

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter One: Nightmare
by Havoc

“The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it.”

- Thucydides

Everyone knew that something was very, very wrong when the soldiers came in and cleared the courtroom of the gathered crowd. The news people protested strongly, but when they were threatened with arrest by the lieutenant in charge of the soldiers if they didn't leave immediately, they grudgingly packed up their equipment and vacated the premises. Jack watched the entire spectacle with a growing sense of dread, wondering what in the world could have gone wrong *this* time. Aria's trial should have started nearly an hour ago, by now, but the plans seemed to have changed. Twenty minutes ago, the Empress had left the courtroom along with Li'ren and many of the military officers who had been sitting on the court martial. Jack, knowing that he was in no position to make a scene, as a mere human slave in this setting, kept his seat and held his tongue even though he wanted to stand up and scream demands for information to anyone within earshot.

One thing that Jack did notice was that several of the soldiers were keeping very close to him and the Me'lia family. In fact, several times Aria's family had tried to get up and leave the courtroom at the order of the lieutenant, like everyone else, only to be ushered back down in their seats. The soldiers around them kept their backs to the family, looking out at the people streaming from the room. Jack looked over at Sami quizzically, but she appeared just as confused and scared as he was feeling. Noticing his expression, the young Ailian shrugged at him, turning her head around as she gazed about the room, trying to figure out what was going on. Jack could see her nose twitching as her sensitive Ailian nose tried to make sense of the flurry of emotions in the area. But even with all of the information that her well-developed sense of smell could tell her, Jack didn't think Sami was having any luck.

When the room was empty except for the soldiers, Jack, and the Me'lia family, the lieutenant came up to them. Since Sami was the head of the family, as the eldest female in the absence of Aria, he spoke with her.

“*A'kre me'lia sin hale ke ta're,*” he said to her. Jack saw Sami stiffen, and knew that whatever the Ailian lieutenant was saying to her, it wasn't anything that she wanted to hear. With what Sami had been teaching him of their language since he had been living with their family, he could understand

some of the words that were being said. He recognized the family name, of course, and he recognized the words *sin*, meaning “problem”, and *ta're*, which could mean either “nothing” or “absent” depending on the context.

“*Mere sin sal'a kresa le sa?*” Sami said, one hand coming up to her chin nervously. She looked at her siblings and her father, sitting around her, then back at the lieutenant. Jack understood her to be asking what the problem was.

“*Te're me san li'a're,*” the lieutenant said, his tone sounding rather short. “*Ne la ai'ra me'lia sola kre'zele lupu.*” He gestured at Sami with one hand, his ears laying back. Sami blinked, appearing taken aback by his manner of speaking. The lieutenant got an impatient look on his face, his lips drawing back, exposing his sharp front teeth. “*Te're me san,*” he repeated.

“What did he say?” Jack asked, a little defensively. As the only member of Aria's family who had known about his relationship with Aria since his arrival on Lirna, Sami had been a welcoming presence since the very beginning of his ordeal. He'd even started to think of her rather as a little sister, or as little as was possible when she had almost three feet of height on him. And the way this officer was talking to Sami was pissing him off, aggravating his already bad mood.

“Ah...He say...ah...,” Sami said, struggling a little as she called upon her rudimentary knowledge of English. “Say problem with trial. Not want talk with family here.” Sami's ears were flat to her head, her robin's egg blue eyes full of worry. “Say I come. Tell more.”

“So he knows what happened? He knows what's going on?” Forgetting where he was, and forgetting the slave collar tight around his neck, Jack stood up from his seat. Before he knew what was happening, one of the soldiers around the family hammered him on the shoulder, sending him back on his ass.

“Slave!” the Ailian lieutenant spat at him in horribly accented but recognizable English. “Sit!”

“Hey, fuck you, asshole!” Jack snarled. Frustrated and in pain, he started trying to stand up again. “You don't own m-”

A firm hand on his other shoulder made him shut his mouth and stay in his seat, and Jack looked to his left to see Sami getting to her feet. The fur on the back of her neck was raised up, and he could see the muscles in her jaw trembling with barely restrained anger. Other than when Aria had put herself in the hospital, Jack couldn't remember ever seeing her angry. As she stood up straight, Jack thought he saw the lieutenant take a small step back. Sami was not an intimidating person, especially by Ailian standards, but she was upset, she was exhausted, and more than that she was at least six inches taller than the lieutenant. And even though she was a civilian, and not a military officer, she was still female, and that counted for a great deal in the Ascendancy.

Keeping her anger in check, Sami resisted the urge to take her claws to the officer's face. Instead, she leaned forward, one hand on her hip and the other shaking a finger a millimeter in front of his muzzle. "*Po'krai le tok me sha'la arai dana!*" she shouted. Her tail was thrashing the air behind her like a whip. "*Ala're masha kera'na te ra ka'i'len!*" Then she swatted him in the face with an open palm, baring her fangs. "*Po'krai! Da'na le kot!*"

Jack couldn't help but be amazed by her behavior. Usually quiet and demure, he hadn't ever seen this side of Aria's younger sister. Then again, Jack realized, with Aria gone for months at a time and Sami the eldest female in the home otherwise, she had to act as the head of the household frequently. She certainly must have had a lot of practice in asserting herself when she had to.

Whatever she had said to the lieutenant, it seemed to have had an effect. The male officer stared at her for a few moments, and then he backed off, a grudging expression on his face. "*Mea'le re ka...*," he grumbled. Words of apology, though obviously not entirely sincere. He turned half away from Sami, gesturing towards the door leading out of the courtroom. "*Tere me san li'a're. Shoka.*" Jack recognized the word for "please" this time.

Nodding, Sami watched the officer begin to move off, then she put a hand on Jack's shoulder, urging him to stand. "Come," she said.

Looking over his shoulder, Jack put his eyes on each of the surrounding soldiers in turn. When it became clear that he wasn't about to be slammed back down again, he slowly rose from his seat and started to follow Sami as she went with the officer. "What about the rest of the family?" he asked her quietly.

"Later," she said, a pained expression on her face. She clearly didn't like leaving them behind, but she couldn't very well bring everyone with her. And though Jack knew that Aria's father and siblings were just as terrified and confused as he was, he was glad that she was letting him come along. "They fine for now...You come."

"If you say so." Jack kept walking, but before they got far, the lieutenant looked back and saw him. He got a sour look on his face and stopped.

"*Sala'a'kre...*," he started to say, but Sami cut him off with a low growl.

"*Le keire sola me,*" she said firmly. Sami brought Jack in front of her, placing her hands on both of his shoulders. "*Lo'krai me nar'i aria lamea. Me'lia che se're lo ara kre'na.*" Her fingers tightened on his shoulders. He tilted his head up and back, saw her staring down the other Ailian.

For a moment, it looked as though the lieutenant was going to object again. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then clenched his hands. But then he just gave a curt nod and resumed his walking.

“What did you say to him?” Jack asked Sami.

She blinked, her face returning to its normal shy demeanor. He thought she looked a bit sheepish. “He say you stay here,” Sami explained. She glanced to the side. “I tell him...Aria give me you as slave. I bring you.” She seemed apologetic at calling him a slave, even if it was technically true.

Despite his mood, Jack was able to crack a small smile. “You lied for me,” he said. “I didn't think you had it in you to lie.”

Sami managed a little smile of her own. “Ah...small lie only...” She sobered then. “Aria ask me take care you, anything happen...Think something maybe happen...” After a second of quiet, she lightly pushed him forward. “Come.” They both walked after the lieutenant, following him from the courtroom.

-Mother...?- Aria asked, barely able to speak past the lump in her throat. -You're...You're alive?-

Aria's head was swimming, not just because of the haziness that still lingered from being rendered unconscious. She wasn't yet convinced that what she was seeing wasn't a figment of her imagination caused by a brain injury, but she couldn't deny that the woman before her looked very much like Ara'lana Me'lia. She had the same eyes, the same snowy white fur, and even the same uniform that Aria had last seen three years ago. From her position, still on the floor where she'd fallen in disbelief, she so desperately wanted to be right that it hurt.

-Yes, child,- Ara'lana assured her. She stepped towards Aria, standing right in front of her daughter. Reaching out to her, she placed a hand on the top of her head. -It's me, and I am alive.-

With a whimper, Aria fell forward, wrapping her arms around her mother's middle. -Oh, mother...,- she cried, burying her face in the older Ailian's uniform. As soon as she touched her, she knew that it was real. Somehow, after three years of knowing that she was dead, her mother was alive. -How? Where have you been?-

-Here, child. I have been here.- Ara'lana smiled down at her. -As for the how...I'll leave that for a little later. For now, come with me, my child.- Pulling herself away from Aria, she went to the door of the small room they were in. She rapped on it with one hand, and an electronic beep signified the lock being disengaged. -Come with me.-

Blinking, Aria wiped the tears from her eyes, getting to her feet. -Where are we? And how did I get here?-

Opening the door, Ara'lana stepped out into the hall outside. -You didn't really think I would let them take my daughter from me, did you, now? - As Aria followed her, she saw that they were at the end of a nondescript hallway. The walls were painted a shade of slate gray, common to many

Ascendancy military installations. Standing immediately to the right of the door in a guard position was a female Ailian soldier, dressed in a uniform of plain black with no unit patches or markings. She matched Aria's stare impassively, until both Me'lia's walked away.

-What do you mean?- Aria asked, looking from side to side as they walked. -The last thing I remember was waiting for my trial to begin, and then Major Tal'in came...-

-Yes, Misa has been working for me for some time,- Ara'lana said. -When I first heard about your...troubles, I asked her to keep an eye on you for me. I gave her instructions to bring you out when your trial began, and she and her people performed the task admirably.- They took a left turn down another hallway, and here Aria began to see other Ailians moving about, walking in groups of two and three. All of them were wearing the same unmarked black uniforms. All of them were armed, of course. Apart from the lack of unit markings, it looked like any other base throughout Ascendancy space.

Surprised, Aria looked at her mother. -Well...Thank you, mother. I am in your debt. But I don't think...- They came through a set of sliding doors, and Aria's eyes widened as she saw a huge hangar full of ships of various sizes. The majority of the ships were fighters, but the hangar also contained patrol ships, like the one Aria used to pilot, gunships, and even some heavy-lift troop transports. The vessels were all painted a deep blood red, rather than the obsidian black that most Ailian ships were painted. -What...What is all this?-

-My personal fleet,- Ara'lana said. -A part of it, at least.- She looked around the hangar, an expression of pride on her face. -Don't worry if you don't understand right now, Aria. Everything will be clear to you soon. For now, I imagine you're hungry after your ordeal. I've had dinner prepared.-

Though she was still very confused, Aria did have to admit that she was very hungry. She hadn't been able to eat breakfast that morning, and of course she had been unconscious for most of the day, if it was even the same day. She had no way of knowing, yet. But even if she had no frame of reference as far as time went, her body knew that it was mealtime. -Alright, I suppose...-

Ara'lana led her daughter through the halls of the military facility, until they reached an area which seemed to be more casual, with less of the cold and sterile feel that usual accompanied an Ailian base. Here the walls were paneled in a rich mahogany, decorated with framed landscape paintings from planets across the Ascendancy. After what Aria had been shown through so far, this place seemed out of sync with the rest of the complex. More than anything, the halls reminded her of her family's home in Hayikwiir City, though Aria did not feel the same sense of homelike welcome that she did when she was there. Rather, she felt a sense of dread that she could not quite explain just yet.

-Here, child,- Ara'lana said. Aria realized that they had stopped, and her mother had opened a

door, gesturing with one hand for her to enter. Coming into the room beyond, she found herself in a small waiting area, marble floored and furnished with wooden chairs. -If you wouldn't mind waiting here just a minute or two, Aria, there is something I must attend to before we dine. Make yourself comfortable and I'll be back shortly.- Ara'lana crossed the room, pausing at the door opposite the one they entered and looking over one shoulder. -And I must insist you remain in this room. I trust you, my daughter, but there are always eyes watching. Please don't give my guards any cause for concern.- With that, the elder Ailian left Aria alone.

As the door closed, Aria dutifully took one of the seats placed in the room. She was unable to make herself comfortable, so disconcerted she was by the situation she was in, but at least sitting down meant that her head was spinning a little less. As casually as she could manage, she took a look around the room. Though it was bare except for the chairs like the one she was sitting, Aria saw at least five places where surveillance devices could be hidden. The cracks between the wood paneling in the walls could hide a small camera, or the chairs could contain concealed audio pickups. So whatever Aria was doing was probably being recorded, or even actively monitored by security personnel. Her best course of action right now would probably be to follow her mother's advice and remain where she was.

Now that she was alone with her thoughts, Aria found herself thinking of what was happening back where she had come from. She had no way of knowing where she was right now, or even how long she had been unconscious. Her mother told her that the meal they were about to eat was dinner, but really it could be any time of day. Aria hadn't seen a clock since she had woken up. Aria didn't even know what planet she was on. For all she knew, she could still be on Lirna, or she could be on any one of the hundreds of worlds that made up the Ascendancy, millions of kilometers from her father, or Sami, or Jack...

-*Jack!*- Aria thought to herself, coming to her feet with a sudden feeling of urgency. Her tail started whipping back and forth frantically as her fur stood on end. -*Where in the hell is he? Did my mother take him, too? Could he be here?*- More than anything, Aria was filled with a desire to find Jack, even if she had no way to know that he was even in the same place that she was. She was halfway to the door she'd come through before she remembered what her mother had warned her about. Aria had seen all of the soldiers during her brief walk through the base, and if she was being watched in the room then her leaving would probably summon someone to at least see what she was doing. Anyway, Jack probably wasn't anywhere near her, and even if he was Aria was completely unfamiliar with the base she was in. Looking around blindly would be somewhat less than useful.

-Dammit...,- Aria muttered to herself. She stopped short of the door, standing still and clenching her fists as tightly as she could manage to keep herself from shaking. When her wrists started throbbing

near where she had cut herself, she relaxed, turning away from the door and starting to pace around the room. Her mind was being consumed by a flurry of conflicting thoughts. She didn't want to be here, but here was where her mother was, and ever since her mother's death Aria had longed to see her again. Aria wanted to get out of here and find Jack and her family, but she was in the middle of a secured military facility and she didn't even know what planet she was on. To a somewhat lesser degree, her sense of curiosity was aroused. She didn't want to leave without getting some answers, most of all how her mother could have been alive all this time without contacting anyone in the family.

The lieutenant led Sami and Jack away from the courtroom, to a conference room a few minutes' walk down a long hallway. After being shown inside the room, the pair was taken by surprise. Jack had expected that wherever they were going, Li'ren was going to be there, but he hadn't expected to see so many Ailians wearing uniforms bearing such high-ranking insignia. They were all sitting around a large table, a gigantic holographic space map projected in the air above it. And more than that, the Empress herself was in the room as well. For Jack, seeing her wasn't as big of a deal. He had met her once before, and had even shared lunch with her. For Sami, on the other hand, it was a much bigger thing to be in the same room as the Empress.

"A-Ah...Mi'ran ke rale solan re'olle!" Sami said, hurriedly bowing as low as she could. Her tail was sticking straight back behind her, the fur bushed out so much that it looked like an orange raccoon's tail. After a short delay, Jack followed suit. Since he was a human he didn't really feel exactly right bowing to the Empress, but he also didn't want to get hit by a guard again, and so acquiescence to current social expectations was the order of the day. When they raised back up, the Empress nodded to Sami.

"Sa re-al," the Empress said, her voice as melodious as ever. She gestured to a pair of empty chairs at the table, next to where Li'ren was, and Jack and Sami both took their seats. The Empress offered a strained smile to both of them. "Jack Squier, I am pleased you have come as well. I do wish I had better news for you, but at least you can hear it now, right from me."

"I don't like the sound of that," Jack said warily. He looked around the room, then glanced at the map projected above the table. He could see the Milky Way galaxy, of course the home of the Solar system. He could also recognize the Andromeda galaxy, which contained the bulk of the Ailian Ascendancy, and the Triangulum galaxy, where the Ascendancy had a sizable presence as well. The map was painted with various colors, though Jack had no idea what the colors might have meant. "This all seems a little above my pay grade, Empress."

The Empress pressed a button under the table, shutting off the display. "Ah, yes," she said. "We

were just discussing a few things.” She gestured to the collection of senior military officers seated around the table. Jack thought that he recognized one of the Ailians as Admiral Te'rou, the admiral presiding over the court martial, but all of the others just looked the same to him. He noticed that they were all staring at him, all with an expression that clearly stated they were incensed that a human slave would dare to speak to the Empress. “And I do regret that I must be the bearer of bad news. You seem to get nothing else, yes?”

From that point on, the Empress spoke in the Ailian language for the benefit of everyone else in the room, especially Sami, who had trouble enough keeping up with English when she *wasn't* completely stressed out. Luckily for Jack, Li'ren was there beside him, providing him with a near-instant translation to what was being said.

“First of all, I want to say that I admire your family for being able to remain as one through such trying times,” the Empress said to Sami, spreading her hands on the table. She looked around the table, giving each of the admirals a very pointed expression, especially Admiral Te'rou, before looking back to Aria's sister. *“You and your siblings truly represent the best that can be expected of loyal subjects of the Ascendancy.”*

Doing her best to keep her composure, Sami gave a tight nod. *“Thank you, Your Majesty. It has been difficult...I have been doing my best to keep the family together. Aria's trial has been very difficult for all of us.”*

The Empress waved a hand. *“From what Li'ren tells me, you have been doing splendidly. I am certain that your mother would be proud of the young woman you have become.”*

As much as Jack knew that he shouldn't be opening his mouth too much in this room, the suspense was killing him. He wanted the Empress to come out and say it, instead of this beating around the bush. “Look, it's obvious that Aria's trial has been delayed for some reason,” he blurted out, drawing some fearsome snarls from the military officers in the room. “If the trial isn't going to be held today, can't we just take her home for tonight?”

“Jack!” Sami hissed, nudging him with her foot underneath the table. “Please...” Li'ren looked similarly uncomfortable, though she was looking at the admirals and seemed to be more worried about their reaction to Jack than what Jack was actually saying.

The Empress, however, seemed sympathetic. “I wish you could, Jack, truly I do.” She switched back to Ailian before continuing. *“I'm afraid I have to tell you something unfortunate. Lieutenant Me'lia is nowhere to be found. As a matter of fact, we have reason to believe that she may have been abducted.”*

“What?” Sami gasped. Her ears flattened to her head, one hand coming up to cover her muzzle.

“Abducted? By who? Why?”

“How could this happen?” Jack demanded. He was livid, so much so that he could feel the heat rising in his face. More than that, he was starting to feel scared for Aria. While he was glad that, for the moment at least, she wouldn't be facing a trial with death as a possible outcome, he wasn't sure she would be that better off in the custody of persons unknown. “This is *supposed* to be a military base. Are people just allowed to waltz in and out? Is that what passes for security with you people?”

“Ke're sa me son?” Admiral Te'rou snapped, looking to Li'ren, presumably for a translation of what Jack had just said. After hesitating for a few moments, she reluctantly provided it. Admiral Te'rou shot up from his seat, baring his teeth at Jack and growling. *“If you open your mouth one more time, slave, I will rip your tongue out and feed it to you!”*

After staring at Li'ren until she finally sighed and told him what the admiral had said, Jack slammed a fist on the table and stood up as well. He would have come around the table and made for the Ailian officer if Sami and Li'ren both hadn't put a hand on each of his shoulders and forced him back into his seat. “If you'd show some goddamned competence, this wouldn't have happened. If you're supposed to be the best the Ascendancy has, we shouldn't have any problems kicking your fucking ass, *cat!*”

“I am *not* translating that!” Li'ren muttered to Jack, glaring at him.

“Sala'a re kre'na te nai!” the Empress roared, rising from her seat. “Both of you!” She narrowed her red eyes, staring lasers at Admiral Te'rou until he sat back down. As soon as she was certain that the situation was back under control, she nodded to Li'ren, who began translating for Jack again. *“We don't know all the details yet, I'm afraid. We have some leads, but nothing substantial. Rest assured, as soon as we know something definite, you will be the first people to know.”*

Though that wasn't very helpful to Jack at all, he had to acknowledge that it was the best he could expect, especially since it had only been hours since Aria had been taken. Sami, on the other hand, appeared much more grateful. She stood up from her chair, bowing to the Empress. *“Thank you so much, Your Majesty. For your kind words, and for the support you have offered to our family.”*

“You're quite welcome, child,” the Empress said. She waved to a guard, who came forward. *“Now, I must ask you to leave. Please go home, and I promise that someone will contact you as soon as we have something to tell you.”* The Ailian ruler looked down at the surface of the table, clenching her fists tightly, and then she spoke again, in a quieter voice this time. *“I am terribly sorry that this has happened. I vow that once I find out who is responsible for this crime, I will show them why it is foolish to cross me...”*

Though Aria was still uneasy about where she was, she did have to admit that the meal her mother had ordered to be prepared was just what she needed. Ara'lana seemed to have done her best to try to make things feel easier for Aria, arranging for a staggering repast of many savory meat dishes, always a heavy presence in an Ailian meal and particularly prized as far as Aria was concerned. As hungry as she was, she was able to ignore the situation she was in, at least for a little while. The atmosphere wasn't too bad either. Her mother's private dining room reminded her a lot of the one at their home, even though it was a bit smaller.

Privately, Aria thought that the dinner company left something to be desired. Besides her mother, there were three other Ailian women around the table. And these three were intimidating, sufficiently enough so that the meal was made more awkward than it ought to have been.

The first Ailian was a face recognizable to Aria, Admiral Selina Kris of the Ascendancy's Navy. With fur of jet black and eyes to match, Admiral Kris had gotten her start in the Royal Guards nearly thirty years ago, recruited from her home planet of Sorra in the Outer Colonies. Five years of guarding the royal palace on Lirna had given way to a lengthy spaceborne deployment, where Kris had excelled. Aria knew that Admiral Kris had once been the current Empress's commanding officer. Currently, the admiral was assigned as the sector commander for all of the Outer Colonies. Though as Aria remembered it, Empress Solan had told her that many of the Outer Colony fleets were no longer reporting to Lirna, so perhaps Admiral Kris had moved on to other duties now.

The next face was unfamiliar to Aria, but the name was not. Introduced to her as Lady Tara Shi'ala, the older Ailian was a rather plain-looking woman, with fur of an orange color similar to Aria's. Nevertheless, she exuded an aura of power and experience that came from many years of navigating the upper crust of Ailian society. While Aria had never met the woman personally, she knew of her reputation. Lady Shi'ala had been the chief advisor for the previous Empress, the official post held now by Lady Amani. Though Lady Shi'ala had not performed the same "extra duties" for her Empress that Li'ren did. During the meal, Lady Shi'ala talked more than either Admiral Kris or Ara'lana, and Aria got the impression that she had not been doing much with her time since leaving the Empress's service. Nothing in any official capacity, anyway.

The third other female was, as might have been expected, Major Misa Tal'in, Aria's commanding officer. According to Ara'lana, she had been the one to bring Aria from where she'd been awaiting trial to where they were now. With decades of experience as a ground soldier in the infantry corps of the Ascendancy Navy, Major Tal'in was a more than capable fighter and very tenacious. The major had begun her career as a foot soldier in the Twelfth Fleet, recruited from her home planet of Mar on the very edges of Ascendancy territory. She had run a tight ship as the base commander at

Mat'ar Air Base, and Aria had considered her to be quite a good officer. During the meal, she spoke little, instead just watching the room like a hawk.

When the meal was over, orderlies came into the dining room and cleared away the dishes, bringing tea and leaving the dinner guests to themselves. Admiral Kris, Lady Shi'ala, and Major Tal'in all remained in the dining room with Aria and Ara'lana. While Major Tal'in poured tea for everyone, Aria realized that she was no longer in the mood for any waiting.

-Alright, mother,- Aria said forcefully. -I'm through with the delays. I want some answers, now. I feel I have been patient enough, and I deserve some satisfaction.-

Leaning back in her chair, Ara'lana lifted her cup of tea, taking a sip. -Well, I suppose you have waited long enough, child. Very well. What would you like to know?-

-First of all, where are we?,- Aria asked. She waved a hand around the room. -What is this place?-

Major Tal'in sat back down in her chair, a hard expression on her face. -That is none of your...-

Ara'lana cut her off with a raised finger. -Misa, please. I can handle this myself.- Setting her tea down, Ara'lana folded her hands in her lap, curling her tail about her knees in a posture of relaxation. -As far as what planet we are on, I'm afraid that is highly classified. We are still within the boundaries of Ascendancy space, of that you can be assured, but we are not on Lirna as you may have guessed. As for what this place is, that's simple enough. This is my base of operations.-

Although she was highly curious about what her mother meant by that, Aria let it go for now. She had much more important matters on her mind. -Mother, it has been three years since we thought you died,- Aria said. Her voice had taken on a tone of pain. -How are you still alive? Why haven't you tried to contact the family? Father has been in mourning ever since you died...-

-Ah...,- Ara'lana said, glancing down at her lap. -Yes, I suppose he would have been...So devoted to me he was...- She looked back up at Aria. -This goes back to that battle, three years ago, now. My flagship and its escort fleet was attacked by a battlegroup of human destroyers. Oh, it was a glorious battle.- Her eyes began to reflect a sense of nostalgia. -It lasted for hours, and in the end the humans were destroyed, but not before they dealt fatal blows to my flagship. The ship exploded, and all hands were lost. Except for myself and a few other officers. But all official reports recorded my death. They weren't far away from the truth; I was severely injured, very near to death, in fact.- She brushed a hand over her face, and for the first time Aria noticed the faint traces of scarring underneath her fur. -My eyes were gone. The medics grew replacements for me, which have been working out quite well. Several of my organs failed over the next few months, and required replacement as well. The whole recovery process took nearly a year.-

-But why the secrecy?-

-It was necessary for my plans,- Ara'lana said. -You see, for many years I have been working towards a goal. A dream of mine, you might say.- She stood up from her chair, beginning to pace back and forth across the floor. -Of all of ours, actually.- She gestured to Admiral Kris, Lady Shi'ala, and Major Tal'in. -For far too long, our people have labored under the oppressive rule of a government which has little concern for our welfare.-

Aria was beginning to feel that something was very wrong. -I don't understand. Do you mean the Empress?-

-Yes and no,- Ara'lana said. -Empress Solan IV is merely a representative of that oppression. What I really mean is the continued subjugation and relegation to the underclass of *my* people. I am referring, of course, to the peoples of our Outer Colonies. For centuries, our population has far outstripped that of the Inner Colonies and Central Worlds combined, yet we are forced to live in poverty while the fruits of our labors enrich the rest of the Ascendancy.- Ara'lana, her face contorted now in barely restrained rage, took her seat again. -Well, I mean to reverse that situation. As I speak, all of the fleets of the Outer Colonies are initiating combat operations against the Inner Colonies, and will before much longer be ready to move on to the Central Worlds. We will claim what is rightfully ours.-

Aria's fur was standing on end now. -You can't be serious. You mean to overthrow the royal family?-

-I do indeed,- Ara'lana said. She smoothed her fur down, regaining her peaceful expression. -I spent my years in the military dutifully biding my time, working with the appearances of loyalty until I had become the top admiral of the Navy. Then I used my position to steadily amass the vessels to form my own personal, secret fleet. Those vessels you saw in the base earlier today were only a small fraction of them. I planned to wait until I had enough ships and loyal followers to make my move. My 'death' only offered greater opportunity for secrecy, especially with that fool Admiral Te'rou taking my place.- She smiled to Aria. -And the time for action is now. We can take the rest of the Ascendancy and those pitiful humans at the same time, and secure the prosperity of the New Ascendancy for thousands of years to come.-

-That's insane!- Aria blurted out, her eyes as wide as a dinner plate. -It will never work. Mother, you must know that the Pteryd have been massing their forces. If we have a civil war now, they'll take the opportunity to strike. We'll be weak and we won't be able to stop them!-

Lady Shi'ala shook her head. -We have thought of that, of course. It's not something to be concerned about.-

-How can you say that? - Aria protested. She looked at Shi'ala, Admiral Kris, her mother, and

Major Tal'in all in turn. -All of you were alive during the last war with the Pteryd. You have personal experience with how dangerous the Pteryd are. You can't possibly be so unconcerned about the threat of war with them.-

-On the contrary, my daughter,- Ara'lana said, a triumphant expression on her face. -I have secured an alliance which should render that possibility meaningless.- She nodded to Major Tal'in, who stood and went to the door leading into the dining room. The major opened the door, stepping aside as though to allow someone in. -Let me introduce you to a friend of mine, one whose importance should be instantaneously clear.-

As Aria watched the being on the other side of the door enter, she felt every single strand on fur on her body stand on end. Her body went cold and her heart began to beat rapidly, as a base-level, instinctual fear began to course through her body. The thing coming into the room was decidedly alien in appearance. Insectoid, the creature had a slender torso which widened down into a powerful lower body. Its carapace was hard and shiny, and its color appeared slightly different depending on how the light hit it, though always a shade of green. The creature stood on four legs, the back two of which were highly developed for jumping and quick bursts of speed. Two more limbs were attached to its torso, triple-jointed and ending in three clawed digits each. Its head was shaped like an upside-down triangle, with the top corners occupied by bulbous red eyes. Two other, smaller eyes were underneath these, and the bottom of the head terminated in razor-sharp mandibles. Short antennae extended from the top of the head, constantly waving this way and that, probing its surroundings.

-Aria,- Ara'lana said, extending a hand to the newcomer. -Please allow me to introduce Seirin-143, a representative of the Pteryd Combine.-

After Sami and Jack were escorted from the conference room, Kri'a resumed her seat and continued the meeting that had been paused. -Admiral Te'rou, I assume we still have no leads as to Lieutenant Me'lia's location?- she said, eying her Chief Admiral. She was still quite irritated at how he had lost his temper before, and the admiral knew it all too well.

-No, Your Majesty,- Admiral Te'rou said. -No further reports have been sent to me. Intelligence and base security are cooperating in the investigation, but no results as of yet.-

-And we still have not heard from Major Tal'in, correct?-

-I'm afraid not,- Te'rou said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. As the Chief Admiral, part of his responsibilities were overseeing all military stations on Lirna. Major Tal'in, therefore, was his direct subordinate as a base commander. -She hasn't responded to any of our inquiries on standard channels. I dispatched an Intelligence team to her quarters on base, as well as to her personal residence in

Hayikwiir City. I'm still waiting on final reports of what they uncovered, but so far nothing promising. However, base security reports that her security code was the last used on the waiting room that Lieutenant Me'lia was occupying prior to the scheduled start of the trial.-

Kri'a glanced at Li'ren, who looked just as worried as she felt. -I think we can guess some of what happened, then,- the Empress said. -Major Tal'in, either of her own will or under duress, was involved in the abduction of Lieutenant Me'lia.- She took a deep breath, slowly letting it out. -Well, then, what can you tell me about the Outer Colony fleets?-

-Some good news on that front, but more bad than not,- Admiral Te'rou said. He called back up the holographic space map. -The Inner Colonies have been attacked on all borders by elements from the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth fleets, as well as some ships verified to be from the seventh and twelfth fleets. In other words, all of the Outer Colony fleets. The Eleventh Inner Colony Fleet successfully repelled the attack in its sector, however inroads have been made by all other invaders. I have already ordered the second and sixth fleets to leave their positions around the Central Worlds to bolster our defenses in the Inner Colonies. They're moving as we speak.-

-Excellent,- the Empress said. -Still no communication from Admiral Kris?-

-No. She left her offices here on Lirna two weeks ago, ostensibly to conduct routine inspections of the Outer Colony fleets. I gave her instructions to reestablish contact with the seventh and twelfth fleets and find out what the hell they were doing making an attack on Earth.- Te'rou gritted his teeth, growling low as his tail swished irritably underneath the table. -She has been ignoring my communications efforts. I know for a fact that those messages were received because the automatic reception signals were sent back. She is deliberately refusing to respond to me.- The admiral took a moment to regain his composure, then continued. -There's something else.- He tapped a button near his spot at the table, calling up several pictures. -Our fleets have sent back images from the skirmishes they've been engaged in. They're reporting unknown ships mixed in with the fleets, all painted in red. None of those ships are broadcasting identification signals of any kind. I have no idea where they might have come from, or under whose authority they may be operating.-

-Red ships?- Kri'a repeated, her eyes widening in confusion. Her ears laid back slightly, and she seemed to be searching through her mind for something. -I wonder...- She was quiet for a moment, but then she shook her head slightly. -Well, never mind that for now. Admiral, keep me apprised of the situation and continue bolstering our defenses. I want total security in the Central Worlds, and I want the fleets still loyal to me working to regain any lost territory in the Inner Colonies.- After a moment's hesitation, she added one more order. -And I also want Intelligence to conduct thorough background checks on all military personnel stationed in the Central Worlds and Inner Colonies who were

originally drawn from the Outer Colonies. They are all to be treated with suspicion until they have been thoroughly cleared. And I do mean everyone, Admiral, regardless of rank or status, is that understood?-

Though shocked by the severe order, Admiral Te'rou nodded. -I understand, Empress. It will be done.-

-Very well, then, you are all dismissed.-

Admiral Te'rou and the rest of the officers cleared the room, leaving Kri'a and Li'ren alone, apart from their detachment of Royal Guards. They were both quiet for some time. Both of them felt quite overwhelmed by the situation, which was something that they had been concerned about for a number of years, though they had never thought it would really happen. The last civil war that had enveloped the Ascendancy had been devastating, more so than any war with their old enemy, the Pteryd, had been. They knew that this war had the potential to be even more terrible, with the Ascendancy being so much larger now than it ever had been, and especially considering the much greater size of the Outer Colonies as compared to the rest of the empire.

-I'm scared, Kri'a,- Li'ren said, rising from her seat and going to her mate. -I don't know what's going to happen now. And it worries me that something could happen so close to us, without us knowing about it or being able to stop it.-

-I know, little one,- Kri'a said. She stood up and brought Li'ren into her arms, hugging her tightly. Their tails twisted around each other tightly. -It scares me, too, believe it or not. To think that our security could have been compromised so thoroughly...- She stopped talking, feeling the beginning of a quiver in her voice. Her concern for Li'ren's safety far outweighed her regard for herself. -I must ask a very important favor of you, Li'ren.-

Li'ren looked up at Kri'a. -Anything, mistress. You know I would do anything for you.-

-I'm afraid you may not want to do this, Li'ren,- Kri'a said with a smile. -I want you to go away, back to Arbaros, to be with your mother. I think you will be safer there than here on Lirna.-

-No!- Li'ren said quickly and sharply, her arms clutching tighter to Kri'a. -I'm not going to leave you. I belong here. My home is with you.-

-Please, Li'ren, you must do this,- the Empress said firmly. She kissed her softly on her forehead. -If it is a true civil war that we are heading into, I will be a prime target for the rebels. I don't want you caught up in any of that. Our enemies have already proven that they can get close to me. You will be far safer on Arbaros.-

Li'ren looked down, not wanting to listen to Kri'a even though she knew that what she was saying made sense. -But I want to stay with you...-

-I know, love, and I want nothing more than the very same. You know I love you more than

anything.- Kri'a tipped her lover's head up, kissing her lips tenderly. -It will not be for long.-

-Alright,- Li'ren finally said, blinking tears out of her eyes. -I'll do it for you.-

-That's my girl,- Kri'a said, smiling at her. She brushed a hand along the side of her face, teasing the base of one ear. -Come. Let's go home for now. We'll have a relaxing evening, and we'll give your mother a call to let her know you'll be coming.- She waved a hand, letting her guards know that they were ready to leave. -It will be all right, my little one. Everything will be back to normal before you know it.-

Though a comforting thought, both of them knew it to be far from the truth.