

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Two: Terror Machine
by Havoc

“Naturally the common people don't want war...That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.”

- Hermann Goering

As soon as Aria's brain caught up to what her eyes were seeing, she let out an aggressive snarl and rose from her seat, her tail lashing at the air behind her. Baring her fangs, she stared down the Pteryd that was standing before the table. Aria could not believe that her mother would allow such a creature to be in her meeting room, and yet she knew her eyes were not lying to her. The Pteryd had been enemies of the Ascendancy for thousands of years, almost as long as both species had been capable of interstellar space flight. For most of the time they had been in conflict, both species had been at a stalemate due to infighting within the Ascendancy, until the Ailians had become allied with the Nuretan Empire and had been able to push the insectoid race back from their borders. Ever since that time nearly three centuries ago, fighting with the Pteryd had been confined to skirmishes and a few minor wars near the border regions, the last of which had been fought when Aria's mother was a young officer in the Navy. Even so, Ailians had developed a deep instinctual fear of their old enemy, reinforced by the history lessons which were hammered into them during their schooling years. Aria wanted nothing more right now than to leap over the table and smash the green-shelled creature into oblivion.

-What is the meaning of this, mother?- Aria asked, her voice a low growl. -What is this...this...*thing* doing here?-

If the Pteryd could understand what she was saying, it displayed no offense at Aria's insulting words. Instead it seemed rather curious, its head rotating a quarter turn to one side as its antennae twitched in her direction. The claws on its hands flicked, but Aria could not tell if it was a gesture of irritation or merely a nervous motion.

-Calm yourself, Aria,- Ara'lana said, a tone of warning in her voice. She waved a hand to her daughter, bidding her to sit down. -I will explain everything to you. As I said, this is Seirin-143 of the Pteryd Combine. It is a representative of its people, here on my invitation. I will not tolerate any sort of threat to it, is that clear?-

After staring at her mother for several long moments, Aria slowly resumed her seat, turning her eyes back to the Pteryd. -'It?'- Aria inquired, her voice overly polite now. She had recognized the veiled threat in her mother's voice. The same tone of speech had been used not infrequently when she was a child and had done something wrong, usually as a precursor to punishment of some sort.

~That is correct,~ a voice said. The sound nearly startled Aria to death, since it seemed as though it was coming from within her own head. For a moment she didn't realize what was going on, and then she recalled that the Pteryd were a telepathic species. Obviously Seirin-143 was the one speaking. *~As you may know, our species reproduces by parthenogenesis. Though we are all sexually female, gender holds no meaning for us.*~ Seirin-143's "voice" was very neutral and androgynous, with no inflection to suggest mood or temperament. For Aria, it was like listening to a less electronic voice readout from a computer. *~Therefore, 'it' is the most proper word to use when referring to the individual.*~

Aria blinked at the Pteryd. -Noted.- She looked at Ara'lana. -What is *it* doing here?-

-As I said, I invited it,- the former Chief Admiral said. -I have been negotiating for months to come to agreeable terms for an alliance with the Pteryd, and now we have come to a most satisfactory agreement. Seirin-143 came at my invitation to finalize that alliance.-

Aria's ears laid back as she grew more confused. -I don't understand.-

-Aria, we are on the brink of a very exciting time for our people,- Ara'lana said with a smile. -Now that the rebellion against royal tyranny has begun, we need to solidify our place in the universe and assure security for our citizens. It's time for us to set aside the conflict that we've had with the Pteryd. I doubt that anyone in the Ascendancy, save for the most dedicated of scholars, would even be able to remember *why* we hate them so.-

~Well said, Lady Me'lia,~ Seirin-143 agreed. *~The conflict has gone on far too long. So many dead, and so much progress lost in the name of war. There must be an end to it.*~

-That is a very noble idea,- Aria said, with some measure of thinly veiled sarcasm, -but your actions to this point don't seem to match your ideals, mother. If peace is what you want, than I can perhaps understand your rebellion against the Inner Colonies and Central Worlds. But I know that you have also invaded Earth and the center of human space. That surely will not bring an end to the war.-

Quiet until now, Admiral Selina Kris spoke up. -Quite the contrary, Lieutenant. You are not thinking strategically.-

-Then make me understand,- Aria insisted.

-Certainly.- Admiral Kris smoothed down the front of her uniform, folding her hands in her lap as she regarded Aria coolly. -Though the Inner Colonies and Central Worlds collectively have a few

more fleets than the Outer Colonies, the actual personnel and numbers of ships in the Outer Colony fleets far outnumber them. As the primary line of defense at our borders, this has always been so. Therefore, we have a comfortable advantage over the royalist forces. This allows us to expand the campaign against the humans while we fight in the Ascendancy.-

Ara'lana nodded in agreement. -With the support of our new Pteryd friends, we can overcome the Inner Colonies and Central Worlds, as well as the humans.- She waved her tail behind her serenely, her peaceful smile widening. -And once the Empress and the humans have fallen, the conquest of the Nuretan Empire will not be far behind. Those ridiculous frogs had no business imposing themselves in the Ascendancy's affairs during the first civil conflict. It would seem only fitting, then, that we repay them in kind.-

-Imagine it, Aria,- Lady Shi'ala said, leaning forward earnestly in her chair. -We have the opportunity to unite the known universe. Human, Pteryd, Nuretan, and Ailian, all at peace finally, for the first time in thousands of years.- She shrugged nonchalantly. -Of course, the war will be bloody. But one must accept these things on the road to greatness.-

Looking around the room in shock at what she was hearing, Aria examined the face of each of them in turn. Seirin-143 was unreadable, but her mother, Major Tal'in, Lady Shi'ala, and Admiral Kris all looked thoroughly convinced in the rightness of what they were saying. They had just stated to her, more or less, that they meant to take over the entirety of known space through total war. And they all thought of themselves as righteous warriors, soldiers in a fight for the greater good. Aria sat back in her chair, staring at her mother as the conclusion rose to the front of her thoughts.

They're all insane.

The kitchen servants all steered clear of Sami that evening while dinner was being prepared for the family. She felt like keeping to herself anyway, busying herself with chopping meats and vegetables for a hearty stew. For the most part she was operating on automatic, doing what she had done hundreds of times without really thinking about it. Her thoughts were instead on her sister, and where she might be right now. The young female Ailian was almost too mentally exhausted at this point to even be truly worried. She just felt so tired. The whole thing seemed wholly unfair. Her family had been so happy once. Both of their parents had been alive, even if their mother and eldest sibling were frequently away, and they didn't have to deal with trials, kidnappings, hospital stays...There had been a war, yes, but it had always seemed so far away. Now it was practically on their doorstep.

-I wish everything could be back to the way it used to be...,- Sami thought to herself. Reaching to her left, she picked up another dense, green root vegetable, laying it on the cutting surface in front of

her. Picking up the knife, she began to slice it thinly. Everything went perfectly until, in her inattention, the blade slipped and nicked her index finger on the hand not holding the blade. She dropped the knife quickly, grasping her injured finger as it began to bleed. "*A're meori ke sho!*"

"Careful."

Sami glanced over her shoulder, seeing Jack standing slightly behind her. "Ah...Jack..." She turned her attention back to the cut on her finger, watching the small trickle of blood soaking her orange fur. "Why you here?"

"I just though I'd come see if there was anything I could do to help," Jack said. He stepped up beside her, looking at the bubbling pot of stew. "It smells good." Looking over at Sami, he raised an eyebrow. "Haven't heard you curse like that before."

"Ah...you understand that...", Sami said, feeling her face warm with embarrassment. She rarely ever used language as strong as what she had just said, but she was upset. Stepping away she began running her finger underneath a faucet, washing away the blood from the minor cut. "If want help, could cut for me."

Jack nodded. "Sure, I can do that," he agreed. Pushing away the knife Sami had been using, he picked up a clean one and started cutting the vegetable where she had left off.

Sami opened a cabinet, looking for something she could dress her cut with. Finding a small first aid kit placed in the kitchen for such occasions, she withdrew a bandage and wrapped it securely around her finger. "Thank you." She observed Jack's cutting, making sure he was doing it correctly. Though the knife, designed for an Ailian hand, was unwieldy in his grip, he seemed to have little trouble. "Not believe I do that..."

"Look at it this way," Jack said, dropping the sliced vegetable in the pot. "At least *you* didn't do it on purpose."

It was a very weak attempt at humor, and definitely not appropriate, but it still broke the tension of both of their moods. Sami looked at the floor, trying not to smile at the joke and failing. "Is true."

Wiping his hands off on his shirt, Jack looked back at Sami. "I really came here to check on you," he admitted. "You hadn't said more than two words to anyone all afternoon, and I learned my lesson not to leave anyone alone for too long when they're upset. How are you holding up?"

Sami sighed, her tail drooping. "Not well...", she said, holding up her bandaged hand as evidence. "So tired. Wonder what happen to Aria. Wonder if she ever come home again."

"*La rek a'mari ke han'rek*," Jack said, crossing his arms.

Looking surprised, Sami nodded her head. That was a phrase that her father was very fond of. It meant "whatever happens will happen". Hearing it from Jack was something she hadn't expected. "You

learn speak right,” she said, managing another small smile. “But you accent bad.”

“Aria tells me the same thing,” Jack said with a smirk. “My Ailian still isn't as good as your English, but I guess I'm picking up a few things.”

“Except cut roots right,” Sami admonished him, looking into the pot. “Too thick. Will be tough.”

Jack grinned. “I never was much of a cook. My chef skills are pretty much limited to picking up the phone and calling for delivery. Even when I was roughing it out in space, Aria did most of the...” He stopped. Thinking of those days was painful for him. Back then he never would have thought he'd ever look back on those times favorably, but on an increasingly frequent basis he found himself wishing he was several months in the past. As complicated as survival had been when he and Aria were stranded together, he figured he was at least a *little* less stressed then versus now. And back then they were together, able to rely on each other.

Noticing his sudden change in mood, Sami laid a hand on his shoulder. “Will be alright,” she said quietly. The Ailian drew him into a gentle hug. “Aria not here, but you with family. Brother.”

With a wry smile, Jack looked up into her blue eyes. “Sounds strange to hear that. Though you feel like more of a sister than my *real* sister.” It surprised him how grateful Sami's expression became when he said that. “It's weird. I know that I'd like to return home one day, but at the same time I feel like I'd be so out of place there, now.” He sighed, brushing a hand through his sandy blonde hair. “But what I really want right now is Aria...”

“Me too.”

-You're very quiet, Aria.-

Flinching a little in her chair, Aria looked up. Her mother was staring at her, a neutral expression on her face. They were alone now, in a different area of her mother's living quarters, a private sitting room equipped with soft lighting and comfortable, padded armchairs. Both of them had mugs of the hot, strongly bitter tea that Ara'lana favored. The former admiral was drinking hers with great enthusiasm, but Aria had barely sipped at the beverage. Her mind was elsewhere.

-I apologize, mother,- Aria said. She looked down at her lap, then back up at her mother, and then she lifted her cup and took a halfhearted sip. -I was thinking.-

-About what?-

-What else? This whole situation!- Aria turned her gaze away from Ara'lana, looking at a random spot on the wall. -You still haven't told me something I've been wondering, mother.- With difficulty, she brought her eyes back to the older Ailian. -If you knew where I was, and you knew the

charges I was facing, *why* did you wait so long to take me away? Do you realize how much I've suffered these past months? Mother, I nearly killed myself because of the stress!-

Ara'lana's expression remained impassive. -I'm aware of that, daughter. A foolish thing for you to have done. A true Ailian soldier does not surrender to such stresses.- She cupped her mug of tea in her hands. -I had my reasons, but most of all I was grateful for the distraction. Any additional strain that could focus resources away from potential discovery of my plans was valuable to me, and the spectacle of your treason charges was just such a thing. Of course, I am glad you survived.-

-Glad? You're *glad*?- Aria was dumbfounded. She couldn't believe that her mother was saying such a thing. -Mother, you *used* me! How do you imagine that makes me feel? I'm not some diversion to be used for strategical gain, I'm your *daughter*!-

-Calm yourself, Aria,- Ara'lana purred. -You're far too emotional. You always have been. Besides, it is not as if Major Tal'in's operation was the first time I sent someone to try to retrieve you.-

Aria blinked, confused enough that she forgot her anger momentarily. -Not the first time? I don't...- Then her eyes widened as she received a sudden flash of inspiration, and of horror. -You don't mean...You *can't* mean those human soldiers! Mother, Li'ara *died* when they came to our home! Please don't tell me they were there on your orders.-

A flash of anger passed across Ara'lana's face, but she quickly brought it back under control. -I most certainly did send them. You see, not *all* humans are so foolish as to think they can defeat the power of the Ascendancy. In recent years, some of them have wisely seen the benefits that allying themselves with me may bring.- Growling quietly, she speared her daughter with an intense stare. -Unfortunately, I did slightly underestimate the resentment that a mere ten years of war can bring to such a weak-minded species. They were unable to resist the meager revenge that killing you would bring them. I am glad that you showed them the error of their ways.-

Still horrified, Aria shook her head slowly. -You're *mad*! Li'ara was your daughter, mother. I can't believe you would send armed human commandos into our home. How could you even *think* of putting your own children in that kind of danger?- Aria swallowed, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. -They killed Li'ara. They were going to kill everyone else, too, including me and Jack...-

-You mean the human you brought home with you?- Ara'lana asked. -Yes...Speaking of him, we need to discuss that.-

-Discuss how?- Aria inquired, her voice suddenly becoming very guarded.

Aria's mother set her mug of tea down on the arm of her chair, folding her hands in her lap. -I'm sure you can guess how. We need to discuss your choice of...I suppose 'lover' would be the proper term for it, since a human cannot be a true mate.- She closed her emerald eyes. -You realize that I cannot

tolerate such a thing. I will not have my daughter ending up like that deviant we have for an Empress, choosing a partner who cannot assist her in extending the family line.-

With a shock of fury, Aria rose from her seat, her tea spilling from her lap, the mug breaking on the carpeted floor. -I hardly think you're in the position to dictate that!- she snarled, glaring at her mother. -You have been gone for three years. Who I choose to...to associate with is none of your damned business!-

-Sit down.- Ara'lana's voice was maddeningly calm, sufficiently enough to send a chill through Aria's blood. -My guards don't like hearing raised voices in my private quarters. A misunderstanding would be most unfortunate.-

Slowly, Aria sat back down again, fighting to get control of herself. After learning what her mother was truly capable of, she would not put it past her to call her guards in to kill her. -Mother...- She took a deep breath. -I know he is a human. I know he is not one of us. I know...I know he can never give me children. But I love him all the same. He has been there for me when it seemed like no one else was.- She gave her mother a very pointed look at that last sentence.

-I understand the way that you feel,- Ara'lana said, looking as though she was working very hard to keep her own anger in check, -but I must forbid it. After all, one day I will be the ruler of our people. And I must have someone to carry on my legacy.-

Aria's tail twitched. -You mean me?-

-Of course.- Aria's mother stood, beginning to pace around the room as she spoke. -Aria, this rebellion is the result of an entire lifetime of work. For decades I masqueraded as a loyal servant of a royal family that my very blood told me to loathe. I bided my time, making alliances within the ranks, finding like-minded individuals, gathering resources...I have not come so far just to have it undone when I finally do die.- She was circling her daughter like a shark. -While I was patient, I made sure that my legacy would be secure. I found a mate. I had a family. I had two sons, and more important than that I had seven beautiful daughters.- Coming behind Aria, Ara'lana placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders. -And you are the best of them all. The oldest, the brightest...The only one that I knew would follow in my footsteps. Even though I indulged your father by making my attempts to keep you out of the military, I knew you would not resist the call that burns in your very soul. And now you are here, with me.-

-What are you asking of me, mother?-

Coming back around to her chair, Ara'lana sat down. -I am asking you to join me. As you know you are destined to.- She leaned forward, her tail waving rapidly behind her. -Help me, Aria. Together, we can guarantee the safety and freedom of our people. We can end these long years of war once and

for all. And we can rule it all when our task is complete!-

Aria stared at her mother. She could not deny that she, herself, was ambitious. Aria had always dreamed of being someone important, someone like her mother. When her career in the military had begun, she had thought that one day she would lead her own unit, perhaps becoming a commander, or a fleet admiral. Maybe even eventually making the transition from a military career to a diplomatic one. She had liked the idea of being an ambassador in her twilight years. Of course, when those fantasies had been hers, she had always pictured herself with a family of her own. But things had changed recently. Now she felt that she would be contented to spend her days with Jack, perhaps even leaving her work in the military and taking over her father's business. She loved her job in the Navy, but she knew that it was unlikely that she could continue on with it now.

But Aria also realized that if her mother had her way, she couldn't have any of the things she had come to want. If Ara'lana was to complete her plans, she had to believe that humans would fare even worse in the new Ascendancy than they had in the current one. Her mother had already said that she would never allow her relationship with Jack to continue. Besides Jack, there was the Empress to think about. Aria could not begin to describe how grateful she was to Empress Solan for everything she had done, and to her consort Li'ren, as well. To join her mother in this rebellion would be a poor way to repay them. Aria knew exactly where her loyalties were.

-No...-

Ara'lana frowned, leaning back in her seat. -What did you say?-

-I said no, mother,- Aria said. She swallowed hard, raising her head and straightening up in her seat. -You were always my model of what an Ailian should be. I loved you like a daughter should. I couldn't imagine wanting to be anything less than what you are. And now I've found out that everything I thought I knew about you was a lie. An act.- Aria felt a tear run from her eye down through the thin fur on her cheek. -I can't betray the Empress, mother. I can't betray Jack. I will not join you.-

For the longest time, her mother just watched her. A series of emotions played across her face and through her eyes. First she saw anger, then denial, and then disappointment. Finally, Aria saw a look that she could only describe as sadness, her mother's ears drooping low. -That is your final decision?-

Unable to respond verbally, Aria just nodded. She was very afraid now, but she did not allow herself to shake.

Sighing, Ara'lana raised a hand. -Very well.- She snapped her fingers loudly.

Aria turned in her seat as the door leading into the sitting room opened behind her. Before she had the chance to react, two guards approached her from behind and grabbed her by the shoulders.

Growling angrily, Aria tried to push them off of her, but her arms were still not back to their full strength and she couldn't do it. The guards hauled her out of the chair, starting to drag her back towards the door. -Mother...!-

Standing up, Ara'lana turned away from her. -I'm sorry, my daughter. But if you will not join me, I cannot allow you to leave here.- She waved a hand back. -Take her to a cell in the brig. I'll send orders regarding her later.-

-Mother, please!-

-I wish we could have come to more agreeable terms,- the elder Ailian said. She looked over her shoulder at Aria. -But perhaps if I remove the source of your hesitation, you will come to see things my way. Would you agree?-

With a sudden burst of strength, Aria managed to rip one of her arms free. -If any of your people even *touch* Jack, I swear I will kill you! Do you hear me, mother?- She tried to rush forward, and then two more guards came into the room, getting her back under control. As they pulled her out of the room, still struggling violently, Aria saw her mother smile and laugh.

-Your threats mean little to me, child. I have kissed the lips of death and come away clean. I fear nothing, now.-

Two days after the abduction of Lieutenant Me'lia, Empress Kri'a Solan sat down to a meeting with Admiral Te'rou and several of her other admirals, as well as some of her most important advisers. Also present were a few representatives of the Nuretan Empire, the allies of the Ailian Ascendancy. An amphibious race who originated on an aquatic world, the Nuretans were a shorter, slender people, though still taller than humans. Bearing slick skin with mottled blue patterns on their flat faces, their most vivid features were their neon-colored, dual-pupiled eyes, and the long, flowing white which grew from their heads. Among the Nuretans, who had arrived urgently at the request of Kri'a, was a female named Kalma Soumaren. Dressed in a military uniform of tiger-striped greens and blues, she was the commanding general of the Imperial Marines, the elite infantry fighting force of the Nuretan Empire. Though historically only the commander of this specific military branch, in recent centuries the commander of the Imperial Marines had come to be a position analogous to the Chief Admiral's position in the Ascendancy Navy, making General Soumaren the Empire's counterpart to Admiral Te'rou.

Kri'a felt exhausted, more than she had in all the five years that she had been Empress. She had not slept much for the past two days, and it was mostly because she was unused to sleeping alone. At her request, her mate of ten years, Li'ren Amani, had left Lirna for her home planet of Arbaros in the

Inner Colonies. The abduction of Lieutenant Me'lia from the middle of a highly secured Ascendancy Naval base, with elite royal guards in attendance besides the usual compliment of soldiers and security personnel, had made Kri'a aware that whoever was behind the rebellion might have operatives anywhere. She also knew that in the coming rebellion, she would be a prime target for assassination, and she did not want Li'ren to become collateral damage for any attempt on her life. Though she knew it had been for the best, Kri'a missed her terribly.

Clearing her throat, the Empress began the meeting. -Admiral Te'rou, thank you for taking time out of your schedule to meet with me,- she said. She nodded to her Chief Admiral, then turned to the Nuretans in the room. -And thank you all for coming on such short notice. Especially you, General. I think you will agree that the situation is certainly one of concern.-

General Soumaren inclined her head to Kri'a. -Yes, indeed, Empress,- she said, speaking flawless Ailian with a light, bubbly accent. Her electric blue eyes narrowed as she spoke. -Your report was most alarming to the Premier.- The general was referring here to the elected chief of state of the Nuretan Empire. Unlike the Ascendancy, the Empire was a highly democratic society, and had been for thousands of years without fail. Their stability was what made them such valuable and reliable allies to the Ailians.

-I should hope it was. It has been hundreds of years since your people aided us in our first civil conflict, and now it seems we are in the same situation again. I know that none of us hoped we would ever have to repeat history like this.- The Empress leaned forward, folding her hands on top of the meeting table. -Before we begin, I must know what level of aid you can commit to us.-

-Right now, I regret that I am only authorized to offer limited aid, Your Highness,- General Soumaren said. -If it were up to me, I would commit the entirety of our force to you, but our Premier wishes to be cautious. We fear a rift within the Ascendancy just as much as you do, but the Premier wants to hold the majority of our forces in reserve, should the conflict become dire. He says we must be prepared for the worst. I admit I do agree with him somewhat, but I believe the hard and fast approach would put an end to this quickly.-

Kri'a stifled a sigh. -Please, as soon as you can, tell the Premier that we cannot afford to be cautious. It is not only the rebellion of our Outer Colonies that we have to deal with, we are still engaged in combat with the humans.-

-I know, Empress, but remember, we do not have the same unilateral rule that you do.- The General shrugged helplessly. -They are debating the matter in Parliament, but these things can take time with us.-

-Very well. Please continue to try, and we will gratefully accept whatever aid you can give us

now.- Turning to Admiral Te'rou, Kri'a activated the holographic display in the meeting table, calling up a map containing star charts of the Ascendancy. -Admiral, give me an update of the situation.-

-Yes, Your Majesty.- Admiral Te'rou manipulated the map, splashing it with an array of different colors. -The rebellion forces are making significant gains into the Inner Colonies. Sector Four is being overrun, and Sectors One and Three are reporting major skirmishes as well.-

The Empress tensed slightly. -And Sector Two? What do you hear of Arbaros?- One of the most important worlds of the Inner Colonies, Arbaros was home to major naval ports, besides being the home planet and current location of her mate, Li'ren.

-Sector Two is secure,- Admiral Te'rou assured her. -In fact, it's the only place where our fleets are holding strong. We could probably spare some of the ships from there, in fact, to help the other sectors.-

-No,- the Empress said immediately. -I will not risk the port facilities, and I will *not* give the rebel forces another place to make a foothold. All fleets will hold firm in Sector Two, is that understood, Admiral?-

-Perfectly.-

-Good.- Taking a breath to steady herself, Kri'a paused before continuing. -Now. The humans. What of the war on that front?-

Admiral Te'rou shifted uncomfortably in his seat. -More bad news on that, I am afraid. Human intelligence seems to have caught wind of the uprising of the Outer Colonies, and it appears to have emboldened them. They are pushing our fleets back slightly, and the isolated human fleets have succeeded in making some connections with each other. They may use the opportunity to make an offensive campaign.- The Chief Admiral hesitated, then he made a suggestion. -Perhaps we should re-initiate an offense of our own, Empress. We could bring in the First Fleet from its position around Lirna and throw the humans back. That would give us breathing room.-

-Your admiral makes a good point,- General Soumaren chimed in. -And if you needed some assistance, I believe I could commit one of the Empire's fleets to such a campaign with minimal convincing to the Premier and Parliament.-

Empress Solan shook her head firmly. -No. This I will not do. I am trying to *end* the war with the humans. I will not engage in any actions that will work in opposition to this goal.- She nodded to her advisers. -I have come to a difficult decision. It is not one that I make lightly.- Looking around the table, at all the Ailian and Nuretan faces looking to her, Kri'a closed her eyes. -Admiral Te'rou, you will order all forces within human space still loyal to my authority to begin withdrawing from human space. They will remain *only* in human-occupied space which was part of the Ascendancy prior to the opening

of hostilities ten years ago.-

The shock in the room was almost palpable. In recorded history, there were very few instances of the Ascendancy Navy being ordered to retreat. Most Ailian commanders preferred to fight to the death, and retreat was seen as a great dishonor.

-Your Majesty,- Admiral Te'rou said, his voice trembling slightly. -Is that...wise?-

-Furthermore,- Kri'a continued, ignoring her Chief Admiral for now, -I want ambassadors dispatched to the human United Nations immediately. It is time that we begin negotiating a ceasefire. It may be a difficult task, but I would like to start paving the way towards normalizing relations with the humans.- She opened her eyes again. -I am deadly serious here, my friends. We may be on the brink of collapse. My mother made a terrible mistake ten years ago, and we are reaping what she has sown. The humans should have been allies, not enemies. We need to make it happen, whatever the cost.-

His jaw tightening, Admiral Te'rou nodded once to the Empress. -I'll see to it, my lady. Due to the Outer Colonies' invasion of Earth, I believe the seat of human government has been moved to Cerelis. We'll make every effort to contact them there.-

-Thank you.- Feeling exhausted, Kri'a passed a hand over her eyes. A tired growl escaped her muzzle, and the claws of her other hands scraped the tabletop in frustration. -Things are moving much too fast for my liking. I would like to apply the brakes before we lose everything.-

-This is a familiar feeling...,- Aria thought to herself. -Accommodations aren't as nice this time, though. This is probably what Jack had to deal with when we got rescued.-

The Ailian was staring up at the metal ceiling of the cell she had been placed in, which was bare apart from a single light fixture in the center. She was lying on a metal bed attached to the wall opposite the door. The bed had no padding except for a recessed cushion where she could put her head, and the toilet facilities were typically spartan. Aria wasn't certain how long she had been in the cell, but she had been fed three times since the guards had thrown her inside, so if they were giving her meals on a regular schedule it was at least the second day of her imprisonment. Her mother had not been to see her, but at this point Aria wasn't surprised by that. In fact, apart from bringing her meals, nobody had been to see her.

Swishing her tail, hanging down from the bed beside her, angrily, Aria ground her teeth together. *-How could mother do this? For years she pretended to be loyal to the Ascendancy, and everyone thought she was honorably killed in battle. Now I find she's been alive the whole time, and she's allied herself with the Pteryd...-* She felt betrayed, and if she ever got out of here she had no idea how she would explain it to her family, least of all her father. Arn Me'lia had mourned his mate for

three years. He was only now starting to come out of the depression he had felt over Ara'iana's supposed death. Hearing that she had been alive the whole time and had never tried to contact him would destroy him.

The sound of the door opening brought her out of her thoughts, and she sat up on the bed as another person she thought she had known came into her cell. Clasping her hands behind her back, Major Misa Tal'in looked down at Aria as the door slid closed.

-Lieutenant,- the major said, blinking her eyes slowly at Aria. -I didn't get the chance to say much to you at dinner the other night, but you're looking well.-

-No thanks to you,- Aria growled, her lips drawing back to bare her sharp teeth. -Traitor.-

Major Tal'in smirked at her, chuckling quietly. -Listen to you. Cavorting about with a human, and you call me a traitor. The difference between a traitor and a patriot, Aria, is who writes the history books. I think history will be on my side when all is said and done.-

-Don't count on it.-

The major's smile widened. -You're hardly one to be the judge of that.- Her tail waved pleasantly behind her. She was obviously much enjoying her position of power right now. -In any case, Admiral Me'lia has sent me here to speak with you. Because you *are* her beloved daughter, she wants me to give you the chance to change your mind about joining us.-

Aria gave a dismissive flick of her ears. -I'm not interested, Major. And you can go back and tell that woman that she has been dead to me for a long time.-

-Be reasonable, Lieutenant. You must realize that if you do not join us, you will be killed. You don't have anything to gain by refusing.-

-Except my own honor.-

Major Tal'in's expression soured. -I have been honorable my entire life, Lieutenant. If you are implying otherwise, you will regret it.- Her ears were steadily flattening to her head. The major was not one who was used to being disobeyed, and even less used to being insulted.

-Honorable?- Aria laughed. -Major, you are perhaps one of the least honorable people I know. You swore an oath to the Empress when you joined the military, and for your whole career you have been secretly working against that oath. You have never known any personal honor. You're worse than trash.-

-Really, now?- The major brought her hands in front of her clasping them tightly, the joints in her fingers crackling. -You have quite the mouth on you, Lieutenant. Your mother was right when she told me how disrespectful you have become. Maybe I should teach you a little respect for your betters.- Major Tal'in glanced over her shoulder at the door. -The door is thick, and the guard station is all the

way at the end of the hall. Nobody's going to hear me take you to school, and I doubt you'll be able to prevent me with your arms as weak as they are.-

-How noble of you,- Aria snarled. -Not afraid of angering my mother, are you?-

-Get up!- Major Tal'in barked at her. -I'll ask for forgiveness later. You won't insult me and get away with it!-

Taking a deep breath, Aria readied herself. -Have it your way.- Without warning, she launched herself from a seated position and tackled the major where she stood, catching her by surprise. Aria wrapped her arms around the other female's middle, though she wasn't able to get a great grip. As they both tumbled to the floor, Major Tal'in was already striking back, and Aria grunted in pain as she felt several sharp blows to the side of her head. Aria didn't worry about that for right now. Her focus was on the major's belt, where a heavy pistol and combat knife were hanging. Whatever she did, she couldn't let the major retrieve her weapons.

-You're going to regret that, Lieutenant,- the major growled. She slapped a hand over Aria's face, covering her eyes and nose. Pushing hard, she forced Aria's head back. With difficulty, owing to her sudden blindness, Aria tried to find the buckle of the other Ailian's belt. The major noticed what she was doing and drew her knees up underneath Aria, pushing her harder to get her away.

Just as Aria felt her grip failing, she managed to grab the belt buckle. Gathering as much strength as she could, she ripped it back, and the buckle snapped under the strain, falling away from Major Tal'in's waist. As the major succeeded in pushing Aria most of the way off, Aria drew her right knee back and slammed it as hard as she could into the other woman's rib cage. She heard a series of crunches and a gasp of pain as several ribs gave way from the force of the knee spear. Ruthlessly, taking advantage of the moment, Aria kicked her again and again, hearing several more bones snap from the force of the kick.

The major's grip weakened, allowing Aria to shove her away from her broken belt. She kicked hard with both feet and Major Tal'in slid across the cell, coming to rest against the opposite wall on the floor. For a moment Aria considered the pistol, but then she changed her mind. The sound of a shot would surely draw the guards, even if they weren't able to hear the struggle going on inside the cell. Getting to her feet, she quickly moved to where the major lay, just as she was beginning to get up as well.

-I think you're about to learn a valuable lesson yourself, Major,- Aria said. She planted her foot firmly on the older Ailian's chest, slamming her back down on the floor. Major Tal'in gave a choked gasp of agony as the kick placed pressure on her broken ribs. -If your enemy's arms are injured, you mustn't forget about the legs.- Aria then placed a foot on Major Tal'in's throat. Her eyes widening, she

tried to grab Aria's ankle, but it was a bit too late. With firm downward pressure and a violent twist, Aria quickly and cleanly broke the major's neck.

Stepping back from the limp corpse on the floor, Aria brushed a hand over her face. After catching her breath, she went back to where the major's belt lay. The belt itself was useless with a broken buckle, but the contents of the belt were more important. Aria pulled the knife and sheath off and slid them into her left pocket. She withdrew the heavy pistol from its holster, taking spare ammunition magazines from their pouches and placing them in her right pocket. Going back to the major's body, she found an electronic key fob in her shirt. Aria hissed in triumph.

-I'm getting out of here now.-