

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Six: Breaking Point
by Havoc

“In time of stress, be bold and valiant.”

- Horace

It felt good to be back in uniform.

When she stepped out of the military transport into the midday heat, Aria straightened the ruffles from her black jacket. As she did, the shiny new captain insignia on her lapels caught the glint of the sun. The Ailian smiled, touching a finger to the silver triangle. Two weeks ago she had been brought onto Mat'aar Airbase, the largest military installation on Lirna, in shackles as a prisoner being tried for treason. Today she came onto base a free woman, fully reinstated as a member of the Ascendancy Navy. The previous day she'd spent hours at the quartermaster getting her formal and duty uniforms sized perfectly. Upon arriving home, most of her family were very impressed with her appearance. Jack had seemed impressed as well, but in a much different way, and *she* had been impressed by how quickly he was able to get the uniform off of her that evening.

Aria got a little worried when she thought about Jack. His time on Lirna had so far been a trying one, but he had weathered it fairly well for a human, especially considering he'd had to spend it as a slave. True, he had never *really* been treated much like a slave, and he'd definitely been much better off than he would have been as a prisoner of war, but he'd hardly had what one could call a vacation. He didn't really belong here, after all. Only a twist of fate had brought them together in the first place, and set this whole series of events in motion. Really, it was a wonder they even still liked each other, let alone loved each other. Aria had tried to look after him as best she could, and in return he'd shown her far more care than she ever would have expected.

Now, though, she was coming to her base to receive her first orders as a new captain, and she had no idea what those orders might be. When she'd returned home after escaping the captivity of her mother, Aria had been told by the Empress that she would have a new assignment for her, which Aria took to mean that her time with the patrol fleet was over. Apart from that, she had no clues. What she did know was that with the war with Ara'lana's forces and the Pteryd brewing, not to mention the fighting that continued with the humans even as the Empress attempted to end that war through diplomacy, her next assignment was very likely not to be on Lirna. If so, that meant she would be separated from Jack, and for how long was anybody's guess. Aria didn't like leaving her younger sister, Sami, with the responsibility for looking after him. Not because of any kind of jealousy; she knew that

Sami was not interested in Jack in that way, but she preferred having him close by, for all the usual reasons that one might expect. Aria and Jack had been most energetic ever since her return home, and she was a little saddened that those wonderful nights might have to come to an end soon. She wondered how he would hold up when they were apart, since he was so far away from anyone else that he might be able to consider family.

Fortunately, her family seemed to have finally adopted him as one of their own, and that would just have to do. For now, Aria had her duties to attend to. As she entered the command center of the base, she had to stop at a security checkpoint, manned by several enlisted soldiers and an officer. To her perverse delight, she saw that the lieutenant in charge of the checkpoint was the very same officer who had led the security detail which had taken her into custody when she'd first arrived on Lirna with Jack. Stepping up to the desk, she cleared her throat, waiting to be checked in.

The lieutenant looked up, and Aria had the pleasure of seeing his fur flatten as his ears laid back. -What are you doing here?- he stammered as he looked her over. He looked very shocked to see her standing before him.

Aria cleared her throat again, her expression hardening as she crossed her arms over her chest. -Captain Aria Me'lia reporting in,- she said, staring him down, as she kept the madly wagging end of her tail below the desk and out of his view. -I have an appointment with the base commander.-

-'Captain'? But...- The lieutenant called up his records on his computer, scrolling through the days appointments until he found it. He looked dismayed, because he knew the consequences that could come from disrespecting a superior, female officer. Belatedly, he stood up and saluted Aria. -Of...Of course, Captain. Commander Vash'ti is waiting for you in the base commander's office. One of my soldiers will show you the way.-

-Why, thank you, lieutenant, but that won't be necessary,- Aria said, in a falsely sweet tone. -I know the way. Please inform the commander I will be there shortly.- She turned away from the flustered Ailian officer, nodding to the attending soldiers as she began to move away.

-Certainly, Captain,- the lieutenant said. A moment later, in a manner that Aria was sure she hadn't been meant to hear, she caught the muttered words, -Disgusting female...Human-lover...-

That was something she wasn't able to let stand. Feeling a flare of anger inside of her, she came to an abrupt halt and whirled around to face the lieutenant. The snarling expression on her tiger-like face was enough to make him shrink back, and she saw real fear in his eyes as she advanced a few steps back in his direction. -Would you care to repeat that last remark, Lieutenant?-

-I...,- the lieutenant replied. He was clearly struggling with his words, trying to think of a way to maintain his steadily-decreasing dignity while attempting to think of a way to backpedal and apologize

without looking like a fool. -I wasn't...Perhaps I should rephrase...-

-No, no, leave it the way you said it before,- Aria hissed at him. -I'm sure you meant it as an insult. I assure you, I do not see it as such.- She kept advancing until she was standing at the desk again, her yellow-gold eyes staring laser beams at the cowering lieutenant. -You want to call me a human-lover? Be my guest.- She grinned rather evilly at him. -Because all it shows is your shame that you know you could never measure up to half the male that he is. And I do mean that in every sense.- Aria ignored the stifled laughter from the female enlisted soldier on the lieutenant's right. -Really, how anyone could trust you with guarding so much as the mess hall is beyond me. Now, do you wish to remain a lieutenant, Lieutenant? Because with your tongue I can most definitely guarantee that you will either remain there for the rest of your life, or sink just as fast as I can report your insubordination to the base commander.-

Completely subdued, the lieutenant sank back into his chair, defeated by Aria's dressing-down. -My apologies, m'lady,- he said grudgingly. He would not meet her stare. -I wouldn't dream of disrespecting you.-

Aria glared at him just a short while longer, and then she nodded. -Accepted, Lieutenant. Do try not to misplace your tail at the end of your duty shift.- With that, she turned back around and continued on her way, suppressing the urge to break into triumphant laughter as she made for the commander's office.

Upon reaching the office formerly held by Major Tal'in, Aria was surprised to find that the office was guarded. While this, in itself, would not have been all that unusual, the guards were not the normal naval security personnel that she would have expected. Instead, the door was flanked by a pair of black-clad, ebony-furred Ailians, easily recognizable by their plain, unadorned uniforms as members of the elite Royal Guards. They remained impassive as Aria approached the door, not acknowledging her presence even as she knew that they had to be keenly aware of her. They were intimidating merely by their appearance, and it was not without apprehension that Aria stood at attention between them.

-I am Captain Aria Me'lia,- she announced to them. -I am expected by the commander.-

Wordlessly, one of the guards half-turned and reached for the door handle, opening it for her. Taking a breath, Aria stepped inside, and the guard pulled the door closed once she was clear of it. When she was in, Aria briefly looked about the office. It still looked much the same as it had when Major Tal'in had occupied the room, although the many war trophies that she had acquired had been removed by somebody. The office was decorated rather plainly, although like any self-respecting Ailian officer would, the new commander had placed a few small mementos of their career here and there. She

then turned her attention to who was in the room. Sitting behind the desk was a tall, somewhat young, and slender Ailian male with rusty-brown fur wearing the uniform of a naval Commander, who Aria assumed to be Commander Vash'ti. She realized that she recognized him, and that he had been present at her preliminary treason hearing on the first occasion she'd returned to Lirna. In fact, he had been one of the officers to vote on the side of dismissing her charges. Seated in two of the three chairs placed in front of the desk were two admirals. One, not so surprisingly, was Chief Admiral Te'rou. The other was a crimson-furred, older female, and Aria recognized her very well as Admiral Grelen, the commander of the First Fleet which protected the homeworld. One other Ailian was in the room, but she had her back to Aria. Whoever she was, she was dressed in the rich formal uniform of an admiral just as Te'rou and Grelen were. She was looking out of the large windows which made up the back wall of the base commander's office, her hands clasped firmly near the base of her tail.

Snapping to attention, Aria saluted smartly. -Commander Vash'ti,- she said in a loud, clear voice, -Captain Me'lia, reporting as ordered.-

-You may be at ease, Captain.- These words came not from the commander, but from the unknown admiral standing at the window. Even as Aria registered the familiar voice, the female turned around, and she saw immediately that it was the Empress. The presence of the Royal Guards was now quite clear.

-Your majesty!- Aria said. She bowed hurriedly, feeling her pulse quicken. She had allowed herself to forget that, though she was the ruler of the Ascendancy, Empress Solan was still actively commissioned as an admiral in the Navy. Aria felt very outranked in the room now. -Forgive me, m'lady, I did not recognize you.-

Kri'a smiled. -Well, I can hardly fault you for that. It has been quite some time since I wore my uniform. With all that has been going on recently, I felt perhaps now was the time to put it back on. Thankfully, it still fits.-

-Please be seated, Captain,- Commander Vash'ti said, indicating the free chair in between Admirals Te'rou and Grelen. -And thank you for being punctual. Time isn't exactly scarce, but I'm glad to see that your time out of uniform hasn't spoiled your discipline.-

-Of course, not, sir,- Aria said. She sat down in the chair provided for her, folding her hands in her lap. She kept her eyes forward, looking between the Empress and the commander, waiting patiently even as she was overcome by curiosity. Surely her new assignment would be something special, indeed, to warrant the presence of her ruler and two admirals.

She was not kept waiting for long. The Empress approached Commander Vash'ti's side, leaning over to call up something on his computer. One of the bookshelves standing against the left wall of the

office slid aside, revealing a wide display screen. It flickered to life, showing large blocks of text interspersed with images. Aria saw several small map images, showing various sectors of Ascendancy space.

-The admirals and I have been going over some of the intelligence recovered from the ship you brought to us,- the Empress explained. -You did well, Captain. Though we lost some of the data due to safeguards that Ara'lana has apparently placed in her ships, we were able to save most of it. It was most informative, and quite alarming.-

Admiral Grelen spoke up next. -As you reported upon your return, it appears true that Admiral Me'lia has secured the alliance of several sizable fleets of humans. As a result, she has added the territory they were charged with to her own territory, to include the human homeworld, Earth. Earth is now entirely under the control of the Outer Colony rebels, and the majority of the humans' main governing body, the United Nations, has fled to the world of Cerelis and several other major colonies.- At Grelen's words, the Empress advanced the display screen to show an updated map of human space. A large swath of it was now indicated as rebel space. -Unfortunately for us, this has not led to a reduction in hostilities from the humans. In fact, they appear more desperate and are ramping up their attacks in an effort to break our defensive lines. Of course, we are *only* conducting defensive actions per Her Majesty's orders.-

-My diplomats are most insistent on that,- Kri'a piped in. -They are making little progress as it is. I was very lucky that their ships were not simply blown out of space when they arrived at Cerelis. The reports they are sending back to me indicate that engaging in a renewed offensive campaign could sabotage what progress they have made.-

-Yes,- Admiral Te'rou grumbled. He was clearly not of the same opinion as the Empress in this matter. -Even more troubling than the humans is the Pteryd. Up until now, we only had your reports to suggest their involvement to any degree in Ara'lana's rebellion. Now we are seeing Pteryd ships in increasing numbers in our battles with the rebels. They appear to have joined the war in earnest.-

-Which I see as somewhat of a good sign,- Kri'a said. -To me, that suggests that Ara'lana is losing confidence. From what our intelligence officers have been able to gather, she expected to make progress much faster than she has been. Calling upon her Pteryd allies to take a more active role would seem to indicate that she needs their help.- She paged through the intelligence. -Whatever the case, in recent days we have been able to regain some ground in key sectors, and though those gains have been small they are not insignificant. What's more, the intelligence you recovered has convinced our allies in the Nuretan Empire. They are committing their forces to aid us, which I believe will give Ara'lana pause.-

Aria wasn't so sure about all that, but she wasn't about to contradict the Empress. -As you say, m'lady,- she said. Tactfully, she went on, -Not that this isn't informative, Your Majesty, but might I ask what this has to do with the reason I was called here?-

The Empress took it in stride. -Well, nothing, I suppose. I just wished to let you know how helpful your assistance has been.- She switched off the display, and the bookshelf slid back into place. -So, I imagine you have been enjoying your week of leave. Your family is well?-

-Much better now that I am home,- Aria said. -They are not taking the news about my mother...very easily. But I think my father and siblings would be taking it much worse if I had not survived. They are doing as well as could be expected.-

-That is very good,- Kri'a said. There was a knowing twinkle in her eye. -And Jack? He is well?-

-Very well, thank you,- Aria said, feeling a touch of warmth in her face. It did feel a bit awkward for the Empress to be bringing *that* up, especially with Admiral Te'rou present. He had, after all, led the campaign for her treason charges because of her relationship with Jack. She could just feel the admiral's dislike for the subject, even though she wasn't looking at him. -I...ah...I must admit. I was not expecting the...well, the news interviews. Or the letters. And not all of it has been positive.-

The Empress looked sympathetic. -I went through much the same thing years ago, with Li'ren,- she admitted. -I can assure you that it will pass, eventually, though the behind-the-back comments may never end. All you can do is stand firm through it all.-

-Yes, m'lady. I will.-

-Good. But now to business.- The Empress came around the desk, leaning back against it. -I asked Commander Vash'ti to call you here on my behalf. I have an assignment for you which I sincerely hope you will take. And speaking of Li'ren, it actually involves her to some extent.-

-Oh?- Aria's curiosity was piqued.

-Indeed.- The Empress crossed her arms over her chest, and her ears laid back slightly. -It has not been very widely publicized, but my consort is no longer on Lirna. For her safety, I sent her back to her home planet, Arbaros. As you know, that planet is a major port world in the Inner Colonies, protected just as heavily as the homeworld, perhaps even more so considering the abundance of shipbuilding and supply points in orbit.- The Empress looked down at the floor. -Unfortunately, we have our suspicions that Ara'lana has learned this fact. How she learned it, we don't know, since I didn't tell anyone other than a select few trusted people that it was going to be done.-

Aria nodded her head. -My mother is quite aggressive. I assume you are worried that she will make an effort to take Lady Amani, to use as a bargaining chip against you?-

-Or to kill her outright,- the Empress said. -As you reported, she attempted to use the same tactic regarding Jack, to try to coerce your cooperation.- Aria remembered that very well, indeed. When her mother had first brought up the idea of Aria joining her, she refused almost immediately. With her daughter's refusal, Ara'lana had threatened quite coldly to have Jack killed if she did not reconsider. -Whatever Ara'lana's aim, I am not willing to risk Li'ren's safety by leaving her under the protection of regular soldiers. Therefore, I am activating a new unit of the Royal Guards, to be stationed on Arbaros and keep my consort safe. Several of my personal guards will be going there to supplement the new guards, but they will need a leader. I want that to be you.-

Aria nodded along with what the Empress was telling her, and then her brain caught up to what she was being told. -You want *me*?- Aria exclaimed, at the exact same time that Admiral Te'rou barked -You want *her*?- Aria couldn't believe what she was hearing. The Empress wanted her to lead the Royal Guards on Arbaros, to be responsible for protecting the second-highest ranking member of the Ascendancy's royalty. That was something far and above anything she had been expecting.

-Yes, Aria, I want you,- Kri'a confirmed. -You have demonstrated that you are someone I can trust absolutely. Beyond that, Li'ren thinks very highly of you, and so I do as well.-

Admiral Te'rou coughed, sitting up straighter in his chair. -Empress, I'm not sure that would be the best thing,- he said carefully. -With absolutely no offense meant to the captain...- Aria could just hear the effort that it took for him to say that. -Is she really the sort of person you want leading a unit of the most elite soldiers in the Navy? The Royal Guards are a public symbol of the power of the royal family. I don't think we want someone with Captain Me'lia's checkered reputation leading them. Especially when you consider the fact that her *mother* is the very person leading this rebellion!-

-Jin,- the Empress said, very calmly and looking the admiral right in the eyes. -You know I value your opinion very much. You have very rarely given me ill advice when it comes to military matters. In this matter, however, I believe you are mistaken. I think selecting Aria for the Royal Guards shows that no matter what your background or your lifestyle, you have a place in our society.- She looked at Aria very pointedly. -And believe me, that is a message that many young people in the Ascendancy need to hear.-

-Your Majesty, I...with all due respect, I'm a patrol ship pilot.- Aria swallowed. -I'm not suited to be a ground soldier, not anymore.-

-You have previous experience as a commando, I believe.-

Aria blinked. -Well, I do, but that was several years ago. I haven't kept my skills up, not to the level required of the Royal Guards.-

-I disagree,- Kri'a admonished her. She raised a hand. -Your reports from after your crash tell a

much different story. You demonstrated an uncanny ability to survive, and your record after that is equally as impressive. You almost single-handedly defended your family's home from a human attack, and you were able to fight your way out of your mother's base of operations. I think you're quite qualified to do the job I am asking of you.- She crossed her arms again. -Of course, you will not be forced to do so. If you want to return to flying patrol ships, I will allow it.-

-No, Your Majesty, I...- Aria stood up quickly, bowing low enough that she thought her ears might brush the floor. -I'm very honored that you would even consider me for this role. I would be glad to accept.- Rising from her bow, she resumed her seat, trying to contain the pride that she felt inside of herself. She never would have imagined, not after being charged for treason, that she could have been asked to join the Royal Guards. For her, it almost felt like being promoted to admiral. -But, there is one thing, Your Majesty.-

The Empress leaned forward. -What would that be?-

Aria bit her lip, her ears flattening slightly and her eyes dulling. -My family. My father, and my sisters and brothers. And Jack. What about them? For this assignment, I'll have to move to Arbaros.- She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. -I'm worried about what my mother might try to do in my absence. She has already sent armed men into our home once.-

-Ah...You are afraid that she may do something to harm your family?- The Empress considered that for a moment. -You have a fair point. You really think she would harm her mate and her own children?-

-I don't think she ever gave a damn about my father,- Aria spat out vehemently. -And until she outright ordered my execution, I would have never thought she would harm me or my siblings.-

Kri'a nodded. -I see. Your fears seem well-founded.- The Ailian ruler tapped her foot thoughtfully on the floor, the tip of her tail flipping from side to side. -Then of course they must go with you. I will arrange their accommodations personally. The royal governess of Arbaros will be expecting you, and will meet you and your family upon arrival. Is that satisfactory?-

Aria felt a relief so great that she could barely believe it. The largest of her worries had been that she was going to have leave her family again, and she'd had enough separation from them to last her a lifetime. -It's more than I would have expected, m'lady. I don't know how I can ever thank you enough, for this and for everything you have done.-

-You can thank me by doing your job well, Captain of the Guard.- The Empress winked at her with a grin, but a second later her smile faltered and she dropped her eyes to the floor. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse, almost labored. -I am leaving in your hands the most important thing in the universe to me. Please...take care of my little one.-

It felt good to be back in command of a ship.

Well, Jack thought, *maybe that's stretching it a little. But I'm in the pilot's chair, and that's good enough for me.* He reached for the controls of the passenger transport he was piloting, hitting a few switches to check the time to hyperspace exit. The human had to stretch a bit more than usual, since the ship was designed to be piloted by an Ailian. By pushing the pilot's chair forward as much as possible and adjusting the foot pedals to their most extreme setting, he was able to manage it without being too uncomfortable. The hardest part had been familiarizing himself with the unusual control scheme, but as it turned out the controls weren't all that different from the sorts of ships he was used to flying. As it turned out, bipedal, two-armed species wound up designing their pilot compartments very similarly. There were only so many ways humanoid beings could function in a starship, after all.

The ship was an impressive one, though. Large but pretty sleek and streamlined, Jack had been made to understand that it was a corporate vessel used by Aria's father's company, for hobnobbing with potential clients and the like. The ship could be piloted by a single person, but it operated most efficiently with a copilot. More like a yacht than anything else, it had plenty of room for Jack, Aria, her father, and her seven siblings.

When Aria had told them all that they would be moving at such short notice, Jack had been surprised how well the family had taken it. He supposed he had taken for granted just how serious Aria's role as the eldest female was. He'd known that the Ascendancy was a matriarchal society even before he'd ever met an Ailian in person, but he would have assumed that Aria's father, being more than thirty years older than her, would have had at least *some* say in the matter. But when she had explained things to them, and told them what the Empress' plans were, they had all agreed at once. Jack thought that if his own mother, or older sister if he'd had one, had said the same thing to him, he would have at least protested a little bit before uprooting and moving to a new planet. Then again, Aria's family was wealthy and could do a thing like this, and her father had part of his business on Arbaros, the planet they were headed for, anyway.

After consulting with itself for a few minutes, the ship's computer projected the time remaining for this leg of the hyperspace jump on the forward viewport. Jack wasn't the best at reading an Ailian clock, but as he understood it they were twelve Lirnan hours into this first leg of the trip, and based on the calculations that the ships navigational systems had made they had three hours left until they were ready to emerge from hyperspace and readjust for the next leg. Aria had said it would take about two days to arrive at Arbaros, a journey twice as long as usual. Because of the rebellion, the usual routes were no longer as safe as they had been, so they had to take a longer path that was better protected by

Ascendancy assets.

Jack yawned, stretching his arms out and hearing a few joints pop. *Definitely didn't miss this part of piloting.* While he was gratified that Aria trusted him enough to get her family safely from Lirna to Arbaros, there really wasn't all that much for him to do. With the way ships were automated, the autopilot and the hyperdrive were handling most of the work, leaving Jack bored most of the time. And yet, he had to remain at the controls, just in case something went wrong and he had to take over manual flight. Still, it was hard not to fall asleep. By Lirnan time, it was nearly midnight, and he was starting to get drowsy.

“You tired, yes?”

With a smirk, Jack swiveled around in the pilot's chair. Aria was standing behind him, her arms down by her sides. He was a little disappointed that she'd returned to wearing military dress, rather than the casual, sheer clothing she'd been wearing at home. With her body, she really made those thin, silky desert clothes look amazing. Then again, as his eyes traveled up her form, the military uniform she was wearing did hug her curves pretty tightly. It wasn't all bad. “A little bit. There's not much to do right now. I've been watching hyperspace, but it's kinda hypnotic. Might not be the best way to stay awake.” He turned back around to face the forward viewport. “Couldn't sleep?”

“I sleep a little.” Aria came over and sat down in the copilot's chair. She also looked out at hyperspace, watching as the blurred colors, mostly blues and purples, swirled and flew by the ship. They both looked on in silence for a while. “Was...three months ago, yes? Four?”

“Somewhere in between,” Jack agreed. He reached over and put a hand on Aria's knee, and she curled her tail up and around his arm. “Feels a lot better to be able to jump through hyperspace properly, instead of blindly.”

“Yes. No engine explosion. Much nicer.”

He laughed, able to find it funny now. “So, tell me about this 'Arbaros' place we're going to. What kind of planet is it?”

“Is colony world, in Inner Colonies,” Aria explained. She leaned forward, tapping a few buttons on the pilot interface and calling up some files. He hadn't been able to decipher the computer's information system, or else he would have done it himself ages ago. Jack was treated to some pictures of tall trees, snow-peaked mountains, and grassy, shrub-covered fields. “Is nice world. Been there before. Many trees, many animals. Is developed, but kept very green.” Another series of pictures showed cities with tall buildings interspersed among the trees, and he was surprised to see how huge the trees were compared to the structures. Some of the buildings were definitely skyscrapers, fifty stories at least, and a few of the trees were taller. A number of the skyscrapers he saw looked like they

were built *into* the trees. “Planet little cold, though. Twenty-five degrees Celsius most days. Cold.”

About seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit, Jack thought to himself, suppressing a smirk. Though a lot cooler than the average of a hundred and ten degrees in the deserts of Lirna, seventy-five degrees sounded like a pleasant late spring day. What was pleasant for a human, however, was a little bit chilly for a species which evolved in an arid climate. He remembered that Aria had found the planet they'd crashed on very cold, even though Jack had only been mildly uncomfortable on the coldest nights there. “Well, bundle up,” he said aloud. “I'm sure Arbaros won't be all bad. If it wasn't liveable, your people wouldn't have colonized the world, after all.”

“Is true, I guess.” Aria smiled as Jack yawned again, wider this time. “You tired. I maybe fly for while?”

Jack shook his head, stifling another yawn and sitting up straighter. “No, no, you sat in the chair for eight hours already before me. I can handle at least three more hours, until the next waypoint.” He leaned forward, tapping a few keys on the control panel. “Make that two hours and forty-five minutes...I think. I'm still confused by your number symbols.”

The alien tigress next to him chuckled. “Or...could see if Sami would like turn. She fly sometimes. I teach her.” Aria traced a finger up and down his leg slowly. “We go to bed, then...”

He was sorely tempted, but Jack reluctantly shook his head. “I want to, but there's no sense waking her. She's had a rough day already. Everyone has. Better to let her sleep, and I really can't take my eyes off the controls. Best just to stay here until the jump is done.”

“Hmm...,” Aria said, a little hint of a growl to her voice. She leaned over, purring a little, and pressed her slightly furry lips to his neck. Jack felt a shiver go up his spine as she kissed at him, the short whiskers on the sides of her muzzle tickling his skin. Then Aria leaned back, flicking her tongue at her lips. “Then slide you chair back.”

Jack arched an eyebrow, but he did as she asked.. “Why, what did you have in mind?”

“Males. So many questions.” With a chuckling purr, she slid off of the copilot's pair and knelt on the deck in front of him. Jack watched as she shuffled forward, her breasts pressing up against the tops of his knees. She placed her hands on his thighs, rubbing along his legs as her claws pricked at his skin through his pants.

“Heh. I guess I have a curious nature.” As Jack looked down at her, Aria began unbuttoning the fastenings at the tops of his pants. The purring in her chest was enough to vibrate his chair, and he felt his cock begin to swell, straining a little against the remaining buttons. “And it's pretty obvious you didn't come up here just to see how the flight was going. Eager kitty.”

“Kitty?” Aria looked up at him, questioning. She hadn't ever heard that word before.

Jack bit his lip as one furred hand slipped inside of his pants, and her fingers curled around his stiff member. "It's...ah...short for..." He paused. He'd momentarily forgotten that "cat" had come to be a fairly offensive slur used against Ailians, and probably "kitten" wouldn't be much better. "Never mind. Just a little nonsense word." The human reached out and rubbed the top of her head, scratching behind her ears with two fingers. Aria's purring deepened.

Aria gently teased his cock out of his pants, letting it stand free up from his lap. Playfully, she blew a small stream of air from her muzzle, and the warm breath flowed around and caressed his skin. Jack let out a low, slow moan, and his cock gave a twitch in response to what the feline was doing. Laughing lightly, she touched a finger to him, stroking up and down his shaft with a feathered touch. Jack got the impression that she was enjoying teasing him, not unlike a lioness toying with her prey. He found it maddening at the same time it excited him, and he tried to lift his hips, striving to push himself closer to her face. When he tried, Aria put her hands on his waist, using her considerable strength to force him back to the pilot's chair.

"No, no, no..." the Ailian scolded him sternly. She looked up into his face, and her gold-flecked eyes narrowed dangerously. "You pilot, remember? Keep eyes on controls..."

His heart pounding, Jack relaxed back against the chair, and as he settled in again he felt the pressure from Aria's grip subside. She growled, pleased at his obedience, and then she leaned in closer to him. Jack was rewarded for his acquiescence by the feeling of her cool, moist black nose touching the base of his cock. She nuzzled at him gently, taking little sniffs here and there, as if reassuring herself of his familiar scent. When she reached the tip, she let out her breath all at once, making him moan louder than ever as the cold blast of quick air hit him. Aria laughed at him, and Jack saw her tail waving behind her in her amusement.

Tearing his gaze away, Jack turned his attention back to the ship's controls. When he did, he was treated to something very new. With his eyes no longer focused on her, telling him what she was doing, everything that Aria did had a heightened sensation to it. He felt her hands slip up underneath his shirt, rubbing at his chest, and at the same time the telltale, rough warmth of her tongue began to bathe his cock. He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the back of the chair.

"Is nice, yes?" Aria purred in between licks. She smiled to herself, dipping her head a bit lower and opening her mouth. Jack slumped down in the chair as she slid him in between her lips, surrounding his rigid member with the heat inside of her muzzle. He wasn't even able to answer her question, but he did the best he could with a guttural moan and nod of his head.

Jack clenched his jaw, the pleasure from his lover's benefaction making his whole body tense up and shiver. She hadn't done this particular act in a very long while, and he'd forgotten how wonderful it

felt. Unlike a human tongue, hers tugged and pulled at his skin as she sucked on him, enhancing the sensation. Jack teased behind her ears again, moving his hand around to stroke her fuzzy, striped cheek. She tilted her head against his hand, murmuring happily, and she slid her mouth down, pushing him deeper inside. His other hand gripped the armrest of the pilot's chair tightly as she moved her head up and down, sucking with a tight seal of her lips around his shaft.

Growling more fiercely, Aria began suckling harder and faster at him, seeming to be in a greedy mood. Jack had to fight against his urge to buck his hips up into her maw, remembering her stern directions to him earlier. And the moment your cock was in a predator's mouth full of sharp teeth was not the right time to be getting disobedient. He allowed her to set the pace, sitting back and enjoying the ride, looking out the viewport occasionally as the dark colors of hyperspace swirled around the ship. As the minutes rolled by, he began feeling that glorious tingling in the extremities of his body, and his heart began beating a feverish pace. He started breathing louder, almost panting.

"Fuck, Aria...", he grunted, pushing down on the pilot's chair arms, raising himself up a little. Aria gave a rumbling, quiet snarl in the back of her throat, and she wrapped her large, strong hands around his waist. She held him in place and pushed her face close, pressing her nose against his belly and engulfing his cock fully in her mouth. Jack gave a passionate, choked cry as she lashed the underside of his shaft with her tongue, and he placed his hands on the back of her head. All at once, he jerked up, and the first stream of his hot, thick cum splashed against the back of her throat. He heard Aria start to purr again, and make quiet sounds of encouragement around him, as he kept cumming, filling her mouth. As his orgasm began to taper off, leaving behind a warm, slightly dizzy sensation, he felt her swallow. Aria lifted her head up, her tongue dragging lightly along his softening cock, and she looked back up at him again. Her lips curled up in a smile, and she flicked her tongue out to clean her muzzle of a small drizzle of cum that had leaked out.

"So much," the female Ailian said. She pushed herself up to eye level with him, and she licked his cheek fondly before kissing him tenderly on the lips. Jack could smell the salty, tangy musk of his cum on her breath. "So quick..." He thought he could detect a little note of disappointment at those words.

Jack was still getting his breathing under control, but he managed to reply. "I've never had *that* happen to me while I was flying," he admitted. He sighed, brushing her soft cheek with the back of one hand. "Way to make me feel selfish, though. I don't have much energy left to give you your turn."

Aria growled lustfully, nuzzling at his neck. "Not worry. I make sure I get my turn later...When Sami fly the ship, I see you then."

"Do I have your permission to sleep first?"

“I think about it, yes?”

A day and a half later, the ship emerged from hyperspace and entered orbit around Arbaros. Sami was in the pilot's seat, handling the ship a lot more confidently than Jack would have expected as he sat in the copilot's chair. Aria was standing behind them, looking over their shoulder at the planet below them. The planet was gorgeous, Jack had to admit. Arbaros looked smaller than Lirna, and the surface was a nearly unbroken canvas of mottled greens, covered here and there by swirls of wispy white clouds. He couldn't see any oceans, but light from the planetary system's sun was sparkling off of numerous points on the ground, so it looked like the planet contained a system of lakes and rivers. The “airspace” above the planet was just as impressive. Jack could see several space stations in orbit, and a large number of ships, both military and civilian, were present. The military ships were mostly staying in orbit, and the civilian ships were traveling in and out of the atmosphere. All in all, it didn't look anything like the second most-populated colony world in the Ascendancy, but from what Jack had heard from Aria and Sami during the journey, he knew Arbaros was the home port of all Ailian fleets and the largest shipbuilding facility in Ailian space.

The ship's radio crackled as Sami began maneuvering for a landing area. “*Samesh te'la rean ke zalete a' mar'e re kash.*”

Sami looked to Aria. Aria leaned forward, between her and Jack's chairs, and she responded. “*Cha. Me'lia kan ra'ale reshta kere.*” She let a note of command creep into her voice. “*A'kre mera kule'are, shoka.*”

“*Krisa za'na aril de na.*” The radio went silent.

Aria nodded to Sami, who continued with her maneuvers and angled the ship towards the planet's surface. The ship rumbled and shook momentarily as it hit the outer limits of the atmosphere, then the ride smoothed out as they penetrated deeper. Before long they were skimming the tops of the trees, approaching a city that Jack could see in the distance.

“What's that?” he asked, pointing towards the buildings rising up among the trees.

“Ar'bre. Government center for Arbaros. Is civilian spaceport there, where we go.” Aria ruffled Jack's hair. “Someone meet us there, my orders say.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said. He looked over at Sami. “Well, welcome to home for the next...however long. At least it has a nice view.”

Sami managed a smile, keeping her eyes forward and steering the ship. “Yes. Beautiful. Like home garden.” She glanced over at Jack and Aria. “Father still not like. Angry. Want to stay home.” She flipped the tip of her tail, smiling just a little.

“Set in his ways,” Jack mused. “Can't really blame him, can you? He grew up on Lirna and lived his whole life there, and now he's being forced to move away for who knows how long. It would be enough to make anyone upset.”

“Yes,” Aria agreed. Looking back at her, Jack could tell that she was upset as well. He knew that she didn't like uprooting her family like this, but he also knew that it was for the best. Aria's mother had already demonstrated a willingness to use violence against the family, so keeping them all together was the best way to keep them protected. “Will work out.”

They continued flying, getting closer to the city, until Jack could see an area where the trees had been thinned out. He was surprised to see that the spaceport looked like it was suspended in the air, with large landing platforms seeming to hover free all by themselves. But as they got closer, he saw that they were actually held up by struts which attached to the trunks of massive trees, and the spaceport facilities looked like they were built into the trees themselves, not unlike some of the pictures Aria had shown Jack before. Deftly, and with Jack's assistance, Sami directed the ship towards one of the unoccupied landing pads and set it down. Once the ship was powered down, everyone gathered at the exit ramp and walked down to the landing platform.

When they got to the bottom of the ramp, Jack took a deep breath of the air. The planet smelled glorious. The air smelled thick and rich, full of oxygen even at the high altitude of the trees. He could smell the fresh scent of the trees, very similar to a pine forest although the trees looked like they were all broad-leaved. He thought he could catch a hint of flowers as well. Looking around, he saw little birds flying here and there, most of them looking no larger than hummingbirds. The temperature was pleasantly cool to Jack, but looking at the Ailians standing around him he could see all of Aria's siblings and her father shivering in the breeze, their fur bristling out from the, for them, cold climate. Even Aria looked a bit uncomfortable, though she was dressed in her uniform and more prepared for the temperature.

Movement caught his eyes, and Jack looked across the landing platform to see a group of Ailians walking towards them. Four of them were dressed in paramilitary uniforms, appearing to be soldiers or local police of some kind. They were arranged in a square formation around two other Ailians, one male and one female. The female was middle-aged, around the same age as Aria's father, and dressed in shimmering green-and-gold robes. The male was younger, wearing normal clothes, although they were the same color as the female's. Both of them had dark blue fur with gold striping. The group kept approaching until they were close to them, and then they stopped. The female in the center stepped forward, looking very regal and respectable.

“Captain Aria Me'lia? Welcome to Arbaros, and to the city of Ar'bre,” she said, speaking

English, to the surprise of Jack. What was more, she spoke it with almost no accent, quite perfectly. Although by now his association with Aria was widespread knowledge in the Ascendancy, so she was probably speaking the language solely for his benefit. “Her Majesty Empress Solan sent word that you would be arriving. I am Miri Amani, Royal Governess of Arbaros.”

The name immediately rang a bell in Jack's head, but Sami got to it first. “Amani?” she said, her eyes lighting up. “Lady Li'ren Amani?”

“I am her mother, yes,” Miri said, fairly beaming with a look of pride on her face. She inclined her head towards them in a minor bow. “I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. My daughter has told me about your family. She admires you very much, Captain Me'lia, and she speaks highly of the strength of your family.” She nodded to Sami and the rest of Aria's sisters and brothers.

“Thank you,” Aria said, bowing to the governess. She turned to her family, sweeping a hand back. “My father, Arn Me'lia.” Aria's father bowed to Miri. “Sami, my sister. Also, my sisters and brothers, Ana, Sana, Jin, Mari, Lem'a, and Raya.” They all bowed in turn, and then Aria moved behind Jack, placing her hands on his shoulders. “And this is Jack Squier, my mate.” She curled her tail around his waist, leaning down to nuzzle at the top of his head. Jack couldn't help turning a little red.

The other Ailians with the governess looked slightly awkward, but if Miri Amani felt anything at the display of affection she covered it with diplomatic skill. “A pleasure to meet all of you. Li'ren has spoken particularly of you, Mr. Squier, and of you as well, Sami. She admires the way you were able to keep your family together during your sister's hardship.”

Sami looked surprised, and the orange fur on her cheeks fuzzed slightly. “Me? Ah...Thank you.” The younger Ailian looked at the ground, seeming embarrassed, but smiling all the same. “Not do anything, really.”

“Don't sell yourself short, my dear. It takes a lot to keep a large family together. I should know.” Miri looked to Aria. “Captain, you've had a long trip. I imagine your family would like to rest. At Her Majesty's instruction, living quarters have been prepared for you. We have plenty of room at my official residence, so I do hope you will accept the offer to stay with me. Considering your assignment, I believe that will work out for the best in any case, yes?”

“Is very generous,” Aria agreed, looking astonished at the offer. She bowed deeply again. “Thank you, m'lady.”

“Of course.” The governess gestured to her entourage. “If you and your family will come with me, Captain, you'll be shown to your new home. Someone will bring your things later. Once you've all settled in, there are some matters I wish to discuss with you in private.”

Jack and all of the Me'lia family were escorted from the main landing pad to a smaller one, where the family boarded a shuttle which whisked them all away. After a short ride through the towering forests in Ar'bre, the shuttle settled down at the apex of one of the treetop highrises. They were all led from the shuttle to a staircase, which took them down into the building to the governess' residence. Jack found it every bit as impressive as he would have expected. Though not as richly decorated as the interior of the palace on Lirna, there was still a certain air of royalty to the home. The walls were finished in a beautiful, polished white stone, and the floors were carpeted with regal blue which matched Governess Amani's fur nearly perfectly. Paintings and wall art decorated the corridors, many of them clearly very old. There to greet them, once they arrived in a spacious room which seemed to be some sort of greeting hall, was a very familiar face.

“Ah, Aria, Jack!” Li'ren Amani said, rising from a plush armchair with a broad smile on her feline face. “My mother said you would be arriving today. It is very nice to see you again.” She walked over to Jack and Aria, clasping hands with both of them briefly. Jack noticed that she wasn't wearing the same white diplomatic robes that she had when she was living on Lirna. Instead, she was wearing the same sorts of clothes that a normal Ailian might wear, a wrapped top and skirt that exposed her belly, though they were made of a thicker cloth to match the cooler climate of Arbaros. Now that she was home with her family, away from her official duties, she didn't have to worry about appearances.

“Lady Amani,” Aria said, bowing to her. “Is nice see you.”

“Hello, Li'ren,” Jack said. “You're looking good. Hope you've been having a good time here with your family.”

Li'ren laughed lightly. “Oh, yes. Very much. I have not been to Arbaros in some years, and it does feel nice to visit. Though I hope to be home on Lirna very soon.” She looked momentarily wistful, but it passed after a moment, and she turned to Aria's eldest sister. “And Sami, so good to see you as well.”

“Yes, Lady Amani,” Sami said, looking rather breathless. She took the consort's hand, bowing also.

“I must say, it is nice to see fresh faces,” Li'ren admitted. A sheepish look made its way onto her face, her pointed ears twitching backwards. “Kri'a seems to think my life may be in danger, so on her direction I have not been allowed visitors. If it is alright with my mother, I would very much like to show you around. You are to live here, after all.”

Miri, standing behind them, shook her head in the affirmative. “I would not mind in the slightest. We must be good hostesses to our guests.”

Suddenly clearing his throat, Arn said something to Aria that Jack didn't quite catch. He looked

distinctly weary, as though he hadn't slept much in the past few days. He had been quite standoffish during the journey, and Jack couldn't really blame him. Only a week before, he'd found out that his mate was alive, and leading an open rebellion against the government of the Ascendancy. On top of that, he was brought thousands of light-years away from his home to live with strangers, even if the rest of his family was there.

"Ah...," Aria said. She looked between the governess and Li'ren. "Is nice offer, but family tired. We maybe take tour later?"

Li'ren looked disappointed, but she reluctantly nodded. "Of course, Aria, how thoughtless of me. This is a trying time for you all. Certainly, I can have someone show you to your quarters so you can get some rest." She nodded to one of the Ailian guards who had accompanied her mother. "The officer will show you to your wing of the residence. We have rooms prepared for all of you." She offered a diplomatic smile. "I certainly hope you all enjoy your time on Arbaros. *Su'te kanme a arbaros re'laare.*" The last sentence was for the rest of Aria's family, who seemed relieved to finally hear their own language again.

"Um...I not mind tour," Sami said hesitantly. She looked among the rest of the people in the room, her tail twitching uncertainly. "If...If is okay."

"I would love to show you around," Li'ren said enthusiastically. Jack thought she was genuinely pleased to have someone take her up on her offer. Li'ren looked to the governess. "Mother, would you care to come as well? You know far more about the residence than I do, after all."

"I am afraid not, Li'ren," Miri said apologetically. "Captain Me'lia and I-" She stopped as a door opened on the other side of the room.

A girl walked in, a human girl, dressed in the same green color as the governess. Dark-skinned and with ebony hair, it took Jack a moment to realize that he had seen her before, though it had been back on Lirna. She was the slave girl Jack had met his first day on Lirna, and then run into again in the royal palace: Brooke. As she came into the room, she froze. The young slave clearly hadn't expected for so many people to be present.

"I...I...F-Forgive me, mistress, I didn't mean to intrude," Brooke said quietly, looking at Li'ren fearfully. "I-I-I just..."

"It's alright, child," Li'ren assured her. Noticing Jack's attention to Brooke, she explained quickly to him. "When I came to Arbaros, Kri'a insisted I bring her with me. She seemed to think I would need someone to serve as a sort of lady-in-waiting. The girl has proven quite indispensable, she really is quite wonderful." Turning back to Brooke, she smiled encouragingly. "Is there something you needed to tell us?"

“Yes, I mean...f-for the governess,” Brooke said. She looked to Governess Amani. “A call for you, m'lady. They said it was urgent.”

Miri rolled her eyes, sighing. “The burdens of my office. If you will all excuse me. I won't be a moment. If you wouldn't mind waiting for me, Li'ren, Captain Me'lia. In the meantime, the officers will conduct your family to their rooms.”

The governess left, one of her guards following after her. The other three guards and the male assistant showed Aria's father and her siblings out, much to their apparent relief, but Jack chose to remain with Aria. That left the two of them alone in the room with Li'ren, Sami, and Brooke. Li'ren bid them all to sit, and they sat around, passing the time chatting until the governess returned. While Li'ren, Sami, and Aria conversed in their own language, Jack took the opportunity to catch up with Brooke.

“So,” he said to the younger girl. “It's been a while, Brooke. What's it like for you, being all the way out here? You haven't been off of Lirna since you could remember, right?”

“No, I haven't,” Brooke said. “It's...It's okay.” She looked over her shoulder, towards where Li'ren was. “I was surprised when Lady Amani brought me here. I like her mother. She has been very kind to me.”

Jack grinned. “Good. Looks like your luck is holding out, a bit.” He glanced around the room. “Not as rich as you're used to living, eh?”

Brooke even laughed at that. “N-No, no...I guess not. But I like it better here. It's not as big. I don't get lost in the governess' residence.”

“Well, we'll be living here together,” he pointed out. “Sami over there will be getting the tour from Li'ren soon. Maybe you could show me around later, if you have a free minute sometime.”

“If...If m'lady allows it,” the dark-skinned girl agreed. “It would be nice to have another human to talk to. There are no other slaves on Arbaros, at least none that I've seen.” Which was news to Jack. He'd assumed that slavery was omnipresent throughout the Ascendancy, but from what Brooke had just told him that might not be true.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Governess Amani walked back in. She looked slightly shaken, her eyes wide and her tail hanging limply behind her. Li'ren stood up as her mother came into the room, smiling.

“Mother, what was the call about?” she asked. Then she saw the look on her mother's face, and her smile faltered. “Mother? Is something wrong?” Everyone else stood up as well. The mood in the room had suddenly shifted, and there came the sense to all of them that something was very wrong indeed.

Miri took a moment to answer. When she did, her voice was trembling and quiet. “A call came

in on the emergency line. There has been terrible news.” She looked around at all of them. “The rebels have attacked the homeworld. They struck less than six hours ago with a massive force, and the fleets are in retreat. And there's more, the...” The elder Ailian put a hand to her chest, as though she felt a pain there. Her ears were laid back as low as they could go. When her voice came back to her, she looked at Li'ren with a great sorrow in her eyes. “The Empress is dead.”

In the silence that followed Governess Amani's news, the only thing that could be heard was the sound of Sami catching Li'ren as she sank to the floor.