

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Eight: Amica Mea...
by Havoc

“It is more difficult to organize a peace than to win a war, but the fruits of victory will be lost if the peace is not organized.”

- Aristotle

Ara'lana relished the feeling of being back in her old palace office again. For so long she had been robbed of that which she had earned, and now she had taken it back once more. As she sat behind her desk, the massive, heavy wooden desk which held so many memories, she ran her claws lightly over the surface. She looked around the office. For the last few years, this place had been occupied by Admiral Jin Te'rou. Traces of him were still there, though in the month since her forces had taken Lirna, she'd had most of what he'd left in the office purged. Some of the things she liked, like the new bookshelf against the wall next to the large, thick doors. That was some real quality, made from the trees of a distant Ascendancy world. That she just couldn't have parted with, even if it reeked of Te'rou's inadequacy. He and his fleets had put up a hard fight, but they had really been no match for the combination of her forces and the Pteryd, not to mention the humans who were under her influence. The battle had almost been a disappointment to her, but not enough of one to quash the feeling of triumph she'd felt upon stepping off the shuttle into the fierce Lirnan sun.

One other thing that Ara'lana enjoyed about her office was what was hanging on the paneled wall across from her desk. A common enough sight in any Ailian government office, it was a large portrait of the late Empress. When Ara'lana had occupied this office, she'd had a portrait of Kri'a's mother on the wall. When Kri'a had ascended to the throne, the portrait had been switched out, much to Ara'lana's displeasure. The elder Solan had been an Empress that she could respect; her daughter had been a disappointment, in more ways than one. But having a portrait of Kri'a in her office now gave her a sort of dark pleasure.

Ara'lana allowed herself a tight, satisfied smile. *-Nothing I have ever done was so satisfying as looking that woman in the face, and pulling that trigger,-* she thought. *-Ailians have long memories. They will remember what I have done. It will be spoken of for centuries, long after my time. A fitting legacy for the freer of our people.-* Her soldiers had done their jobs well. Taking the palace had been their top priority once landing on Lirna, and all of them, she was sure, would have been sorely tempted by the desire to take all the glory for themselves. All of them, on the other hand, knew that the prospect of what Ara'lana would have done to them for disobeying was something not to be contemplated. So

they had taken the Empress alive, keeping her until Ara'lana could arrive, allowing her to take the task which was rightfully hers.

Ara'lana had been surprised by how much courage Kri'a had shown. An admiral to the end, she had been in her uniform when she'd been taken. Her soldiers had told her that Kri'a had personally killed three of them before the rest of her Royal Guards had fallen. She would not have expected such ferocity from a person like her. Even when Ara'lana had held the gun to her head, there was no pleading, neither was there fury or despair. There had just been a steady stare, and no betrayal of thought except for a slight increase in her rate of breathing. Then the words came.

-This wins you nothing,- Kri'a had said, her voice maddeningly calm. -Nothing at all.- And then she'd had the audacity to smile. Not a smile of triumph, or of confidence, or even of sarcasm.

-She pitied me,- Ara'lana thought. *-That was a smile of pity... Well, I need the pity of no one. Not now that I am so close to realizing what I've dreamed of my entire life.-* She let her smile widen. *-She can keep all of the pity for herself.-*

A knock came at the office door, bringing Admiral Me'lia out of her introspection. She stood up from her chair. -Come.- The door opened, and a slender, orange-furred Ailian walked into the room. She was older than Ara'lana, and she had an air of royalty about her that came from decades of service with the upper classes of Ailian society. She was followed by a black-furred female, younger than her companion, dressed in a crimson admiral's uniform. She carried a reader and a collection of data cards in her hands. Finally, a large, green, insectoid creature entered, the Pteryd representative Seirin-143. Its bulbous red eyes caught the lights in the room, making them flash and glimmer. -Tara. Selina. Seirin-143. Thank you for coming so quickly. I'm eager to hear your status reports.-

-Of course, Admiral.- Tara Shi'ala, the former chief adviser to the Empress' mother, closed the door as Admiral Selina Kris took a seat in front of Ara'lana's desk. Shi'ala sat down next to Admiral Kris, folding her hands in her lap. Seirin-143 preferred to stand, finding chairs far too uncomfortable for its hard-carapaced body. Ara'lana found it amusing how Lady Shi'ala and Admiral Kris found the Pteryd's presence so uncomfortable, their feelings betrayed by the subtle way in which their fur stood on end and their pointed ears turned back. Old prejudices were as powerful as ever. When they were all settled, Ara'lana resumed her seat.

-Well, Selina,- she said. -You first. How is the progress with repairing our fleets, and what of the progress we are making in other areas of the Ascendancy?-

Admiral Kris nodded. -Repairs to our fleets were completed yesterday, a week earlier than my original estimates said they would have taken. We've shifted our focus in that area to replacing the ships and fighters which were lost in the battle to take Lirna, as well as in engagements in other sectors.

All shipbuilding facilities in the Outer Colonies, civilian and military, have been devoted to the rebuilding efforts. Ships are being dispatched to their respective fleets as they are completed, with a priority placed on the fleets stationed here.- She lifted the data reader in her hand, checking it for a moment. -The battle brought us down to ninety percent strength, taking into account the damaged vessels. Between the repairs that have been completed and ships which were already under construction and were finished, we're up to ninety-two percent. In another month or two we should be back to full strength.-

-Marvelous,- Ara'lana purred, leaning back in her chair. -Much better than I had anticipated.- She reached up with one hand, stroking the white, striped fur on her cheeks. -Once we are up to full strength, we will begin combat operations against the Nuretan Empire. Small ones, at first. By committing their forces to this conflict, they have inserted themselves into an internal matter of the Ascendancy. I will punish them for this error in judgement.-

Admiral Kris looked a bit uncertain. -I would caution against that, Admiral,- she said carefully. -Until the rest of the Ascendancy is fully pacified, we will be taking a huge risk in opening up additional theaters of operation. We should wait until we can devote our full attention to the Nuretans.-

Resisting the urge to growl, Ara'lana made herself appear thoughtful. -Well...I shall take your advice into consideration, Selina, of course,- she said diplomatically. Inwardly, she thought she would do nothing of the sort. You could not show mercy to your enemies and expect anyone to respect you. Ara'lana turned to Seirin-143. -And what of your people?-

Clacking its mandibles, the Pteryd envoy flicked its antennae towards the rebel leader. *~Our ships sustained negligible damage in the battle, since you relegated us to support roles.~* If the alien insect felt any insult at its forces being given that job, it did not show. Seirin-143's telepathic voice was just as lacking in inflection as ever. *~I have sent word back to the Combine in regards to your victory. They are most pleased, and willing to send whatever additional reinforcements you require. We, as you, are also eager to show the Nuretan Empire the folly of their ways.~*

-Thank you,- Ara'lana said, nodding her head. -And don't worry. Your people will see their share of battle soon enough, I am sure.- The Pteryd clacked its mandibles again, its forearms twitching slightly. -Selina, what about our human allies?-

-They sustained no damage in the battle,- Admiral Kris reported. -Those who have joined us seem very capable. Some of their ground forces have been brought to the planet's surface, to assist with maintaining control over the larger cities. The populace is naturally rather opposed to our presence, but once the turmoil has settled and essential services begin running smoothly again, I believe that will cease to be a concern.-

-Very good,- Ara'lana said. -Tara? Your political assessment?-

-Our hold over the Outer Colonies is solid,- Lady Shi'ala said. -That has always been the case. The ruling elite are devoted to our cause, and the common people won't dare to go against them. There will be no issues. We are making significant progress in the Inner Colonies as well. Along with our military victories, we have begun receiving overtures through back channels from various planetary governments in the Inner Colonies. No doubt they are wishing to avoid the devastation which has been waged on some of their neighbors.- She hesitated, then she pressed on. -However, there are some problems that I did not foresee.-

Ara'lana frowned, her eyes narrowing. -What problems?-

-We overestimated the effect that the death of the Empress would have,- Shi'ala explained. -There was some initial turmoil, but the recovery was fairly quick. I did not foresee how effective the change in leadership would be.-

Ara'lana snarled, her tail lashing the back of her chair. -You mean that damned little deviant that Kri'a wasted her life with? What could she hope to do against us?-

Slightly over a week after the taking of Lirna, the news had hit the networks that Lady Li'ren Amani had been declared the Empress of the Ascendancy. In a highly-publicized ceremony on Arbaros, she'd sworn the oath that all new Empresses took when they ascended to the throne. It had made Ara'lana's blood boil when she'd seen it happen. In her opinion, Li'ren had no claims to royalty. Her family was from a minor noble line that had risen to prominence by accident, by a fluke. Because one Empress, after the hundreds of Empresses that had come before her, couldn't control her urges enough to do what duty required of her.

Unfortunately, Ara'lana's opinion was not shared by many analysts among the Ascendancy. There seemed to be a certain amount of precedent for picking Li'ren as the successor to the Empress. In the past, whenever an Empress died and left behind no direct successors in the way of children, it had fallen to sisters, aunts, or cousins to fill the role. And since none of Kri'a's living relatives could be considered part of the Ascendancy during an open rebellion, all of them being from the Outer Colonies, the prevailing opinion among the royalist factions was that Li'ren could ascend to the throne. She and Kri'a had, after all, been bonded, as grossly unconventional as it might have been. For Ara'lana, it was a sickening reminder of how far the Ascendancy had fallen that an exclusively female bonding could be considered legitimate in any way.

-I'll remind you,- Lady Shi'ala said patiently, -as I have before, Admiral, that Li'ren Amani is not a woman to underestimate. She is a very accomplished politician for someone of twenty-five years. For five years, the entirety of Empress Solan's reign, she was her top adviser and confidant and quite

frequently her personal representative in high-level diplomatic matters. For the two years prior to that she was a resident agent on Lirna for the diplomatic corps, and for three years before that she was her own mother's assistant, and I need hardly remind you how skillful and experienced a diplomat Miri Amani is. That's not to mention the intensive legal education that she received in her formative years.- Shi'ala's ears twitched forward, seeing the displeasure on Ara'lana's face. -I'm only telling you this because it's something you need to know. She may not be a soldier or an inherently threatening person, but she is a dangerous enemy to have.-

Ara'lana had to grudgingly nod, knowing that Shi'ala was making good sense, no matter how much she didn't want to agree with her. -I have watched some of the speeches she has given since the battle,- she admitted. -She does show a certain...poise.- The white-furred female looked off to one side, thinking. -She has supporters, then.-

-Many of them,- Shi'ala said. -You should know as well as I do. Though her relationship with Kri'a was fairly well-known among the upper elite of our society, among the common people it was virtually unknown. She was publicly visible only as a prominent diplomat and politician. Now, naturally, her peculiar...ah...lifestyle has become far more public in the wake of Kri'a's death and her ascension to the throne, but I think you know how the public reaction has been to your own daughter in that regard. It is perhaps not surprising that Li'ren is enjoying a significant amount of popular support.-

~It is something that my people find quite curious,~ Seirin-143 interjected. Its head swiveled from side to side, looking at the Ailians in the room. *~So much importance placed on this matter of whom you choose to mate with. My people have no such dynamics to consider. Quite curious, indeed.~*

Ara'lana eyed Seirin-143 for several long moments, contemplating how best to tell it that she didn't much need lessons on Pteryd culture and physiology at the moment, but she decided it didn't matter anyway. -In any case...I find it clear that I must do something about this new...- Ara'lana paused, her mouth souring as the next word hovered on her tongue. -...Empress.-

-And soon,- Admiral Kris agreed. -Our intelligence assets on Arbaros and elsewhere in the royalist sectors of the Ascendancy inform me that the Inner Colony and Core fleets have regrouped and repaired. They are also receiving constant reinforcements from the Nuretan fleets. In a few days, they may be in a position to begin attempting to retake territory.-

-Another point of concern,- Shi'ala put in. -I understand that the new Empress has been sending out envoys to various human groups. I, along with my staff, believe she may be attempting the same sort of alliances that Kri'a failed to create.-

With a snort, Ara'lana waved off that idea. -*That* is one thing that I firmly believe we have nothing to worry about,- she said, laughing. -The humans have become disorganized from years of war

with the Ascendancy. Their homeworld is lost to us, and their government is weak. They are looking for any advantage they can get, and their aim is to try to use the division within the Ascendancy to that end. They are a suspicious race. They will be unable to trust Ailians to hold up their end of any sort of bargain. Even the humans who have allied with us are merely in it for their own selfish means. Self-preservation is the primary motivation for humans, remember that. I have made a study of understanding humans ever since first contact. Of everything I have said, I am absolutely certain.- Shi'ala did not look convinced, but she held her tongue. -The far more pressing concern is the gathering royalist forces. For that, I have an interesting solution...-

For all that he was paying attention to what was in front of him, Jack didn't notice the right hook coming for the side of his head. By the time he saw it approaching, it was far too late to do anything about it, and he felt a hammer blow to his skull that made him give a grunt of pain. Stars flashed before his eyes, and he was rocked to the side. Stumbling, he fell to the padded floor, one hand clapping to the side of his head as the other slapped the floor to break his fall.

“Shit!” he hissed through his teeth, squeezing his blue eyes shut as his head began to throb. He felt a little bit dizzy, but even as he registered how the room was spinning, the feeling began to subside. Jack came up to a crouch, shaking his head to clear it further, and he blinked to get the lingering sparkles out of his vision.

“Drop you hands again...”

Jack looked up at the black Ailian female standing in front of him. She was pacing back and forth three steps at a time, keeping her gaze down on him. Her tail was swishing back and forth in a manner which suggested agitation and no small amount of frustration. She was dressed in workout clothes, a black form-fitting pair of pants and a midriff-length sleeveless top. The fur on her shoulders and arms was slightly matted with sweat, but she betrayed no fatigue in either her breathing or her stance.

“Sorry, Aria,” he said. Jack rubbed his head, still feeling some of the ache from where she'd punched him. “I was trying to keep my eyes on you, and I got too focused...It's a lot to keep track of.”

“No excuse,” Aria said simply. “You need be aware everything. Not focus on one thing. Is dangerous. Stupid.” She tapped her foot, her tail still waving, but then she seemed to calm herself. As Jack watched her, she leaned over, offering him a black-dyed hand. “Up. Try again, yes? You hit me four time today. One more, we done.”

Grinning a little, Jack took her hand and let her pull him to his feet. “You make it sound so easy, Aria. You've got commando experience, and all I ever had was the basic self-defense I got in pilot

training when I joined the Navy.” The human brushed a hand back through his sandy blonde hair, and he looked up at Aria’s face. “Plus, it’s not exactly a fair fight. You’re three feet taller than me. How am I supposed to get a shot at your head if I have to jump to reach it?”

Aria blinked, and then she smiled back. Though it was as friendly a smile as always, the gleam in her yellow-gold eyes also gave her expression a predatory edge. “Then jump. Keep your hands up. Watch my body.” Without warning, she swung a hand for Jack’s face, trying to strike his cheek with an open palm. This time, he brought his arms up almost as a reflex and was able to block the blow before it connected. Aria’s eyes widened slightly in pleased surprise. “Better.”

For the last month, ever since the meeting when Li’ren declared that she would accept the position of Empress, Aria had been working double time as the head of the Royal Guards. From the time she woke up until the time she and Jack went to bed, usually late at night, she was either training with various squads of her soldiers or patrolling the Arbaros governess’ residence, where the newly-crowned Empress Amani lived. Though the work seemed to be quite taxing on Aria, Jack got the impression that she found it very satisfying. She had started her military career as a foot soldier, and had confided in Jack that such a career had always been her first choice. While she hadn’t disliked her work as patrol ship pilot, the journey from junior officer to admiral in the Ailian military, with few exceptions, began in the infantry. Although personal promotion was the last thing on her mind, considering the dire situation that her people were in, Aria was eager to demonstrate that the former Empress’ faith in her had been warranted.

One aspect of her enthusiasm for her job was the training that she and Jack were currently engaged in. Near the governess’ residence, built high in the trees like most other buildings on Arbaros, was a civilian police post which had been commandeered by Aria and the rest of the Royal Guards. The post was suited to their needs, and therefore had been transformed into their headquarters. The building contained offices and an armory, as well as a surprisingly impressive firing range and a well-equipped workout facility. The latter was where Jack and Aria were, in the middle of an open, padded area of the floor. It was late in the evening, and they had the place to themselves. No matter what sort of duties her day included, Aria always made it a point to bring Jack here for at least an hour. Some months earlier, when Jack had first come to live with her family on Lirna, he’d agreed to a few lessons from Aria in Ailian hand-to-hand combat. Unfortunately, owing to how much stronger she was than him, they’d barely made it through the first lesson before Jack had to stop due to a bothersome little concussion.

This time, though, Aria had promised to hold back for him. He knew that she was worried that either he, she, or both of them were still targets for her mother. Jack had already proven that he could take care of himself before, but she still worried, so she wanted to do what she could to give him that

extra edge. Over the last month he had made a lot of progress, but Aria was a tough teacher. She always found ways to challenge him, and it seemed like there was always some new move for her to pull that would throw Jack for a loop. At least he wasn't bruising as easily anymore, and he was feeling like he was in even better shape than he had been after trudging through a lost jungle planet with a pissed-off Ailian woman and wild animals trying to kill him at every turn.

Jack stepped forward towards Aria, deciding that it was time for him to take the initiative in this training session. He began throwing punches and kicks at her, which Aria handily parried and blocked. "So," he said, in between strikes, "how are your duties going?"

"Good," Aria said. She made a motion as though she were going to counterattack, and Jack shied back from her, shuffling to the rear and to the left. "Soldiers trained well already. Before me. Not difficult. Lirnan guards help, yes? Have good lieutenant work with me." She swung her right foot out, trying to kick Jack in the ribs, but he dodged it. She gave a little snarl, baring her sharp teeth slightly. "Nice."

"Family seems to be settling in," Jack said.

Aria smiled, swishing her tail, this time in a pleasant, leisurely sway. "Is true."

When they'd first moved to Arbaros, Aria's family had been very out of sorts and uncomfortable, especially since they had been moved into the governess' residence. That had been Empress Solan's idea, in order to give Aria the opportunity to protect her family as well as Li'ren. Aria had appreciated it, but her father and siblings found it somewhat awkward. However, they had gotten used to it over the past several weeks. A big part of that was the friendliness of Governess Amani and Li'ren. They'd both done their best to make them feel welcome, and Aria's father had even been provided with a high-quality communication terminal in his living quarters, of the kind which was usually set aside for military or diplomatic purposes. This allowed him to keep up with his business affairs, or at least the ones which were not located on Lirna. That had done wonders for improving his mood.

"I've...ah...seen Li'ren around the governess' house, too," Jack said. "She seems like she's coping well. I can't imagine what she's been going through."

"Empress Amani," Aria corrected him. The same way that she had corrected him every time he referred to Li'ren by her first name. "Is more respectful, yes?"

Jack rolled his eyes, using the brief lull in Aria's attention to try to jump up and punch her on the muzzle. He couldn't be that lucky, though, and she batted his fist away. "She's not my Empress," he said, smirking at her. "And I've always called her Li'ren. Why should I change that now?" He darted around Aria, but she spun around and kicked him in the chest. A light kick, but enough to send him

back several meters.

“Males,” Aria growled, flicking her ears forward. “No respect.” She shook her head at him, then sighed her surrender on the matter. “But is true. Empress strong. And busy with work. No time for grief.”

“I don't think it's just that. She has her family. Her mother is here, and I think she talks to her brothers pretty regularly.” Jack paused, gauging Aria's stance. He noticed that she was putting her weight on her back foot, and her tail tip was twitching. She was getting ready to jump on him. Jack began slowly stepping to the side, and he saw her nod fractionally. “She's got friends, too. Sami, for instance. She's been hanging out and talking with Li'ren a lot since we arrived.”

Aria nodded again, circling around in opposition to Jack's movements. “I know. Guard captain, yes?” She waved a hand down her body, indicating her recently dyed black coat of fur. “Have to know.”

“Well, here's something you might not know,” Jack said, raising an eyebrow. “Sami is sweet on Li'ren.”

He saw Aria's eyes widen considerably, and her arms dropped a few inches as she stared at him. Taking the opportunity, Jack darted in close to the Ailian and bladed his body to one side. Before Aria could recover from her shock and react, he loaded his left leg and lifted his right, kicking out and catching Aria in the right side just under her ribs. She gave a yelp of surprise and teetered to one side, giving Jack the chance to follow up with a jab under her chin. Aria rocked back and lost her balance, falling down to the floor and landing right on her rear. Jack heard her curse and roll to her side as she grabbed for her tail, which had gotten pinned underneath her when she fell.

“Ha!” Jack crowed, flexing his fingers as the sting from striking her strong jaw dissipated. “There's number five. And number six, too, if you want to count the kick. Not bad, eh?” He straightened up and crossed his arms across his chest. “Need a hand up?”

Aria gave an abbreviated snarl and shook her head, standing up on her own as she rubbed the base of her tail. “Fine...” She touched a hand to her jaw, and there was a little pop as she opened her mouth and worked it back and forth. “That hurt. Good. You much better.” Her lips widened in a grin, and he saw that familiar spark in her eyes. His growing prowess with Ailian martial arts was turning her on. Jack still thought it was a bit strange for someone to get so aroused by fighting, but he wasn't about to complain.

“Thanks.”

“But...ah...what you say,” Aria said slowly, her smile melting away. “Not understand.”

Jack hesitated for a second. “You mean you really didn't know?” He dropped his arms, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his pants. “You can't tell me you haven't noticed. Sami talks about

Li'ren all the time. Whenever I talk to her, she always tells me how much she likes talking to Li'ren and hearing stories from her about growing up in the palace. Sami admires her a lot, and I think she's got a pretty serious crush on her.”

Aria looked down at the floor, and then she turned away, going over to a padded bench and sitting on it. She seemed taken aback by what Jack was telling her, but not as much as he might have expected to see. Finally she spoke up. “Knew Sami...different. But not like that. Is...difficult.” The Ailian crossed her ankles, turning her eyes back on Jack. “You sure?”

“Well, I'm no expert on Ailian psychology, or anything like that,” Jack said, stepping over and sitting next to her. “But I know you pretty well. And I've spent plenty of time with Sami, so I think I have a good read on her.” He shrugged. “I think I'm right. I think Sami respects Li'ren's grief too much to say anything to her, but she definitely likes her.”

Taking a deep breath, Aria looked up at the ceiling. Jack could tell that it was a lot for her to absorb. He knew that same-sex attraction still held a huge stigma in Ailian culture. There had been a considerable stir about it when the news had come out to the public about the real nature of Li'ren's relationship with Kri'a. The reaction had been tempered somewhat by the way the late Empress had used his and Aria's relationship to try to build support for peace with humanity, but even so not all of the reaction had been positive. Aria was probably worried about what her sister might be subjected to if she pursued something with Li'ren.

When Aria took a while in speaking again, Jack tried to mitigate things. “I...could be wrong, I guess.”

“No...,” Aria murmured. “You right, I think.” She sighed, and then she looked over at Jack. He saw a shrewd sort of respect on her face. “You wait for good moment to tell me. Surprise me. Give you chance to strike. Sneaky.” Leaning down, she planted a kiss on his lips. At first it was just a brief one, but as she drew away she paused and then went back in, deepening it. She started purring, very faintly but enough so that Jack could hear. Aria was still keyed up from their sparring match.

As she kissed him, Jack put his hand on her thigh and rubbed it firmly. He put his tongue out and she parted her lips, letting him slip it inside and touching it to her own. He felt her furred palm press against the small of his back, and she pulled him closer to her as her tail curled up in front of him and coiled around his legs. She usually got in a frisky mood after a training session, but tonight she seemed particularly so. Perhaps it was because he'd done especially well this evening, or maybe it was just because the workout facility was much more deserted than usual. Nobody was around, and other than the subtle sounds of their kiss and Aria's purr, the room was quiet.

“Sneaky?” Jack asked, once his mouth was free. “Nah...Not me. I was just making small talk. I

just happened to be lucky that it threw you off your game.” He rubbed one hand up Aria's side, teasing his fingers through her black fur. Jack would never have said it to her face, because he knew she was self-conscious about it already, but he missed the vibrant orange of her natural coloring. He hoped that eventually, when her assignment with the Royal Guards was over, he'd be able to see it again.

“Lies,” Aria purred, and she rubbed her cheek against the top of his head possessively. She touched a finger to his knee, dragging it up his thigh until it rested lightly against the crotch of his pants. Jack let out a low groan as her claw traced along the ridge of his cock, making it swell in response to her feather touch. Aria cooed in approval, whispering into his ear. “*Ha're ke sala me...*”

Jack's face warmed at her words. His understanding of Ailian had vastly improved since he'd first met Aria, and what she'd just said to him had been a succinctly descriptive explanation of what she wished him to do to her. “I don't know if that's a good idea,” he said, even though he was really thinking the exact opposite. “Someone could walk in any time.”

“Is exciting, yes?” Aria said, her voice a low, throaty growl. “Make it...nicer.” She cupped her whole hand around his groin and squeezed him firmly. His hips jerked forward against her, and she laughed softly. “Oh, yes. Much nicer.”

Aria took her hand away and grabbed for the waistband of his pants, her deft fingers untying the strings that held them tight around his hips. He could see the eagerness in the way that she moved, the way that she seemed desperate to get him where she wanted him. Jack let her drag his pants down, lifting up his body so that she could get them past his rump. As they got down to the tops of his thighs, his cock rose to stand straight up from his body. The human kept his eyes on the Ailian's face. Aria was looking down at his lap, and he saw her tongue flick out at her thin black lips. She reached out with a finger, touching it to the underside of his shaft and stroking upwards. He gritted his teeth.

“Damn, Aria,” he hissed. “How can you be so eager and so teasing at the same time?” Jack looked down at his lap, seeing a bead of precum forming at the tip of his cock. He was already hard as a rock, and he did have to admit that the more public location might have had something to do it. He and Aria were usually so discreet, waiting until they got back to their room in the governess' palace. The change was exciting to him.

Aria smiled sweetly at him, though the predatory gleam remained in her eyes. “Is good, yes? You like, I see.” She put her fingertip to his cock, swiping up the slippery liquid collecting there. Drawing her hand back, she stretched out the clingy strand of liquid. As the strand broke, she lifted her hand to her mouth and licked her finger. A loud purr rumbled in her chest. “*Karesh te zala a're...Tasty.*” Licking her lips again, she finished pulling his pants down his legs. Once they were gone, she gave him a little wink, and she leaned forward and kissed him. “Now you.”

Jack was confused by those words, until he saw Aria lie back on the padded bench, stretching out with one leg in front of Jack, across his lap. The other leg was behind him, her bare foot brushing up and down against his back as she looked down her body at him with half-lidded, sultry eyes. Then he understood, and he smiled as he leaned towards her. As she watched him, the subtle thrum of her purr vibrating through the air, he removed her tight, sleek workout leggings. Once he did, he immediately detected a strong scent. The smell almost sent his head spinning, even before he recognized as a familiar one. It was radiating from between Aria's legs, the fragrance of her arousal, but on this occasion it seemed much more intense than ever. He was instantly drawn in, intoxicated by it, so much so that he didn't even notice as Aria pulled off her top and freed her voluptuous breasts.

"Damn..." Jack breathed, touching his fingers to her silky, lovely pussy. A wondrous sigh escaped his mouth as he felt how hot her sex was. And she was wetter than he had ever felt. The Ailian murmured in fevered pleasure as he rubbed his thumb along her slit. He looked up from where his hand was, taking in the whole of her body. He saw her wide, curvy hips, and her flat, firm belly. His eyes traced along the lengthy, jagged scar that wound its way through the rich fur covering her front, following its trail up from her navel, between her breasts, all the way to where it touched her collarbone. Finally, he looked at her feline face, where her yellow, gold-flecked eyes stared back at him. "There's something different about you tonight, Aria. Something...wild."

"Mmm...", she purred in response. Aria curled her tail up and around his back, and he felt it pull against him. She reached down between her legs with both hands, two of her fingers touching her pussy and spreading her nether lips apart. Jack's heart skipped a beat as he saw the black-framed pink inside, glistening in the white ceiling lights. The scent was even stronger now, and the truth struck him all of a sudden like a lightning bolt. Ailians were a feline species. Could it be that they experienced heat like animals on Earth? That would explain the boldness that was driving her to disregard the fact that anyone could walk in at any moment. She spread her legs wider, bending her knees, inviting him in. "Need you..."

The very picture of obedience, Jack slid back and then got on his belly. As Aria looked between her breasts at him, he scooted forward until his face was between her sleekly muscled thighs. She took her hands away from her sex and placed one on the back of his head, gently nudging him down as she teased her fingers into his hair. With his mouth millimeters away from her pussy, he took a deep breath. Her essence flooded his nose, and he swooned. He couldn't imagine how an Ailian's...pheromones, he supposed...could affect a human, but it was certainly working for him. His ears perked up as he heard Aria give a small, kittenish mewl of need, a sound that he'd only ever heard from her a handful of times before. It was the sound she made when she was so desperately ready for him that she was almost

driven to begging.

Never one to disappoint his lover, Jack acceded to her desires, and he pressed his mouth to her sex. Aria moaned as he slipped his tongue inside of her and began to tenderly lick at her slick folds. Jack reveled in the spicy, sweet, exotic flavor that he knew so well by now. Except now it was even better than ever, amplified by the state she was in. It was like she was a succulent delicacy and he had been starved for weeks. Her alien pussy was all his, and he began to lick deeper, smearing her fluids on his face as he strove to push his tongue as far in as it could go.

“Kas'ne ne sa'i ra,” Aria whimpered. He'd heard her say that once or twice before, always when he was doing something particularly nice to her. Smiling to himself, Jack slipped his hands underneath her rump, cupping her sculpted ass in his palms. Though the base of her tail was pinned beneath her against the bench, he could feel the muscles rapidly contracting in rhythm with his tongue. If her tail was fully free, he would have to constantly dodge it as it whipped around his head.

At the same time, Jack felt Aria's inner muscles clenching at his tongue as he licked inside of her. He knew that she was growing so very close to her climax, drawing near to the very peak of her pleasure. He felt a very real sense of satisfaction and delight that he was the one who could bring her to that level of ecstasy. Jack squeezed her rear and pulled her tight against his face, lapping faster and harder at her. He was determined to make her scream. He wanted to hear that passionate Ailian roar that he'd heard so many times before...

But before he could get there, Aria moved her hand to his forehead, pushing him firmly up and out from between her legs. A little disappointed, Jack looked at her face. The insides of her ears looked flushed and she was panting slightly, with her pinkish tongue protruding from inside of her muzzle. At his questioning expression, Aria smiled at him and cupped her hand underneath his chin. Her furry thumb caressed his cheek.

“Not like that,” she whispered huskily. Aria sat up on the bench, and Jack did the same. She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips, slipping her rough Ailian tongue inside of his mouth to play along his smoother human one. Then she put her arms around him, pressing his face gently against her firm, pillowy breasts. She touched her cold, black nose to the top of his head, nuzzling him fondly. *“Like this.”*

Setting herself back from him again, Aria gave him one of those dangerous, seductive looks that she could do so well. With another wink, she turned around, putting her back to him. Then she lowered herself down on her front, letting her feet go to the floor on either side of the bench. As her breasts flattened against the padding, she pushed up against the floor, raising her ass up. Her tail lifted, and Jack's heart hammered against the inside of his chest as he got a look at her Ailian pussy from this new

angle.

“You know how to deliver a message efficiently, Aria,” Jack said, chuckling. He got up on his knees behind Aria on the bench, placing his hands on her waist. His cock was standing out, hovering an inch away from her sex. He could feel her heat radiating against his flesh. By this point he was just as desperate, and just as ready, as she was. “I don't think I tell you often enough how beautiful you are.”

Aria's ears flicked back at his words. “Enough talk,” she growled. Her tail curled back, wrapping around his body and tugging at him. She pulled him in, and the tip of his member made contact with her nether lips. “Mate me. Show me you real male.”

Grinning, Jack hunched forward over her back. “As you command, Captain.” He thrust his hips forward, hard, and his cock slammed right inside of his mate. Aria let out a shrill howl and wrapped her arms around the bench, hugging herself tightly to it. Trying to control his own breathing, Jack held himself deep in her, his fingers squeezing her waist as he tried to comprehend the searing heat which was enveloping him now. He thought he had felt everything Aria had to offer him, but he couldn't have imagined the feeling of an Ailian in season.

She was tighter around him than she had ever been, and the heat was almost unbearable. Her inner muscles clenched around him sensuously, gradually milking along his length and holding him firmly. It almost seemed as though her body didn't want him to ever leave, but he forced himself to pull out of her, little by little. Aria whimpered at his exit, and she pressed herself back, trying to get him back inside. Jack grinned, teasing her like she had teased him. When he was almost all the way withdrawn from her pussy, he paused there for a long, torturous second, and then he slid back inside. The deep, low moan that Aria gave him in response was music to his ears.

After that, he held nothing back. Gripping her fast around the waist, Jack started thrusting in and out of her at a frenzied pace. He could sense Aria's surprise at his vigor, and her delight at how he rocked her body back and forth atop the padded bench. She was purring louder than ever, rumbling groans of pleasure issuing from her as Jack fucked her recklessly. Neither of them had any concern anymore for how much noise they were making, and whether or not anyone in the Royal Guard headquarters would hear them. They were too wrapped up in their passion. Jack was lost in the rapturous sensation spreading through his body from his cock, and he was just as enthusiastic in his exultation as she was.

Aria was still right on the edge, never having come down from before, and Jack knew it. He also knew that she was trying to hold herself back, to make this experience last for as long as possible. The human loved giving her that, and loved being the only one who could give her that. He loved her. And so he wanted her to let herself go, and to feel that overwhelming pleasure that awaited both of

them.

“Come on, Aria,” Jack coaxed her. He took one hand away from her waist and placed it on the small of her back, rubbing it up her spine and back down again. Then he abruptly grabbed the base of her tail and tugged hard, which made her give a yowl of combined pain and delight. He pushed his cock as deep as he could and ground his hips around, stirring himself inside of her. “You know what I want. Let me hear that roar.”

Aria clenched her teeth so hard that he could hear them grate against each other. Then, finally and gloriously, he felt her pussy squeeze him the hardest yet. The Ailian pushed herself up on her hands, arching her back and lifting her head. She growled through her teeth, and then her jaws opened wide as she let loose a loud, panther-like roar of unbridled ecstasy. The sound made Jack's ears ring, but it was exactly what he had been waiting for. While she was still in the midst of her blissful agony, he began thrusting fast and deep, his cock angling against the top of her passage. As her orgasm intensified, his began, and he threw himself down against her back, wrapping his arms around her midsection as he began to shoot thick ropes of his human seed deep into her. The two lovers kept each other going, a new ripple starting inside of Aria with each spurt of Jack's cum, which in turn milked even more out of him.

When Jack couldn't bear the heat any longer, he pulled his sensitive cock out of Aria. One final stream of cum shot from his member, painting her undertail lewdly with its milky whiteness. As more began to leak from inside her pussy, Jack fell back onto his rear, shaky and gasping for breath as his shaft slowly deflated. Aria slumped forward, purring with a peaceful expression on her face. She looked back at him, affection evident in the way that she smiled, her tail waving languidly.

“My mate...,” Aria murmured lovingly, sitting up and turning to face him again. They came together, hugging each other warmly. Aria rubbed her cheek against him, licking at his forehead as she rumbled contentedly. “How I ever think of killing you?”

Jack chuckled wearily. “Ah, I don't hold it against you,” he said. “I'll admit, I thought once or twice of killing you, too.” They both shared a laugh at the memories of their first meeting, recalling the tussle they'd had outside of his crashed ship. What a different outcome this fight had had. “I hope I've satisfied you tonight, m'lady.”

“Mmm, yes.” Aria leaned back, stretching herself and popping a few joints. “Feel much better. Not as hot.” She gave him an evil grin. “You clean bench, yes?”

Blinking, Jack stared at her, then looked down at the bench. It had become quite messy, indeed. “Me? Don't you think you share some of the responsibility for this?” He crossed his arms over his chest, raising one eyebrow.

Smiling sweetly, Aria shook her head. "Captain of guard, yes? Not do chores like this. Is you job tonight, Jack." She stood up, a slow drip of his semen making its way down the inside of her thigh before she retrieved her workout pants, pulling them back on. "I go to bed now. See you when finish." She brushed her tail playfully against his face, picking up her top and starting to put that on as well as she walked away.

Shaking his head ruefully, Jack got to his feet and gathered up his clothes also. "You're lucky you can kick my ass," he said, unable to keep from laughing. "You win this time, Aria."

As she stared at the computer screen, trying to think of what should come next, Li'ren Amani found herself reflecting on the series of events that had brought her to this point in her life. At times, the process of thinking about it made her head spin. Here she was, twenty-five years old, and she was the Empress of the entire Ailian Ascendancy, or at least the part of it which was still under her control. Billions of people, all of them her subjects, distributed among thousands of planets. To think that a mere ten years ago she had been back here on Arbaros, getting ready to accompany her mother to Lirna for her posting on the homeworld. Just five years after that, bonded with the love of her life, she had been the second most powerful woman in the empire.

-And now I am the youngest Empress in over five centuries,- she said to herself. She took a shuddery breath and closed her eyes. *-I never wanted this. I just wanted to be happy. But now I must keep my people from tearing each other apart.-* Li'ren sighed and opened her eyes again. The words of the half-finished speech she was working on were still there, staring back at her. As much as she might have wished it, just having the desire for all of this to go away would not make it so. But she had been working all afternoon and she still had a lot left to write. This was a speech she was supposed to give in the morning, and it looked as though she would not be getting much sleep tonight. Her eyes hurt, and she longed for a break, but there was just so much work.

Thankfully, a knock came at her bedroom door, and she pushed her chair back from the desk, looking towards it. The distraction was a welcome one. -Yes, who is it?-

The door opened, and one of Li'ren's guards stepped inside. -Someone to see you, m'lady,- he said. He moved aside, and in stepped a person who had become a very familiar sight to Li'ren over the past few months. Though the family resemblance was somewhat diminished owing to her sister's current assignment, the orange-furred young woman who entered was still unmistakeably the second-eldest of the Me'lia family.

-Sami,- Li'ren said with a warm smile. Her spirits lifted right away at the sight of her friend.

While she'd been grieving for Kri'a, visits from Sami had kept her going by giving her a chance to remember the good times. The Empress turned off her computer screen and waved a hand at one of the soft armchairs in her room. -Please, sit down. I was forgetting what time it was. You are well?-

Showing proper respect, Sami bowed to Li'ren. -Very well, m'lady. I hope you are.- She came into the room and sat in the chair. For a while now, the two of them had been keeping an unspoken appointment with each other every evening. On occasion, they would be up into the early hours of the morning, just talking and sharing stories of their lives. It gave Li'ren a much-needed escape from her mounting duties as Empress.

-I am quite well,- Li'ren said. She looked to the door. -Thank you. You may leave us.- The Royal Guard left the room, closing the door behind him, and Li'ren got up from her chair to take the one near Sami's. She smoothed down the front of her royal blue-and-gold robes, the colors that she had been wearing ever since the ceremony. -I'm very glad you picked right now to come by. I could use a break from work. Things are getting quite busy around here.-

-I've noticed,- Sami said with a wry grin. -Aria tells me that she's having to work lots of overtime, checking out everyone who comes to the governess' residence. She is very stressed, but I think she likes it. And of course, Jack helps her to relax.- She giggled then, covering her mouth with one hand. -She thinks she is being discreet, but our rooms are right next to each other. I hear them.-

Li'ren couldn't help but laugh as well. -I can imagine. Aria is quite intense when it comes to her professional life. I cannot picture her being any different in regards to her personal life.-

Still smiling, Sami's eyes drifted over to the now-dark computer screen. -What were you working on, m'lady?-

-Ahh.- Li'ren leaned back against the cushions of her chair. -I have to give another speech tomorrow. This is going to be an important one, and I've been working all day on it.- She gave a heavy sigh, letting her eyes close. She felt so tired, but she knew that if she fell asleep now she wouldn't wake up for a long time. -I have to announce to the rest of the Ascendancy that the slave trade will be abolished.-

Sami's mouth fell open in shock. She just stared at Li'ren for the longest time, not sure that she'd heard correctly. -You will end the slave trade?- It was an entirely inconceivable concept to Sami. Slavery had been a part of the Ascendancy for thousands upon thousands of years. In the distant past, when the Ascendancy had not been a unified government, groups of Ailians warred with each other, taking slaves from each others groups as trophies. Ailians were still bought and sold as slaves, either as a way for them to pay off their debts or as punishment for crimes. In the war with humanity, thousands of colonists and prisoners of war had found themselves sold into slavery. It was just a fact of life.

-I have to,- the Empress said. -Right now, I am trying to end a war and forge an alliance with the humans. I am much more likely to be successful if I can at least free all of the humans who have been taken as slaves.- She opened her eyes again and looked out of the window in her room. -And how can I do that while leaving as slaves the millions of our own people who find themselves as such? It would not be fair, and it would cause much more unrest than I am willing to deal with. This is an issue which has been lurking in the background of politics in the Ascendancy for centuries.- Li'ren looked back at Sami. -Kri'a talked of doing what I am about to do. Neither of us cared much for slavery. I know that your family does not, either. I imagine there are others who share the same sentiment. I am very much hoping that it will be easier than I think it will be.-

-I...I hope so as well,- Sami said, still somewhat taken aback. -I know that Aria would love to be able to take that collar off of Jack. We all feel terrible that he has to wear it.- She started to stand up. -If...you need to work, I can leave and let you concentrate.-

-No, please,- Li'ren quickly said, leaning forward and putting a hand on Sami's knee, -sit and stay for a while. I need to rest my brain, or I'll lose it.- She looked at a clock on the wall. -Have you eaten yet?- Sami shook her head. -I was going to stop for dinner soon. My mother and I usually eat together, but perhaps you would care to join me this evening? We don't even have to go anywhere, I can have it brought up here.-

Settling back down into the chair, Sami looked very pleased to be invited. -I usually eat with my family as well,- she said. -But they will be just fine without me. I would love to have dinner with you, m'lady.-

Meanwhile, at the main military spaceport in Ar'bre, Aria was in the control room where all space traffic heading into and orbiting around Arbaros was tracked. Though it was outside her area of expertise, she liked to come up here every once in a while to see how things were going. She had given her word to Empress Solan to make sure no harm came to Lady Amani, and now that Lady Amani was herself the Empress she considered her promise to be even more important than ever. Having the Captain of the Royal Guard in the control room let everyone else know just how vital the task of keeping Arbaros secure was.

Aria was starting to get worried. For over a month now, there had been little in the way of news from Lirna. With the way that her mother had been eager to gloat over her victory, she would have expected there to be something. Oh, of course, the war was still going on. There were battles every day, and territory was still being lost, little by little, to the rebel forces. But she had anticipated more personal contact from Ara'lana. Taunting, more gloating, whatever. There had been none.

-What could mother be planning now?- she wondered. More than anything, the curiosity was what was killing her. Uncertainty nagged at her every day, but she tried to push through it as best as she could. Instead, she concentrated on the myriad of radar displays which occupied a huge wall in the control room. They watched over the space around Arbaros from every conceivable angle, utilizing both satellite- and ground-based systems. Right now, things were relatively quiet apart from the higher-than-normal number of military ships above the planet. Nearly every ship from the First, Second, and Fourth Fleets was in orbit around Arbaros, and the Third and Sixth Fleets were elsewhere in the solar system that Arbaros occupied. The Eighth and Eleventh Fleets, which had initially reported to Arbaros in the wake of the battle for Lirna, had been sent away by Admiral Te'rou. They had joined the Tenth Fleet, the largest of all the fleets in the Ascendancy, in battling the rebel forces and holding the defensive lines with human space.

-Captain?- a voice said from behind Aria.

Turning, Aria saw another female Ailian behind her, one of her Royal Guards. She was an unusual one in a variety of ways. For one thing, she was one of the few Guards whose fur was naturally black instead of dyed. She was also one of the Guards who had been sent from Lirna prior to the invasion, which made her a precious scarce commodity. Most unusual of all, she was uncommonly short for an Ailian, barely taller than seven and a half feet, which made her look much younger than her true age of twenty-two years. This made it easy to underestimate her, but Aria had sparred with this one during training. And she knew that Lieutenant Mari Ayalis, her executive officer, was most definitely the most dangerous warrior still living in the Royal Guards.

-Lieutenant Ayalis,- Aria said, looking back at the radar displays. -Do you have something to report?-

-Yes, Captain,- Lieutenant Ayalis said. She held up a data reader that she'd brought with her. -I got passed an alert from one of the communication officers down in the crew pit. We have an unscheduled arrival from the Tenth Fleet. A messenger ship, so they say.-

-So they say,- Aria repeated. She took the data reader and looked over the information that was on it. The data told her the ship's position and class, and a few other details about it. -Well, what about this ship warrants my attention?-

Lieutenant Ayalis took the data reader back. -They're requesting permission to land on the planet,- she explained. -They say their ship's guidance systems are malfunctioning, however, so they need our assistance to get down. It's taking up a lot of our resources, because the control system is already strained due to the increased traffic around Arbaros. We've already helped them as far as getting into low orbit, but I need sufficient authorization to bring them the rest of the way.-

Aria could sense that there was something else that the lieutenant was worried about. -So what's the problem?-

-The problem is that once they got in close range, we couldn't verify the contents of their ship, and their identification system stopped transmitting,- Lieutenant Ayalis said. -They're a messenger ship, so they have a jamming system, and it just turned on full blast. It could be tied to their other malfunctions, but...-

Aria immediately felt a sense of alarm, but she couldn't quite place why. -Have you contacted Admiral Te'rou?-

-Not yet. He's in a meeting with Governess Amani and General Soumaren on his flagship. He didn't want to be disturbed.-

-Disturb him,- Aria ordered her. Her sense of alarm was growing, and if she had learned anything in her years as a soldier, she had learned to trust her instincts. Right now her ears were laid all the way back, and the fur on the back of her neck was pricking up. Even if she didn't know exactly what was going on, her position meant that she needed to take every precaution. -Alert the detail at the governess' residence. I'm going to grab the on-call squad and head back there now to double the guards. Get someone up there to intercept that messenger ship and prevent it from attempting to land. I have a bad feeling about it.-

Lieutenant Ayalis nodded and saluted. -Right away, Captain.-

As she walked out, Aria looked back over her shoulder. -And just pray that ship's actually from the Tenth Fleet.-

-...And so there we both were, not a stitch of clothing on either of us, and then two of the Nuretan ministers walk into the meeting room,- Li'ren said, tears of laughter in her eyes. -Apparently, someone accidentally gave them the wrong time for the session, and they'd come three hours early! So, of course, I'm just laying there on the meeting table looking for something, anything, to cover up with, and they're absolutely flabbergasted. But Kri'a just stands up, puts her hands on her hips, and says 'We're holding a high-level diplomatic meeting right now. Come back later.'-

Sami was beside herself with laughter as well. -She did not!- The dinner dishes had already been taken away, and now the two women were waiting for after-dinner tea to be brought. Sami had been enjoying herself just as much as she always did when she got to spend time with Li'ren. The food had been wonderful, and today the stories that she was telling her were absolutely delightful. She never would have thought that the former Empress, or Li'ren, could have been so mischievous. -So what did they do?-

Li'ren wiped her eyes, still chuckling. -Well, what else could they do? They bowed, apologized, and walked out.- The current Empress looked out the window again, a smile still on her face. -That was Kri'a...She didn't care what anyone else thought, and she wasn't afraid of looking foolish, either. She was the most confident woman I'd ever met.-

Nodding, Sami crossed her legs, laying her hands on her knees. -She sounds like it. I don't think I could ever do anything like that.-

-You might surprise yourself one day, Sami,- Li'ren said as she turned back to her guest. -I bet you have a mischievous streak in you, somewhere.-

-Maybe...- Sami leaned forward, a little sparkle in her eye as her tail wagged behind her. -So...Did you two finish your 'high-level diplomatic meeting'?-

Sami saw Li'ren's eyes widen, and the blue fur on her cheeks fluffed out slightly. For a few seconds, the Empress looked like she didn't know what to say, but then she began to laugh harder than Sami had heard her laugh yet. When she finally got control of herself again, her tail was still whipping back and forth with mirth. -See, I told you!- Li'ren folded her hands in her lap, looking somewhat shy for a change. -Well...we decided to find a more private place, but...yes, we did.- She took a moment to catch her breath. -Ah...Kri'a...I wish she were here now...She would know just exactly what to say in that speech I have to give tomorrow. But then if she were here, I wouldn't be giving it, would I?-

-I guess not,- Sami said. She tried not to let her mind linger too much on diplomatic affairs. -Do you have any ideas yet?-

-A few..., - Li'ren murmured. She seemed to be getting more quiet, more melancholic. Sami often saw these ups and downs when the subject of her dead mate came up. Fortunately, this down was a very short one, and the Empress began to smile once more. -This is a change of subject, but I wanted to thank you for...well, for the last few weeks. Being able to talk about Kri'a has been...has been very good for me. I think I would have gone crazy after a few days if you hadn't been here. Thank you, Sami.-

-Oh, Li-..., - Sami began to say, but then she caught herself, remembering proper etiquette. -M'lady, you're the one I should thank. My mother is responsible for all of this. My father, and my younger brothers and sisters...It doesn't bother them as much. They're all stronger than me. Aria is too busy to talk with me. If I didn't have someone to help me keep my mind from dwelling on everything that has happened, I would be a wreck. Being able to listen to your stories has been as good for me as talking has been for you, Your Majesty.-

While the younger woman was speaking, Li'ren was listening to her carefully, one finger stroking her own cheek softly. The Empress had a wistful expression on her face, and at the end of her

little speech, she gave a small shake of her head.

-You are much stronger, I think, than you give yourself credit for,- Li'ren cautioned her with a wave of her tail. She leaned forward in her chair and placed a hand over one of Sami's. -And I won't have any more of this 'm'lady' or 'Your Majesty'. - She smiled again. -If we are to be friends, you must call me Li'ren.-

For the last few days, Jack had been feeling that familiar sensation of stir-craziness that he'd had after being at the Me'lia family's estate for so long. Governess Amani had made it very clear to all of them that they were welcome to explore the place as much as they wished while they were guests there, but for Jack that invitation hadn't been something he'd taken advantage of too much. As much as he liked Aria's family, and as much as some other Ailians such as Li'ren and the governess had treated him with kindness, he still felt pretty uncomfortable around Ailians as a whole. So he had mostly stuck to the quarters that the family occupied unless he was out and about with Aria.

Today, though, the governess' residence was relatively empty, so Jack had decided that he was going to have a look around and see if it would make him feel a little less restless. The only people that he saw in the building, for the most part, were the Royal Guards, patrolling in ones and twos. They didn't pay him much mind at all; they all knew by now that he was the mate of their captain, and if any of them took issue with that they were professional enough not to let it show.

As he walked through one of the halls, looking at some of the paintings on the walls, he saw someone walking towards him. Petite, dark-skinned, and dressed in luxurious robes, Jack recognized the figure as Brooke, the human slave girl whom the late Empress had sent from Lirna to serve as Li'ren's lady-in-waiting. She was walking with steady and measured steps, carrying a large, silver-colored tea tray in both hands, keeping her eyes on the tray and the floor in front of her to avoid spilling anything. When she got closer to Jack, she happened to glance up and see him as well.

"Oh!" Brooke said, breaking into a smile. "Hello, Jack. I haven't seen you around in a while." She stopped and adjusted the tray in her arms. "I've been so busy lately, though. I wouldn't have had much time to talk, anyway." The young girl giggled a little.

"You seem to be in good spirits," Jack observed. "I take it you still like it here?"

Brooke nodded her head. "I like it a lot better than being on Lirna," she said. "It's not so hot here. And the Empress...Lady Amani, I mean, she treats me just as well as she always has. Her mother is very kind to me as well." She jerked her head up a little, her long black hair waving as she did so. "I was heading upstairs to bring mistress her after-dinner tea, actually."

"Really? I'll walk with you." Jack stepped in beside Brooke. "Like you said, we haven't seen

each other in a while. It's nice to see another human face.” He patted her on the shoulder.

The girl seemed a little unsure of that, unused to the idea of a human who wasn't a servant walking around, but after all, Jack was more than a mere slave. He was a guest of the governess the same as Captain Me'lia and her family. “W-Well, alright. I suppose.” She started walking again, and they turned a corner to some stairs.

While they were walking up the stairs, Jack noticed that the dishes on the tea tray barely rattled at all. Brooke was keeping everything very steady but still walking at a normal speed. She must have had a lot of practice with this sort of thing over the last few months of working in the royal palace, and now in the governess' residence. He would have been impressed if the sight of the thirteen-year-old girl carrying a serving dish wasn't a sobering reminder of how many humans there were living as slaves in the Ascendancy.

When they got to the upper floor, Jack thought of something. “You know, Brooke, I have a question to ask you.” The slave girl looked over at him, curious. “How do *you* feel about this new war in the Ascendancy? Or about the Empress being killed?”

Brooke was quiet for a second or two, and she looked like she was thinking hard about what her answer should be. “Well...I don't know how I feel about the war, really.” She glanced over at Jack. “I...I just don't really see how it matters to someone like me. I don't think anything would really change for me if the rebels win.” She looked back at the floor. “I don't really like Ailians very much. In fact, y-you could probably say that I hate them. But...my life got a lot better when the Empress bought me. She treated me like I was a person, instead of just a slave, and she was very nice to me. Nobody ever treated me that way before.” Brooke sighed. “I suppose you could say I'm sorry she is dead. I feel bad for Empress Amani.”

“Yeah...,” Jack agreed. He had liked the Empress as well, and seeing Li'ren's reaction to the news of her death would have been enough to break the hardest of hearts. He wasn't sure that he would go as far as Brooke and say that he hated Ailians, not anymore, but he had absolutely no trouble understanding her point of view.

Soon after that, they arrived at a door flanked by two of the black-uniformed Royal Guards. Brooke stood in front of the door and lifted the tea tray. “*Parak me sa'ra le,*” she said with what Jack recognized as an impeccable accent. From what he'd heard of the Ailian language, he would have thought she could pass as a native speaker, which made sense considering she'd told him when they first met that she had been a slave for almost ten years.

One of the guards nodded at Brooke, and he opened the door for her. The other guard kept her eyes on Jack, watching him carefully but not seeming particularly disturbed by his presence. Jack

looked around them into the room. From the furniture that he could see through the door, this looked like a bedroom. This must have been Li'ren's quarters. As the door opened wider, he could see Li'ren herself seated in an armchair. The Ailian Empress looked over and saw Brooke, and she gave a smile.

“Hello, child,” Li'ren said, in her lightly accented English. “Do come in. You picked a good moment to arrive with the tea.” She craned her neck to look around Brooke, and her ears pricked forward. “Ah, Jack! What a surprise. Come in, won't you? We were just talking about something that might interest you.”

“Me?” Jack said, a little surprised. He turned his head from left to right, and when he saw no reaction from the Royal Guards flanking the door he shrugged and walked inside. As he did so and got a better view of the room, he noticed that Sami was sitting in the chair adjacent to Li'ren's. “Oh, hey. I might've guessed you'd be here, Sami. You missed dinner.”

Sami gave him a warm smile. “Ate here,” she said simply.

“Please, sit,” Li'ren said, gesturing to another chair as Brooke set the tea tray down on a table in between her and Sami. Jack took the chair that she pointed out to him. He found it awkward as always. Because the chair was made for an Ailian, his feet dangled a good twelve inches above the floor. With the tea delivered, Brooke bowed to the Empress, and she was about to leave when Li'ren spoke again. “Oh, Brooke. Don't go just yet. I'd like you to stay for a moment, if you wouldn't mind.”

Her eyes widened, and Brooke looked over her shoulder at the door. “Um...” She turned back to the three seated people, and after a moment's hesitation she nodded. “O-Of course, mistress.” The human girl was waved to a seat by Li'ren, and the guard outside closed the door quietly.

“What's this about, Li'ren?” Jack asked.

Li'ren slid forward in her chair, reaching for the tea pot to pour a cup for herself and one for Sami. “I have something I want to ask you,” she began. She offered the tea pot to Jack, and he declined. Brooke did the same, seeming very disconcerted about being offered tea by the Empress. “I realize you may not be the most qualified person, but you proved yourself to have a rather sharp mind in the meeting before. I feel like you may be able to provide some insight for me.”

Jack shifted in his seat. “I...guess I could do my best.”

“I'm going to be giving a speech tomorrow,” Li'ren explained. “It's a very important one. I am convinced that it will be something that will aid our war effort, but I wanted a human opinion.” She glanced at Brooke before going on. “Tomorrow I'm going to give a speech in which I announce the abolition of the slave trade in the Ascendancy. I'm doing this mainly because I need every edge I can get in convincing the humans to agree to a cessation of hostilities, and to join us in fighting the rebels and the Pteryd. What are your thoughts on this?”

To say that Jack was stunned would have been an understatement, and looking at Brooke he could tell that she was taken aback as well. Slavery was one of the main “evils of the Ascendancy” that they had been taught about during basic training. They'd been told that it was such an ingrained part of Ailian culture that it could never end, and that the only way to free the humans who had been taken as slaves in the conflict was to defeat the Ascendancy completely and totally. Now he was hearing from the leader of the Ascendancy herself that the slave trade was going to be abolished.

“Well...,” Jack said slowly, still trying to wrap his head around it. “I really don't think it's going to hurt your chances of getting a good response. Slavery is one of the things that humans really find distasteful about Ailians. I mean, we used to have legal slavery on Earth, centuries ago. It's illegal everywhere in human space, and has been for a very long time. I think if you abolish slavery, it's going to surprise a sizable portion of humanity, and probably not in a bad way.” He tilted his head to one side. “If you don't mind me asking...have you heard anything from your diplomats yet? Have they made any progress?”

Li'ren's ears folded back along her head, and she stared down at her lap. She took a slow, deep breath. “The response has been less than encouraging,” she admitted. “As a matter of fact, I have heard very little from the envoys I have sent, though I am certain they all arrived at their destinations safely. I am worried that I will hear nothing until it is too late for it to matter. We lose territory to the rebels every day. Not as quickly as when the conflict was in its early stages, but it is still steady. The reinforcements we have received from the Nuretan Empire have helped, but the Pteryd have massive fleets which they could bring into the fight at any time. It may take a while, but without additional assistance, I am afraid that this may be a war we will eventually lose.”

Jack nodded. “Another question...When you abolish slavery, what will happen to all of the human slaves?”

“They will be given a choice,” Li'ren said. “If they wish, we will arrange for them to be returned to human space. I will do this whether or not we get any assistance from humanity.” She looked at Brooke again as she spoke. “However, we will also allow any humans who wish to stay in the Ascendancy to do so. I believe it is only fair that they be allowed to choose their own destiny. We have dictated it for them for ten years.” Despite her apparent mood, Li'ren gave Jack a sardonic smirk. “Of course, if Ara'lana emerges victorious from all this, any humans who choose to remain in the Ascendancy may find themselves slaves again regardless of what I do.”

Both of the humans looked at each other. Jack quirked a smile at Brooke. “You hear that, Brooke? You're gonna get a choice. Which option do you think you'd choose?”

With a slightly panicky expression, Brooke looked between Jack and Li'ren. This news seemed

like it was quite overwhelming to her. After a few minutes, she opened her mouth. "I...I don't know..." she said, her voice very quiet and quavery. She looked suddenly scared by the prospect of having to choose her own fate. "I..."

Suddenly, the lights in the room went out, plunging them all into darkness. Jack could hear a gasp of startled fright that sounded like it came from Sami, and there was clacking sound as someone put down a tea cup. The only light now came from the window in the room, and it was little more than dim moonlight.

"The hell?" Jack asked, frowning.

"*Kas'a re lema...?*" Sami said, her voice very slightly shaky. Her robin's egg blue eyes were shining faintly in the moonlight coming through the door, and Jack could tell that they were very wide indeed.

"*Chala ze'le re kan,*" Li'ren reassured her in a calming voice. She got up from her chair, crossing the floor to the door, and she opened it and exchanged some words with one of the guards outside. Then she closed the door again and came back to her seat. "The power is out, if that wasn't obvious already. One of the guards is going to see what the problem is. We should wait here until they've gotten it all sorted out."

Sensible, Jack thought. *God knows with my luck I'd bust my ass down the stairs trying to figure the way back to my room...* But then a moment later he heard a faint rumbling sound, which grew steadily louder. "What's that?"

There was a pause of a few moments, and then Li'ren spoke. "It sounds like some sort of aircraft. Probably one of the shuttles coming to bring one of our official guests back to the spaceport. I hope they're careful, with all of the lights out."

Though her tone was unconcerned, Jack suddenly felt a sense of dread which he couldn't immediately chalk up to the darkness.

Aria didn't feel overly nervous until she looked out of the window of the transport craft and saw that the treetop city below them was dark. In the month that she'd spent on Arbaros, she had never seen it so dark. Usually the city was alive with lights at all hours. She looked behind her, towards the rear of the slender aircraft. The thunderous roar of the engines coming through the forward open sliding doors on each side made it nearly impossible to hear anything else, but she could see the same confusion on the faces of the twenty armored Royal Guards riding with her. Frowning, Aria stood up and went to the front of the ship, sticking her head into the pilot's compartment.

-What's going on?- she shouted, jabbing a finger down towards the floor.

-Not sure,- the co-pilot yelled back. Both the pilot and co-pilot were Naval pilots, hand-picked by Aria and Lieutenant Ayalis for special operations. -Looks like the power is out to most of the city. Don't worry, though, our nav system is space-based, so we're not having any problems finding our way.-

Aria nodded, and she put a hand on the pilot's shoulder. -Have you been in contact with the guards at the governess' residence?-

The pilot shook his head. -We've been trying, but all we get is static. Power to the residence might be out as well. We'll be in visual range in five minutes. Between our forward spotlights and the light from the moon, we should have a decent view.- He flicked a few switches on the comm systems of the transport. -When we're closer, we'll probably be near enough to make contact with the guards' portable radios. The trees on this planet really interfere with the low-power signals at a distance.-

-Alright.- Aria returned to the rear of the craft. She switched on her own portable radio so that all of her soldiers could hear her clearly. -Okay, when we arrive at our destination, our priority is to make sure that the residence is secure. We'll split into two groups, with one securing the exterior and the other making a sweep of the building. Make contact with the standing guard detail and keep everything tight. Understood?- She received a chorus of responses in the affirmative.

A few more minutes passed, and apart from the occasional gust of wind the flight was going smoothly. Even so, Aria's heart was racing. It was a feeling that she hadn't felt in a long time, not since the last commando mission she had been on. Back then, she'd been working against the clock, defusing demolition charges placed aboard the ship she had been assigned to. Now she felt like she was on a time limit again, though she had no evidence to support that as of yet. If that was the case, Aria hoped that the outcome would be a little better than the last time. The scar down the front of her body ached slightly at the memory.

Her radio keyed up, and she heard the co-pilot's voice come across the airwaves. -Getting into visual range now,- he reported. -Lights are out at the governess' residence. Not seeing any movement...What the...- A split second later, Aria heard and felt a surge in the transport craft's engines. -Hold on back there!-

The transport abruptly banked hard to the left, giving Aria barely enough time to grab a handle next to the sliding door. At almost exactly the same time she heard a rapid series of metallic clangs as something struck the armored bottom of the aircraft. After the first series of sounds, a second and third burst came, and Aria realized that they were being fired upon. She looked out of the sliding door nearest to her, and at the angle they were turning she was able to make out the roof of the governess' residence in the darkness. As she tried to see additional details, Aria spotted a flickering flash coming

from midair just above the roof, and the flash illuminated something else. She had seen the object, or at least one just like it, a few times before during ground missions on the border between human and Ascendancy space.

-Gunship!- Aria called over the radio. The muzzle flashes from the heavy gun on the side of the single-rotor helicopter seemed as bright as the sun compared with the darkness of the night. How the human-built craft had made it there was a mystery to her, since she knew that helicopters could not fly outside of an atmosphere. She hoped that the armor on their own aircraft would hold up to their fire.

-I see it,- the pilot responded, his voice calm. -There's another one circling the north side of the building. Captain, I'm not going to be able to get close with those gunships in the way.- He maneuvered the transport further away from the building. The incoming fire from the gunship ceased. -They're not pursuing, for now. Looks like they're flying overwatch. There's a heavy transport on the landing pad attached to the building. Not one of ours.-

-That explains how the gunships got here, at least,- Aria thought to herself. She growled, her ears laying back. -You need to get us in closer so we can secure the building,- she told the pilot. -Those gunships are probably covering for troops.- She switched channels on her radio. Every channel she tried to call out on, she received nothing but silence as a response. -No comms with my guards inside.-

-My co-pilot is on the radio to command,- the Ailian pilot reported. -There are two Nuretan interceptors on combat air patrol this side of Ar'bre, and four of our fighters on the far side of the city. The Nuretans can be here in thirty seconds, and our people will be here in five minutes. Once the interceptors take those gunships, I can get in close.-

-Let me know as soon as you're moving in,- Aria ordered him. -I want you to take us in as low to the building as you can go. We'll jump to the roof.- Without waiting for the pilot's acknowledgment, Aria turned back to the Royal Guards. -Change in plans. Once our air support arrives, four of you with me, Group One, and five of you separate, Group Two. Group One will breach the building through the east side of the roof, Group Two to the west. The rest of you, Group Three, will take the landing pad and secure the enemy transport...-

-Captain Me'lia, the transport is lifting off!- the co-pilot interrupted. -Moving away from the residence now.- He looked back into the passenger compartment of their aircraft. -The gunships are still maintaining their overwatch. No change in their positions. They're not going with the transport.-

Aria thought rapidly, trying to figure out what might be going on. -They must still be covering for something,- she decided. -We'll stick to the plan. Keep the Nuretan interceptors coming, but contact our own fighters and have them divert to pursue that transport. I want it stopped.-

As her orders were affirmed by everyone, Aria did her best to remain focused on the task at

hand, which was to secure the governess' residence. She tried not to think about her family being in there, or of Jack. Her main duty was to the Empress, and as much as it pained her, she couldn't consider anyone else right now. And if she did her job well, ensuring the Empress' safety would mean ensuring that of everyone in the building.

Back at the military spaceport, Lieutenant Ayalis was trying her hardest to divide her attention equally between the radar screens and what radio traffic was coming through from her captain. She had everyone available trying to figure out how a human transport could have made it through their defenses, as well as how the power to the city had been cut. Fortunately, the spaceport had backup generators that were isolated from the rest of the power grid. At this very moment, Naval forces were boarding the messenger ship that had apparently started off this whole mess.

-Lieutenant, what the hell is going on here?-

Lieutenant Ayalis whipped around as Admiral Te'rou came up behind her. He was accompanied by the Nuretan general, Kalma Soumaren, and also by Governess Amani. All of them seemed alarmed at the current developments, to say the least, and the lieutenant assumed that they had already been informed of everything that was going on by the way that the governess looked frantic. The Empress was her daughter, after all.

-Admiral, the governess' residence is under attack,- Lieutenant Ayalis reported. -We're also currently tracking a messenger ship in low orbit. Our troops are boarding it now, and I expect to hear from them shortly. Captain Me'lia is waiting on air support to clear the area around the governess' residence before she can breach the building.-

-I want to know how enemy forces managed to land on this planet without our knowledge!- Admiral Te'rou snarled, his tail whipping back and forth in fury. The russet-furred admiral approached the radar screens, his eyes moving back and forth over the displays. -I'll have someone's head for this.-

Lieutenant Ayalis took a deep breath. -We had to divert a lot of our resources to the messenger ship, when we were still reasonably certain it was a legitimate ship in distress,- she explained. -It is possible they were able to slip in while our attention was divided. We will know for sure soon enough, sir.-

Just as soon as she was finished saying that, one of the communications officers called up from the crew pit. -Lieutenant, the boarding party has cleared the ship,- she reported. -They're reporting that it's empty.-

-Empty?- General Soumaren repeated with a frown. Her neon-colored eyes were narrowed in concentration as she surveyed the radar screens along with Admiral Te'rou. -How can that be? A

remotely-controlled ship? A decoy.-

There was another flurry of activity from the crew pit, and a second communications officer stood up and called to Admiral Te'rou with a frantic voice. -Admiral, urgent message from our patrol fighters! They're pursuing a transport ship which lifted off from the area of the governess' residence. It's heading out of the planet's gravity at full speed and is already in low orbit.-

-What!?- Governess Amani gasped. She had to steady herself against the railing overlooking the crew pit.

-Stop that ship!- Admiral Te'rou ordered quickly. -Signal the fleet and have ships move to intercept!-

Almost before the order had left his mouth, loud alarms began to ring out inside the room. Several of the radar screens began flashing red, and the screens which depicted the space surrounding the planet started filling with colored symbols, each of them representing a ship. Personnel began darting here and there in the crew pit, and more than a few cries of alarm were heard.

-Pteryd ships emerging from hyperspace!- a radar officer reported. -At least fifty heavy cruisers and an unknown number of smaller ships. They're advancing on the planet. That transport ship is vectoring for the closest of them. I don't know if our ships will be able to get near enough to the transport to stop it; the Pteryd have better weapons range than we do.-

-Visual confirmation on the enemy from our picket ships,- a communications officer said. -They're engaging them now.-

Admiral Te'rou slammed a fist on the railing, baring his teeth. -Go to full alert. All ships, engage the Pteryd fleet. Defending the planet needs to be our highest priority. If they get close enough to bombard the surface, we'll be wiped out.-

-Nuretan interceptors on station,- the pilot reported. -Stand by.- He was circling their transport in a tight pattern around the governess' residence, outside of the range of the gunships' weapons. Aria kept her eyes focused out of the windows, watching for the enemy helicopters. Every now and then the moonlight would glint off of them just right. -They're firing.-

Rather than hearing the missile strikes, Aria saw them. From a spot several kilometers out, she saw a faint flash, and then a pair of missiles streaked out of the darkness. The helicopter gunships immediately tried to evade, but the missiles were far too accurate. The nearest helicopter took a missile on the tail, and it spiraled out of control to disappear below the treeline. The second missile hit the other helicopter dead in the center, and it detonated in a shower of flame and debris.

-Go, now!- Aria ordered the pilot, but he was already on the move. The transport shot forward

towards the building. -Everyone get ready.- All of the Royal Guards stood up from their seats in the aircraft, checking their weapons. The guards were carrying shortened, lighter versions of the rifles that were standard-issue for Naval troops, optimized for close-quarters fighting.

In a matter of seconds, the transport was hovering over the east side of the residence, barely a meter from the roof. At a wave from Aria, four of the guards darted to the sliding door and jumped out, landing lightly on the roof. The captain followed them, and then the transport moved to the west side and dropped off five more guards. After the drop was complete, it flew down to the first level of the building to where the landing pad was, to drop off the remaining eleven guards, who would enter at the main doors.

The first in line in Aria's group went immediately to a rooftop access door. When he arrived at it, he stopped. -East roof access has been breached. They came in this way.-

-Alright.- Aria keyed up on her radio. -Group Two, sweep the building top down. Group Three, bottom up. Group One is heading for the Empress' last known location.- The other two group leaders sent back their acknowledgment, and then Aria nodded to her lead soldier.

Staying in a line, the five soldiers went through the doorway and found the stairs, making their way quickly down to the second floor where Li'ren's quarters were located. The interior of the residence was, quite simply put, a mess. As they moved through the halls, they could see shell casings littering the floors. There were bodies as well, mostly servants and a few civilian personnel, but not all of them. Some of the fallen were Royal Guards, and mixed in with them were masked human soldiers clad in dark blue.

-Group Two, fourth floor clear,- Two's leader said over the radio. -Seven guards down, multiple civilians, multiple enemies down. Some civilians sheltered in place, one guard needs medical attention. Continuing.-

-Group Three checking first floor. No signs of movement. Nothing heard.-

Aria filed their reports away in the back of her head. Her group had a specific purpose, and they were focused on it. As they walked down the hallway towards where the Empress' room was, they passed a few fallen Ailians who were still moving. They ignored them, but made a note to themselves of where they were. If they were still alive when the building was clear, they'd make sure medical personnel got to them.

-Group Two, third floor clear. Ten guards down, multiple enemies down, no survivors.-

-Group Three has cleared the first floor. Five guards down, two need medical attention. Injured civilians as well. Two guards staying with survivors, rest moving up to second floor.-

Finally, they arrived at the door to Li'ren's quarters. Eight human commandos were lying dead

on the floor. One of the Empress' personal guard detail was down in the hall, shot in the chest and head and crumpled in a heap against the wall. Her sidearm was still clutched in her hand, and there were three empty magazines scattered around her. She had evidently put up a hard fight before she had fallen. Her tail was still twitching erratically, and one of Aria's soldiers knelt to check her.

-Still alive,- he reported. -Barely. She needs help fast.-

Aria checked the handle of the door, and found that it was locked. She looked back at her soldiers. -You,- she said, pointing at the soldier who was next to the fallen guard. -See what you can do for her. Everyone else on me.- The captain shouldered her rifle, aiming it directly in front of her. Taking a preparatory breath, she raised one foot and kicked the door as hard as she could. The heavy wood frame splintered and the door swung open into the room.

Before the door could hit the wall it was attached to, the four soldiers rushed into the room with Aria in the lead. What they were faced with made Aria go cold. The room was almost entirely empty, apart from the second half of Li'ren's personal detail. He was dead on the floor in a pool of blood, which was soaking into the carpet. The room was in disarray, with the furniture overturned and broken. On the far wall, the window was open, and a perversely pleasant breeze was blowing in. Aria slowly lowered her weapon, stunned. She had been expecting to find someone here other than the guards, either alive or dead. She had not been prepared for nothing.

-Gone...,- Aria murmured in disbelief. The realization of what must have happened hit her in an instant, and Aria snarled as she walked over to the window. -*They left out of this window,*- she thought. -*They must have taken her. The gunships were a sacrifice to delay our assault, they weren't cover for anyone. They took her on that transport that left.*- Her fur bristled out as the fury of what had happened washed over her, intensified by the knowledge that she had failed.

-Captain?- a voice called over the radio. Aria recognized it as the lead guard for Group Two.

-What?- Aria growled, much more heatedly than she had meant to. She was far too angry right now to be ashamed of herself, though she knew that would come as soon as things had settled down. She had failed to fulfill her promise to Empress Solan. She had failed in her entire purpose for being sent to Arbaros.

-We've finished our initial sweep of the building,- Two's leader said. -Group Three located your family in their quarters along with their guard detail. They are all fine.- There was a pause. -We can't locate your oldest sister, and the human is gone, too. The guard detail says that your sister was visiting Her Majesty.-

It took a moment for what she had just been told to register. When it did, Aria felt anguish take over the fury. -Jack and Sami are gone, too?-

-It looks that way.-

For a minute Aria didn't know what to do. She looked blankly around the room, taking in the broken furniture, the blood on the floor, and the body of the dead guard. Then she looked out of the open window again, staring up at the night sky. As she stood there, the rage suddenly rose up again. With a furious roar, Aria lashed out with one arm, clenching her fist and punching a hole in the wood paneling on the wall right next to the window. She ignored the startled looks of her soldiers, her eyes narrowing as a gust of wind stung them.

-Mother...,- Aria said to herself. *-This time you have gone too far. I will see that you pay for this, even if I have to kill you myself.-*