weapon all the way, and allowed it to hang from its sling. “You are

Li'ren Amani?" he asked her.

The female gave a small nod, her intensely red eyes looking him over. "I am. And again I ask who you are."

Kozlov offered her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, though he knew that the appearance of a squad of human commandos would not typically be a reassuring thing to an Ailian. "I'm Lieutenant Nikolai Kozlov of the 57th Guards Spetsnaz. I've been looking for you, Your Majesty. My men and I would like to get you out of here, if you're ready to leave. I think your Royal Guards will be happy to see you."

The Ailian Empress gasped, and he saw relief wash over her face. "I...We heard the fighting outside," she said. "I assumed the fleets were here, but...The negotiations were successful, then?" She placed a hand over her chest. "I was beginning to think they would never work..." Li'ren sank down onto the couch, unable to stand any longer from the flood of emotions welling up inside of her. She was overwhelmed by relief and vindication all at the same time. Could it be that one war would finally end after these ten long years?

"Well, I wouldn't say everything is over just now," Kozlov said to her. "But that can be worked out later. For now, let's get you to safety." He keyed up his radio, selecting the channel that would put him directly to the Nuretan General Soumaren. "This is Lieutenant Kozlov. We have secured the primary objective. I repeat, the primary objective has been located. I'm transmitting my position and requesting an evac team."

Ara'lana stepped down between her soldiers, the white-furred admiral walking with measured steps as she approached her daughter. She had a predatory look on her face, a quite evil grin parting her lips to show her pristine, sharp teeth. Aria was gripped by fear, but she stood her ground, coming to stand in the doorway despite the weapons that were trained on her. Her mother paused, looking back over her shoulder at her soldiers, then looking back to her.

-Put your weapon down, Aria,- she instructed her calmly. -My soldiers would love to have a reason to shoot you. I, of course, don't want that at all.- She crossed her arms over her chest. -You can't run. The minute you move, you'll be taken down. It's hopeless, you must see that.-

Aria gritted her teeth, but her mother was correct. Lowering her arms, she let her rifle slip from her hands and clatter to the floor. She stared down Ara'lana, seething with rage as she glared at the object of her hatred. She almost couldn't stand the look of satisfaction on the elder Ailian's face, the smugness of her belief that she had won. The captain raised her head, intent on not letting her anger and fear show in her expression.

-You haven't won, mother,- she growled. -It's all over. By now your fleets are outnumbered, I'm sure of that, and the humans are on our side now. You're going to lose the homeworld, and without Lirna your grip on the rest of the Ascendancy will crumble.-

Ara'lana chuckled. -I don't see it that way,- she countered. -I have the full force of the Pteryd Combine behind me. They are more than enough to handle your alliance. But that's for another day. Right now, I have the little problem of you to deal with.- She clenched her hands into fists. -You have been more than a bother to me, and I intend to see to it that you will trouble me no more.- She waved back to her soldiers. -Leave us be. I will deal this matter on my own.-

Her soldiers hesitated, the aim of their weapons wavering in surprise at this order. -M'lady, perhaps...,- one of them began to say.

-I said go,- Ara'lana snarled. -I can handle one little girl on my own. My daughter is my business. Go and help the others in repelling the attack. That's an order from your Empress, mind you.-

Looking at each other, the soldiers lowered their guns and took one last look at their leader before they turned and hurried out of the meeting hall. Once they were gone, Ara'lana gave a snarl of intimidation. She flexed her arms, and then pulled her sidearm from her belt and tossed it to the side, leaving herself unarmed. Aria blinked in surprise. What was her mother up to now? Did she not mean to kill her?

-I haven't forgotten what you did to escape from me the last time,- Ara'lana said, her feet moving slowly as she stalked towards her. -Major Tal'in was one of my best soldiers, and you killed her. But you took her by surprise. I will not be surprised so easily. I will enjoy humiliating you before you die, daughter.-

Realizing what her intent was, Aria raised her hands and got into a fighting stance. Her mother had taught her everything she'd known about fighting hand-to-hand. -You don't have to do this, mother,- she said, trying one last appeal, as futile as she knew it would be. -You can surrender now. You can call off all of this madness.-

-Madness?- Ara'lana repeated. -Not madness, my dear daughter. Conviction!- With that, Ara'lana launched herself at Aria, pouncing with full force and wrapping her arms around her upper body. They both tumbled to the floor as Ara'lana came down on Aria with all of her body weight, enough to drive the air out of her lungs as they fell. As soon as they hit the floor, the white-furred female clenched a fist and slammed it into the side of Aria's head.

A flash of white clouded Aria's vision for a moment, and she registered the sharp sting of the blow to her skull. She hissed through clenched teeth and fought back, bringing her legs up and wrapping them around Ara'lana's waist. She rolled to one side and struggled to get the taller, heavier

woman off of her. While her mother continued raining blow down on her head, Aria managed to get halfway onto her left side. She threw up one hand and caught her mother high under the jaw, not the optimal position for a real throat strike but close enough to cause her to snarl in pain and loosen her hold on her daughter. Aria shoved her away and drew her knees up, and with all the strength in her legs she pushed hard on Ara'lana with both feet, propelling her across the floor a few feet. With the few seconds she had bought herself Aria got up on her knees and reached for her belt holster.

-Damn!- she growled, finding nothing there but empty air. The captain realized that when her mother had stunned her with the blow to the head, she must have used the opportunity to disarm her. Her handgun was lying uselessly on the floor where Ara'lana must have tossed it, too far away for her to get to it in time. The rebel commander was already rising to her feet, and could be on her as soon as she made a move for it.

-No cheating, now, Aria,- Ara'lana scolded her, the same way that she had done countless times during sparring matches when Aria was an adolescent. Her mother clearly wanted to do this her way. -I expected better of an honorable captain of the Royal Guards.-

-The only fairness in a fight is before the first blow is struck,- Aria said. She got back up to her feet, resisting the urge to wipe the trickle of blood that oozed down her cheek and tickled her. -You taught me that.-

Ara'lana smirked, and then she lunged for Aria again. Aria was ready this time, and she sidestepped the attack and hip-checked her mother, sending her stumbling away. At the same time she lashed out and backhanded her brutally across the face. The blow should have sent the older woman reeling, but instead she grabbed Aria's arm before she could bring it back and trapped her elbow. Ara'lana yanked down, and Aria was flipped head over heels before she could realize what was happening. It was only in the nick of time that she was able to get her feet underneath her, but not in time to prevent her mother from kicking her in the chest. Though she kept her footing, she gave an abrupt shriek of pain as she felt something give way in her ribcage.

Backstepping quickly from her mother, Aria held her arm around her midsection. Every time she took a breath, she felt a sharp twinge in her chest, and she knew that at least one rib was broken. She grimaced, her ears laying back, as she tried to will the pain away. As much as her body was trying to compensate for it, she couldn't make it dull completely.

-You're still too slow, daughter,- Ara'lana said. -I always told you, but you never listened.- She advanced on her, and Aria backed off and blocked the former admiral's blows as best she could. -If you were quicker, I wouldn't have the Empress, and I wouldn't have your pet human.-

Aria's eyes flared. -Shut up!- she yelled, and she threw herself at her mother. Ara'lana jerked

back from her, but Aria headbutted her right on the tip of her muzzle. Her mother howled as she clapped a hand over her face, blood starting to stream from between her fingers. She pressed the advantage, launching into a flurry of strikes and kicks. Her mother was the one on the defensive now, her arms held up to block the fusillade of physical force. Aria roared, her mind starting to cloud as her rage overtook her. She pinned the older female up against the wall, her knees coming up over and over again, driving into Ara'lana's stomach. As her mother's arms lowered to try to block her, Aria drew one first back as far as she could, ready to deliver a punishing blow to her throat.

In a flash, Ara'lana unsheathed her claws on one hand and swung it up. Aria screamed as the razor-sharp claws slashed through the left side of her face, up her cheek and across her eye. Instantly, everything to her left went dark, blood gushing from the gashes torn into her flesh and pouring down her face. She reeled away from her mother, disoriented and in some of the worst pain she could ever remember experiencing.

-Overconfidence,- Ara'lana said. She laughed, wiping the blood from her own face as she came way from the wall. -It's a killer.-

Brooke was gasping for breath, but she was keeping up well with Jack. He had been right about the Pteryd. After killing the first in the basement of the palace, they had been dodging more of them on a near-constant basis, and the word seemed to have spread among the rest of the rebel soldiers who remained in the palace. They'd been met at several hallway intersections on the way up by squads of two and three rebels, and Jack would either have to double back and find another way around or fight his way through. Up to now he'd managed to get them through the encounters alive, but several near misses had left him with graze wounds on his arms and legs, and one direct hit had mercifully been stopped by the stolen armor he was wearing. He was running low on ammunition, he was exhausted, and he was growing less certain by the minute that he and Brooke would be able to find a way out.

"Are we any nearer the exit?" Jack shouted to the slave girl, leaning around the corner to shoot down the hall at one Pteryd that was keeping them pinned down. He knew they were on the ground floor of the palace, but he was so disoriented that he couldn't tell exactly where.

"I think so," Brooke said. She was flinching, her ears covered by both hands against the noise of the weapons firing. "If...I'm not sure, but I think if we go down that hall, there's a door that leads out into the gardens! I...I'm so turned around right now..."

"Fuck me...," Jack groaned. He leaned his head around the corner. The Pteryd soldier was advancing on them, and it raised its weapon and fired just as he ducked back. He stuck his hand out into the hallway, bracing the rifle against the wall as he fired blindly. "I hope you're right about this."

His gun went empty, and he released the magazine as he reached for the last spare he had. He jammed it into the weapon and yanked the charging handle. With a deep breath, he took his rifle in both hands and knelt on the floor. Jack leaned around the corner again and squared his aim on the Pteryd, firing a three-round burst that took it right in the head, splintering the carapace around its brain as the bullets tore it to shreds. The insectoid alien dropped to the floor. "Goddamn, they just keep coming...Come on, let's go!"

He reached back and grabbed Brooke's hand. Together they ran down the hall towards the door at the end. If he got out of this alive, Jack promised himself that he would never take sunlight and fresh air for granted again.

-I would have given you everything, you know!-

Aria staggered to one side as her mother kicked her in the ribs, the pain from what was already broken amplified by the force of the attack. She fought to keep her feet, trying to push down the rising panic from being half-blind. Ara'lane gave her no quarter, her aggressiveness worse than ever. Her claws had opened more wounds on her arms, and though Aria was giving it back as much as she could, it wasn't enough. Her mother was just too good, and though Aria was tough, she didn't think she was going to be able to overcome her. She was losing a lot of blood, and dizziness was starting to come over her.

-You would have been a princess!- Ara'lane went on, shoving her with both hands. Aria stumbled, going down to one knee. That opened her up for a kick to the underside of her chin, and she was rocked back onto her back. -Our family would have become the most powerful in the entire Ascendancy! Our people would have claimed their rightful place as the leaders of our race.-

Aria tried to respond, but she was choked as Ara'lane came down on top of her and pressed her hand around her throat. Her mother's fingers squeezed with a vice-like grip, cutting off her air as she held her down. She kicked her legs up in an effort to dislodge her, but the rebel leader had too good a position. She couldn't get her off, and her vision was starting to go black as her lungs grew desperate for oxygen. She racked her brain for something, anything she could do. As she thought hard, a sudden thought flashed into her head. She still had her knife strapped to her belt. In the stress and pain of the fight, she'd all but forgotten about it.

-You get to share in none of it, now,- Ara'lane said. She stretched her free arm back, all of her claws extended. Aria knew that the next blow would be straight at her neck. -Give our ancestors my regards.-

As her hand came down, Aria snatched her knife free from the sheath at her hip. Ara'lane's eyes

widened in surprise as the polished metal caught the lights overhead, but she had nowhere to go. Aria thrust the knife up and plunged it into her chest, stabbing the blade deep into her heart up to the hilt. Her mother gasped, a gurgle coming from her throat as her face screwed up in pain and confusion. She twisted the blade violently, and Ara'lana retched as blood sprayed from her muzzle. The white-furred woman looked down at Aria, her eyes glazing over, and then she went limp.

With as much of her waning strength as she could muster, Aria rolled her mother's corpse off of her. Breathing was the hardest thing in the world right now. With the fight over, she could feel all the pain that her rage had been keeping dormant. She knew she had lost a lot of blood, and that she had broken bones all over her body. But her prey was dead, her fight was won, and the room was quiet.

The last thought that went through her head before unconsciousness took her was that she would have loved to have seen Jack one last time.

-Looks like some of them are giving up,- Lieutenant Ayalis said. She was watching the area around the palace through her rifle scope, with several of the human SEAL snipers nearby. Down in the gardens and the courtyards of the palace, numerous rebel soldiers were laying down their mostly empty weapons and stepping out from behind cover. Sporadic gunfire was still being exchanged, with the majority of that coming from the Pteryd.

For the most part, though, it seemed as though the battle was coming to an end. The commandos who had breached the palace were reporting back in, stating that the building had been almost completely cleared, apart from a few scattered areas. The airspace around Hayikwiir City was all but pacified, and the influx of human soldiers and armor was driving the rebels away. Mari didn't want to rejoice just yet, but in their sector of the planet, at least, it looked like the battle was close to being won.

-Rifleman in the open!-

The warning came from one of the other Royal Guard snipers perched among the buildings. The lieutenant got back on her rifle, scanning the ground below. -Where?- She reached over and slapped the arm of the SEAL next to her, letting him know to be ready.

-West side of the palace,- her soldier radioed to her. -I don't have a good angle.-

-I see him,- Mari said after searched for a few seconds. The human male soldier had come out of a side door into the gardens. "West," she said to the SEAL.

"Got him," he said. "He's got a weapon. There's a girl with him. Hostage?"

"Maybe," Mari said. She zoomed in on the man. She could tell he was injured, but he had crimson body armor on and was carrying a rifle. He had what looked like one of the palace slaves by the hand, dragging her along with him, and he was looking around frantically.

"I don't think the guys on the ground have seen him," the SEAL judged. He tightened his grip on the rifle. "I'll take the shot."

Lieutenant Ayalis kept her scope on the man, something nagging at her in the back of her mind. The man turned his head, looking up at the sky, and then she had a quick realization. "Wait!" She dropped her grip on her rifle and lunged to the side, grabbing the SEAL's rifle and jerking his aim off. "Not a rebel." She got on her radio to the soldiers on the ground. "-A human just came out of the palace, west side into the gardens. He is armed but he is *not* a threat. Get someone to him and bring him to safety.-"

"-Damn it all!- Admiral Kris snarled. Alarms were sounding all over her bridge, and more alerts from her captains were pouring into communications with each passing minute. The human ships and the Ailian reinforcements were tearing into her fleets, and though she was trying to manage things as best as she could her ships weren't able to fight back effectively enough. Her flagship was the least damaged of all of them, and even her shields were starting to buckle, and the human fighters had taken out nearly half of her ship's weapons. The battle was spinning out of control for her.

"-Another group of ships coming out of hyperspace!- one of her radar officers called up to her. An escort carrier and a formation of cruisers.

Admiral Kris stared out of the forward viewport as the new group of human ships entered the space around Lirna. "-What the hell are those Pteryd doing? Our flank is totally unprotected!- As she spoke, the fighter bays of the new carrier emptied, bombers and interceptors streaming out to join the fray. She stood up from her chair and went to the railing overlooking the crew deck, leaning down. "-Someone get me the Pteryd commander on comms right now!-

"-Admiral?-

The admiral turned around, her arms crossed over her chest as she regarded one of her junior officers. She did her best to look aloof and intimidating, but the effect was reduced when the fur on her tail was bristled out. "-You had better be here telling me that the engineers have repaired the damaged shield generators.-"

"-No...ah...No, m'lady,- the lieutenant said. She swallowed. "-Communications has been intercepting royalist transmissions from Lirna. They're reporting that Admiral Me'lia has been killed.-"

Admiral Kris' eyes widened, and for a second she felt like her heart stopped. Her ears swept back as she crossed the distance between her and the lieutenant and grabbed her shoulders. "-How reliable are those reports?- she demanded, shaking the officer violently.

"-Th-The intelligence division thinks they're authentic,- the terrified lieutenant replied.

Selina cursed and spun away, her thoughts jumbled by this new information. She thought about the reports she had been receiving from the planet's surface. Eight of her fifteen ground commanders had failed to report in as scheduled, and the casualty numbers were not favorable. If Ara'lana had been killed, that was a further blow to their command structure. Some sort of miracle would be required to win this battle now, at least as long as those goddess-forsaken Pteryd held their hands behind their backs.

-Admiral, transmission coming in from the Pteryd.-

-About time!- Kris growled. She went back to her command chair and activated her comm system. A holographic image projected itself in the air before her, but it was not the Pteryd that she expected to see. -Seirin-143? Where is Admiral Tailin?-

The Pteryd envoy clacked its mandibles. *~The admiral is tending to the fleet and is busy. You wished to speak. Speak.~*

-We are being decimated out here!- the Ailian admiral said, barely restraining her voice from a shout. -We need your assistance to drive back the humans.- She looked at her radar readouts, her eyes scanning back and forth. -Why are you pulling back your ships?-

~Admiral Me'lia is dead,~ the Pteryd said without inflection or feeling of any kind. *~Our soldiers on the ground informed the Combine before they were killed. The humans have changed the equation. This battle is lost. We intend to minimize the losses we will take and are falling back to positions in the Inner Colonies. You may stay and continue this futile endeavor if you wish. It would be much more prudent to conserve strength for the future.~*

Admiral Kris bared her teeth at Seirin-143's image. -You are retreating? What cowardice is this?-

~It is not cowardice. It is a simple risk and benefit analysis. If you live, I look forward to speaking with you again, Admiral.~ Seirin-143 cut off the transmission on its end. Almost immediately afterward, Pteryd ships began disappearing from the radar screens as they jumped into hyperspace, leaving the system.

Selina clenched her fists, and then she slammed a hand down and snapped the armrest of her chair off. She was as furious as she could imagine herself ever being. -Damn those bugs...I told Ara'lana...-

-Admiral...-

-What!?- Admiral Kris snapped, spinning in her chair and glaring at the lieutenant who was still standing behind her.

The officer pointed at the forward viewport in answer. Admiral Kris turned back around just in

time to see more human ships exiting hyperspace, smaller ships that seemed more suited to border patrols, but additional firepower nonetheless. She did the math in her head, and she leaned back in her command chair. Coldness washed over her. There was no way they could win this now.

-Admiral, what are your orders?-

Selina covered her eyes with one hand, and she clenched her jaw so tight that it ached. -Recall all fighters. Form up the fleets. Issue abandon ship orders for the most heavily damaged vessels, and gather escape pods as you can.- She lashed the air behind her with her tail once in anger. -Full retreat. The homeworld is lost.-

“Shit,” Jack hissed. He flinched away from the sting of the antiseptic spray.

“Sorry.” Lieutenant Ayalis replaced the spray back in the medical kit on the ground. She reached for an electric wound sealer and began tracing them over the small cuts and burns on Jack's arms.

Jack looked around the gardens. Once the fighting around the palace had ceased, they had become a makeshift triage area for soldiers injured during the battle. Human, Nuretan, and Ailian medics were moving among the flowering bushes and tress, tending to people lying on stretchers, stone benches, and the grass. People were still being brought out of the palace on stretchers, a lot of them servants who had been caught in the crossfire.

Every few seconds, Jack looked over to make sure Brooke was still doing okay. One of the UN medics was looking after her a few feet away from him. She hadn't been injured by gunfire, but the slave girl had been bruised after a few falls inside. She looked overwhelmed by the amount of activity that was going on around her, but she still looked relieved that it was all over.

“Got another coming out!”

He turned his head to see a group of UN Navy corpsmen emerge from the palace, carrying someone on a stretcher. As they approached, he could see that it was a black-furred Ailian wearing the uniform of a Royal Guard. One of the nearest clear spaces was next to Jack, and they made for it. When the stretcher was set down on the ground, he immediately shot to his feet.

“Aria? Aria!”

Lieutenant Ayalis tried to make him sit down again, but he pulled away from her and went over to the stretcher's side. Aria was lying limp on its surface, and she looked like absolute hell. Blood stained her uniform all over and was matting her fur, and she was breathing shallowly and slowly. The left side of her face was almost unrecognizable, but he knew it was her.

Jack pushed one of the corpsmen aside and put a hand on Aria's shoulder. “Aria?”

It took several seconds, but eventually her right eye opened. The yellow-gold orb took a

moment to focus, but when she saw him her hand came up and grabbed the front of his shirt. “Jack...,” she managed to say, her voice a low, strained rumble. She tugged him weakly down, her other arm coming around his back as she hugged him to her blood-soaked breast. “You safe...” He could hear the relief in his voice, but also the pain.

“I knew you were coming for me,” Jack said. He straightened up and looked her over again, as he let one of the corpsmen back him off a bit. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Mother...,” Aria croaked. She coughed, a little blood coming up as she did so. She winced slightly as the corpsmen began cutting off her uniform. “Find her. Fight her. Kill her.” Her tail was hanging limp over the side of the stretcher. Jack couldn't remember seeing her this bad, not since the fight she'd had with the pack of wild beasts soon after they'd first met.

“How bad is it?” Jack asked one of the corpsmen.

The medic looked at Aria, and he shook his head, shrugging. “I don't know Ailian physiology all that well,” he admitted. “But just looking at her...Massive blood loss, a few broken ribs...probably some more broken bones. That eye is probably beyond saving. She's going to need some serious surgery in a real hospital, nothing like what a field hospital can give her. Her people are probably going to need to medevac her after we get her stabilized.”

“Fuck, Aria...,” Jack groaned. He held onto her hand as the medics began to work. Brooke was looking on curiously. She had met Aria before, of course, though they'd never really spoken at any length, but she was familiar with her from her time at the governess' residence on Arbaros. “You'll be okay...You're gonna be okay...”

He looked up at the sounds of clattering equipment. A squad of four Royal Guards was moving their way, and they were escorting two familiar faces. Li'ren, the Empress, was walking side-by-side with Sami, moving around the garden and observing the work of the medics. Jack was a little surprised that she would still be here, but with all the friendly soldiers around she was probably as safe as she had been in days. She was accompanied by a human military officer that Jack hadn't seen up to now.

When she saw Jack and Aria, Sami's eyes went wide and she rushed ahead of the group. The younger Ailian knelt next to Aria's stretcher, looking down at her elder sister with extreme worry on her face. She was clearly distraught, tears welling up in her eyes as she saw how badly her sister was injured. Li'ren came over as well, putting a comforting hand on Sami's shoulder.

“Jack,” Li'ren said, looking down at him. “I am glad to see you made it through this.” She glanced over to where Brooke was seated, and her muzzle widened in a smile. “Little one, you are alive as well...Thank the goddess for that.”

Brooke bowed her head, looking down at the grass. “M'lady.”

Li'ren looked back to where Aria lay, and she squeezed Sami's shoulder. The younger girl's hand came up and laid over hers, her head leaning over and her cheek rubbing against where their hands were joined. "Captain Me'lia's injuries appear very grave, indeed," she said solemnly. "She has proven herself to be ever the strong fighter, though. I have confidence that she will recover. I do not wish to award more medals posthumously than I must."

The human officer that was with Li'ren came over to Jack and extended his hand. "You're Jack Squier, right?" he asked. Jack blinked, nodding as he took the officer's hand. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Carswell, SEALs. Empress Amani has been telling me about you and Captain Me'lia here. Interesting story you two have. If you had stuck with the Navy longer than you had, I think you would have done well with us." He grinned at Jack. "I hear that you did well for yourself in there, anyway."

"Well as I could, I guess," Jack allowed. He didn't want to take his eyes off of Aria for longer than he had to. The corpsmen had her uniform cut off to expose her injured areas, and they were checking her over more thoroughly now.

"I have been speaking with the commander," Li'ren said. "I think that there is great promise for a continuing alliance between the Ascendancy and the United Nations. This is not the end of the war, after all, and the rebels continue to hold large quantities of human and Ailian space."

"Yeah," Jack agreed. He wasn't paying much attention to what Li'ren was saying, preferring to listen to what the medics were saying as they worked to stabilize Aria. "I bet."

Li'ren didn't seem bothered by it, in fact she seemed to smile as she saw the way that Jack was concerned over Aria. "The first step towards solidifying that alliance will be taking place very soon, in fact. I have requested, and the UN fleet commander has agreed, to begin evacuating humans previously held in slavery on Lirna."

"What?" This came from Brooke, blurted out before the girl could realize that she was interrupting. Her eyes were wide, and she had stood up without seeming to know it.

"I keep my promises," Li'ren said firmly. "The UN upheld their side of the bargain, and I must uphold mine. All slaves will be freed, and any humans who wish to leave the Ascendancy will be repatriated." She met Brooke's eyes. "Starting with you, child."

Brooke's jaw dropped. "M'lady?"

"You have been a faithful servant ever since Kri'a took you in," Li'ren told her, smiling warmly at the girl. "Commander Carswell will be leaving with his wounded men in a few hours, returning them to Cerelis for more expert medical treatment, and he has agreed to take the human servants from the palace with him. If you wish to accompany them, you are more than welcome."

The dark-haired, dark-skinned young girl looked dumbfounded, terrified, and excited all at the

same time. For all of her life that she could remember, she had been a slave, and now she was being given the opportunity to leave that life behind and return to be with her own people, to be free.

“M'lady...,” she said, her voice wavering. “Th-Thank you...I want to go.” She looked down at the grass, and then she looked up again, staring Li'ren right in the eyes. “Thank you. For treating me like I was a person, and not someone's property. I won't miss Lirna, but...thank you...”

Li'ren smiled at her. Next to her, on the stretcher, there was a lull in the activity of the corpsmen, and in that lull Aria stirred and spoke again.

“Jack...,” she said, her voice a little stronger but still faint. “You go, too...”

For a minute, he wasn't sure that he had heard her correctly. Jack tilted his head to the side. “Say again, Aria?”

“You go...to Cerelis,” Aria said. She tried to sit up, but one of the corpsmen eased her back down, keeping her flat on the stretcher. She bared her teeth and tried, but failed, to growl at him. “Not stay here. Go back...to you people.”

“What?” Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked between the human officer, Li'ren, and Aria, shaking his head. “No, no, I'm staying with you, Aria. I'm not going anywhere. I love you. I'm not leaving.”

“Please.” Aria swallowed, gathering all of the strength that she needed to talk. Jack could see a tear make its way down her cheek. “Not want to. But with me...not safe. Is war. Mother have many allies. Many friends. All angry now, want revenge. Will try kill me...Kill you, too.” She blinked her good eye, and another tear fell. “Much safer for you...if not with me. Please.” She squeezed his hand. “Want you here...But want you safe more...”

Jack could think of a million things he could have said and done. He could have been angry, could have yelled at Aria. He could have screamed that it wasn't fair, to go through everything they had been through together and then be torn apart again. He could have gotten up and walked away from her without saying a word, could have killed her with his silence. He could have asked the Empress to interfere and talk sense into Aria.

But he realized she was right. As long as the rebels were still out there, there would be people who wanted revenge for the death of their leader. Aria had said it herself to him, many times. Ailians had long memories, and an insult or slight against their honor was not easily forgotten. They'd come for Aria, he was sure, and as long as he was around for her to worry about, that would be that much more attention she'd not have to devote to doing her job, keeping herself safe, and fighting this war. So not only was it safer for him to do what she asked of him, it was safer for her as well. As much as he didn't want to say it, that was the truth.

“Alright...,” he said, barely able to hold down the sob that wanted to escape his throat. “I’ll go...I’ll go back with them.” He rubbed the back of his arm across his eyes, wiping away the tears that were clouding his vision. “I love you, Aria.”

She pulled him back down again, kissing him passionately. He accepted it, blood and tears and all, without hesitation. “*Se le ch’aa ara*,” she whispered to him as the kiss broke. “I never forget...”

Back on a UN transport ship, moving steadily away from Lirna, Jack stood near a window in one of the galleys. He was looking back at the planet, leaning against the thick glass panel with his forehead resting against his, staring at the sandy tan orb with unblinking eyes. Lirna was slowly shrinking as the ship moved away from its gravity well, prepping to make the jump to hyperspace and begin the journey to human space. He knew it was too late to go back, but he at least wanted to look at the planet until it disappeared from view.

“Coffee?”

Jack didn’t turn, but he recognized the voice of Commander Carswell. “No thanks.”

“You really didn’t want to leave,” the SEAL commander said. He made it an observation rather than a question, but Jack responded to him anyway.

“I didn’t,” he said. He brushed a hand back through his blonde hair. For the first time in a few days, he realized how exhausted he was, but he knew he wouldn’t sleep well tonight or any night for a long time.

“That Brooke girl is settling in well,” Carswell told him. “Thought you’d wanna know. She asked about you. I told her I’d come look for you. I think she’d appreciate having someone she’s used to being around, once we reach Cerelis. Lots of records from the old colony worlds were destroyed by the Ascendancy, in the early days of the war. I went ahead and transmitted the request to see if any of her family can be tracked down, but...not much hope of that, I think.”

“Probably not,” Jack agreed. “I’ll think about it.”

Carswell slapped him on the shoulder. “Might wanna find someplace to sit down,” he told Jack. “Going to hyperspace before too much longer. Be good to get home.”

“Not home for me,” Jack murmured as the officer walked away. He felt like there was a fist around his heart, constricting it and making his whole chest feel tight. “My home is down there, millions of miles away from where I was born.”

When he would be able to return home, he didn’t know. Not for a long time, he was sure. But he had faith. One day, he knew, he would be able to come back. And she would be waiting there for him.

“True love doesn't have a happy ending, because true love never ends. Letting go is one way of saying I love you.”

- Unknown