

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Nine: ...Meis Tumultus...
by Havoc

“If we don't end war, war will end us.”

- H.G. Wells

“Ow, fuck...,” Jack hissed, putting a hand to his head. Everything seemed to hurt, but that was throbbing in an especially severe way. “Headaches...Why always headaches? I'd give anything for a nice, honest twisted ankle, or even a bad back...” Grumbling, he sat up, trying to figure out where he was and how he had got there. As he rubbed his aching cranium, some of the memories of the recent past started to bubble back to the surface.

He recalled being in Li'ren's room in the governess' residence, with her, Sami, and Brooke, while the Empress spoke about plans she had for the future of the Ascendancy. Then, the power had gone out, and the guards had locked them in the room. For whatever good that had done, since a short few minutes later there had been a commotion in the hall outside, and human soldiers had stormed in. He touched the back of his head again, feeling around and finding a large knot there. He remembered standing up and trying to put himself between Sami and the soldiers out of reflex, and getting tackled and smashed with the butt of a rifle for his trouble. After that, everything had gone black, and then he'd woke up here.

“Wherever here is...,” Jack mumbled. The room he was in was fairly nondescript, but it was slightly chilly and the only light came from a single lamp set into the center of the ceiling. The floor was bare, made of something like concrete but rougher and cool to the touch. As a matter of fact, the material reminded him softly of the sandy stone that Aria's family estate had been built with, but he very much doubted he was back there. Jack got the impression that he was underground. He couldn't hear anything that sounded like a noise from outdoors, and the air smelled less fresh than it would were he above ground.

“I...I think this is...the cellar in the royal palace...”

Turning to look behind him, Jack saw Brooke sitting a short distance away from him, in the corner of the room. The dark-skinned, long-haired lass was sitting on the floor, her back against the wall, with her knees drawn up in front of her and her arms around her legs. She had her chin resting on the tops of her knees, and she was staring at Jack with her eyes of deep green. Unlike the first time the two of them had been in this sort of situation, he had a clear view of her. She looked a lot better than he felt. Although her clothes were torn in a few places and she had a few scrapes on her hands, the slave

girl seemed mostly unhurt.

Grunting a little with the soreness he was feeling all over his body, Jack crawled over to Brooke and sat up against the wall next to her. “The royal palace?” he asked. He found that a little hard to believe. Lirna was a good distance away from Arbaros, and it had taken nearly two days to get there, even at hyperspace speeds. “Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure,” Brooke said with a small nod. “I mean, I was blindfolded for most of the time after we landed, and I was only ever in the cellars a few times, but this looks a lot like them. I guess they took the food and stuff out when they decided to put us here.”

“But if we’re on Lirna, I mean...was I really out that long?”

Brooke nodded again. “I...I was a little worried you weren’t going to wake up,” she said, her voice a little shaky. “Those soldiers hit you really hard. I kept checking to make sure you were still breathing, but...I’m glad you woke up.”

“Ah...Yeah, me too.” His legs feeling like jelly, Jack managed to get to his feet. He walked to the door of the room they were in. The door looked heavy, but it had a small window in it which was covered in a wire mesh. Putting his face up to the mesh, he was able to look out into the hall. He couldn’t see much other than a nondescript wall, but from some subtle noises that came every few seconds, there were probably guards standing outside of their makeshift jail cell. Two of them, if he had to guess. Not wishing to earn himself a second beating, just yet, he quietly went back to Brooke and sat down. “Do you have any idea why they locked us up down here?”

“I don’t know,” the young girl responded. She put her head down, burying her face in her hands. Understandably, she seemed quite afraid. “I don’t even know why they took us in the first place. They separated us from mistress and Lady Me’lia almost immediately. I don’t understand what’s going on...”

Looking up at the ceiling, Jack tried to think. Taking Li’ren and Sami made sense to him. Li’ren was the Empress, after all. She had value as a bargaining chip, or as some other sort of leverage that the rebels could use as an advantage over the Ascendancy. And since the leader of the rebellion was Ara’lana Me’lia, Sami’s mother, she might have been reluctant to kill Sami. Aria was fighting her, but maybe Ara’lana hoped to find support in her other children. Brooke probably escaped death because she was just a slave, and seen as useful to keep alive, or not worth killing. But from what Aria had told him about her meeting with her mother, she had absolutely no qualms about killing Jack. He honestly couldn’t think of a good reason why he was still alive.

“Well, there’s no use in speculating,” Jack said. He reached over and put a hand on Brooke’s shoulder, trying to be comforting. He lowered his voice a little. “All we can do is wait and see what will happen. Let’s just bide our time.” He injected confidence into his voice as best as he could. “The

first chance I see to try to get us out of here, I'm going to take it. So don't worry. I'll do my best to get us both out of here alive." He wasn't sure what he, an unarmed human, could do against a palace full of human, Ailian, and probably Pteryd soldiers, but in his mind anything was better than just giving up and waiting to die.

She was frightened, she was among enemies, and she was far away from most of her loved ones. But for all that, Li'ren felt a strange emotion at being back on Lirna. She could not, of course, call it happiness, but it was something very akin to that. Even though her mate was dead, and her world was taken over by those who wished to bring her way of life to an end, it was still home. And as she was led through the halls by the foursome of crimson-clad Ailian soldiers, she realized she felt more at peace than she had in weeks. If there had ever been any indication that a battle had taken place in the palace, it had been quickly repaired by the invading forces. Doubtless Ara'lana had wished to enjoy her victory in pristine settings. Everything looked nearly the same as it had when she had left, what seemed like a lifetime ago.

The past several days had been quite unusual, to say the least. When human soldiers had entered her room and slain her guards, she had been prepared for the worst. Li'ren had fully expected to be killed right then and there, but they had instead bound her hands and taken her, along with Sami, Jack, and the slave girl, Brooke, from the room through an open window and to a waiting helicopter. The craft had ferried them to the landing pad of the governess' residence, where they'd all been taken on to a much larger ship. Once on board, Li'ren had been separated from everyone else while the ship had been underway, but upon landing on what turned out to be Lirna, she had been brought into the royal palace where she and Sami had been placed in a suite of rooms which had normally been reserved for guests of the Empress. They had been treated surprisingly well, but Li'ren had the suspicion that their treatment was more due to the fact that Sami was the daughter of the rebel leader, rather than any consideration for her own position. Of Jack and Brooke, Li'ren had no idea where they were being kept, but she fervently hoped harm hadn't come to either of them.

-Where are you taking me?- Li'ren calmly asked one of the soldiers, the third time she had asked that question since being taken from the room in which she had been held since arriving on Lirna. For the third time, her question went unanswered, but really the young Empress had a fairly good idea of where she was headed. She also felt reasonably certain of what her fate was to be. As scared as she was, that certainty gave her some solace.

After walking for several minutes, she was brought to a room that she knew very well, indeed. Near the center of the palace, close to where Li'ren had shared quarters with Kri'a, was the private

dining room where the two of them had sat over many a meal during their time together. As she was led inside, she saw that it *had* changed quite a bit since the last time she had seen it. The room, once decorated with softly colored paintings and vivid bouquets, was now clad in hangings bearing patterns of red and black, and no flowers whatsoever. At the table, regally clad in robes of blood red and gray, was Ara'lana Me'lia. The table was set for tea, with a silver platter holding a steaming pot in the center, between the usurper and an empty chair.

-Ah, Li'ren,- Ara'lana said, standing from her chair. Her voice was carefully polite and measured, and her expression suggested a mood of friendship, but underneath that could be detected the air of a predator lying in wait. Ara'lana waved to the empty chair opposite her. -Do sit. We have much to discuss.-

Li'ren looked at the guards surrounding her, waiting to see if they would prompt her forward, but when they made no effort to do anything she stepped forward on her own. As calmly as she could, the Ailian woman took her seat, primly sweeping her tail out from underneath her so she wouldn't sit on it. She folded her hands in her lap, looking across the table and trying not to let her face betray how she was thinking about the various ways in which she would like to see the former admiral's life end.

-I do not see that we have anything to talk about,- Li'ren said. She was unable to keep the vitriol out of her voice entirely, though she did better than most could have. A lifetime being brought up in diplomatic circles did have its advantages. -I presume that you have had me brought here to be killed. I know you find amusement in cruelty, but I see no need for delay. Be done with it.-

-Cruelty?- Ara'lana repeated, looking somewhat taken aback. -Oh, I assure you, child, I take no pleasure from being cruel. But one must be forceful in one's political moves. You, of all people, should know that.- She waved a hand towards the guards behind Li'ren, and they all exited the room, leaving her and Li'ren alone. The white-furred Ailian reached for the tea pot and poured two cups of the bitter, fragrant concoction. -And I have no intention of killing you, my dear. Yet, in any case.-

Li'ren turned her nose up as a cup of tea was set in front of her by Ara'lana. -So you say, Ara'lana. But I'd wager I would find that tea...not to my liking.-

-You mean poison? That's really not my style, Li'ren. Just ask Kri'a.- She smiled, some of the placidity in her expression being replaced by sick humor. She picked up the cup she'd given to Li'ren and lifted it to her own lips, taking a sip from it. -You see? Nothing to fear.- She replaced the tea in front of the younger female.

After glancing at the cup, Li'ren left it where it was. -If you're intention is not to kill me, perhaps you should explain yourself, then.- She crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at Ara'lana with her ruby red eyes as she resumed her seat.

-No pleasantries? Come now, Li'ren, you are a politician. You know that there must be accounting for protocol.- Ara'lana picked up her own tea and cradled it in her palms. Li'ren could see the tip of her tail swaying back and forth behind her. The older woman was clearly enjoying herself royally. -Do try the tea, my dear. It's quite bitter, but I assure you that the flavor is beyond compare. A specialty of my home planet, and my very favorite. Much more complex than the pedestrian teas one is commonly limited to elsewhere in the Ascendancy.-

-Thank you, no,- Li'ren said, perhaps a bit petulantly. When really there was probably no harm to be had from the drink, she was still determined not to play any of Ara'lana's games.

Ara'lana sighed. -How boring. Very well, if you insist in being so intractable, I will not attempt to dissuade you. To business, then.- The white-furred Ailian glanced over Li'ren, seeming to evaluate her for a few moments. The young Empress had never felt very uncomfortable being looked at by another woman before, but Ara'lana was not looking at her out of any sort of romantic feeling, she was sure. Rather, she got the sense that it was much the same way that a slaver evaluated their wares. -I brought you here in order that we might try to cease this foolishness. I think you can agree now that you have little hope for victory. Even with the aid of our Nuretan neighbors, you are rather uncomfortably outnumbered.- She lifted her cup, glancing over the rim as she sipped. -I hope the last month has given you time to consider the offer that I made when we last spoke.-

Li'ren had to laugh at that. -You mean the most gracious offer you made to send me to prison for the rest of my life? I did not consider that an offer worth serious consideration.-

-Come, come, Li'ren,- the matriarch of the Me'lia family said soothingly. -I always thought you were a reasonable woman. Kri'a was full of fire, and not really the sort of impartial person one needs in an Empress. I was quite hoping you would not allow your emotions to get the better of you.-

-It is not a matter of just my emotions,- Li'ren said, choosing her words carefully. Hearing Ara'lana dare to mention her mate's name made her want to strangle her with her bare hands. -I have to consider the desires of my people. They wish for peace, but they are fiercely angry about the death of...their Empress. You must see that your rash actions have done nothing to unite. You have only deepened the divide between the colonies.- She shook her head. -I have watched the propaganda that you put out. You speak of unity, and peace, and cooperation, but everything you do foments more war, more death, and more division. The worst of all is this alliance with the Pteryd. I cannot believe that even the citizens of the Outer Colonies favor that friendship.-

Ara'lana set her cup down. -The citizens have faith in me,- she said. -Even those who are reluctant to see the benefits don't dare go against my will. They wish for unity just as much as I do.-

-They wish for it, or they fear how you would impose it upon them?-

-When you get right down to it, what's the difference?- the former admiral asked. She leaned forward, spearing Li'ren with an oddly earnest gaze. -You have spent time in the inner circles of the Ascendancy's government. You are Ailian. You understand the necessity of intimidation as much as I. It doesn't matter how you convince people, whether through clever words or by the threat of force. It is all the same.-

Li'ren bared her teeth, and with a soft growl she leaned forward as well. -In the short term you may be successful, but eventually you will wear your subjects down enough that they will not stand it any longer. Fear is not the same as obedience. And the more you make people afraid, the harder they will fight against you.- She waved a hand for emphasis. -The war with humanity is the perfect example. Kri'a's mother made the mistake of thinking that a sharp rebuke would back them off. Instead, we saw the opposite. It will be the same with the people of the Inner Colonies and Core Worlds. And with the citizens of the Outer Colonies, if you are not careful. And that is why, ultimately, you will fail-

Her smile slowly widening, Ara'lana sat back in her chair. -I had a feeling you would be unreasonable.- She smoothed down the front of her robes, suddenly eerily peaceful in her posture. -You always were a good advisor. You have the respect and admiration of many people. Which is why I am certain that the full force of your people's fleets will be devoted to your rescue, and my defeat. I will enjoy smashing them above the skies of our homeworld, and your execution will be broadcast to the entire Ascendancy. It will be a marvelous end to my final victory.-

Li'ren surprised Ara'lana by giving her a satisfied smile of her own. -I am to be bait for your trap, then? So be it. But you know as well as I do that Ailians are not easily trapped.- She stood up from her chair. -I would like to leave, now. Being in your presence is making me rather ill.-

Blinking, Ara'lana shrugged and raised a hand, snapping her fingers. The guards came back in, and one of them came to Li'ren and took her arm, pulling her away from the table. She offered no resistance, but Ara'lana did offer a parting shot before she went. -When you see her, do let Sami know that I harbor no ill will towards her. But she should choose her friends more wisely. Familiarity with you seems to be hazardous to one's health.-

Li'ren stopped short. -You would harm your own daughter?-

-Oh, one hopes to avoid such things,- the former admiral said offhandedly. She shrugged her shoulders. -Sami was always the obedient one, the quiet one. I always had my suspicions, of course, but she never gave me cause to know for sure. She never gave me any troubles, but I really can't overlook her taking up with someone like you. Such things shall not be tolerated under my rule, as under that of some Empresses.-

-Someone like me?-' Li'ren repeated. She turned to face the terrible woman. -I hardly know

what you mean. If you suspect something is going on between us, you are mistaken. But Sami *is* my friend, and mark my words, I will not allow you to take another friend from me.-

-You can protest as much as you like, but I see the signs,- Ara'lana said. She stood from her chair, coming around and walking forward until she stood right in front of Li'ren. -I can't decide what's worse. Aria joining those pitiful Royal Guards to fight against me, or Sami debasing herself by surrendering to such a pointless life.- She leaned forward, her voice lowering almost to a whisper. -But I am not heartless. I shall allow you both to die together. Perhaps, then, you shall have the comfort in death that Kri'a did not.-

Ara'lana gave a low chuckle of amusement at the way that Li'ren nearly ripped herself out of the guard's grip, before she was taken through the door and out of the dining room.

When Chief Admiral Jin Te'rou took his seat at the head of the meeting table, the doors were closed and the lights dimmed. At his instruction, the projector set into the center of the table was switched on, and the device ran through its start-up sequence. The room was much fuller than it normally would have been. Besides Admiral Te'rou, there were the admirals commanding the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Sixth fleets, along with numerous senior fleet officers and infantry commanders. Complementing them were representatives of the military of the Nuretan Empire, including General Kalma Soumaren and the fleet admirals of the Imperial Navy. Various members of the diplomatic corps were present from across the Inner Colonies and Core Worlds, including a number of representatives who had managed to make it off of Lirna in time. Royal Governess Miri Amani, once again taking a leadership role, was seated at the right of Admiral Te'rou.

Aria felt a great amount of sympathy for the governess right now, and from where she sat about a third of the way down the table from her and Te'rou she could see the worry evident on the older Ailian woman's face. She was facing a great deal of problems right now, what with the abduction of her daughter, the Empress, and the impending attack that the Ascendancy was preparing to launch. Aria was feeling much the same as the governess was. Sami and Jack had been visiting Li'ren, according to the information gleaned from the Royal Guards who had survived the attack, and they were gone as well. As to whether any of them apart from Li'ren were still alive, they couldn't be sure. All they had were rumors, with nothing substantiated. Sleep had been hard to come by for Aria, but she'd done the best that she could.

-It appears we're all here,- Admiral Te'rou said, once the projector was ready. -If there aren't any objections, let's begin the meeting.- He pressed a button, and a divided screen playback began of video taken of the same time period from many different angles, some shot in space and others from the

ground. -As you all are aware, forty-eight hours ago, allies of the Outer Colony rebels attacked Arbaros and assaulted this very building in which we are meeting. The humans who attacked were exceedingly well-trained and managed to take the Royal Guards stationed here by surprise.- As Admiral Te'rou, the video played, showing the radar readings from the control center. -Their attack was three-fold. First, they used a decoy ship to occupy our tracking resources and distract us from the second threat, a fast, heavily armed and armored transport ship of human origin. This ship slipped through our defenses and managed to make it all the way to the governess' residence without being detected. It released two gunships, who suppressed and eliminated the exterior security forces before forty to fifty commandos assaulted the interior of the building.-

Some of the camera views were of the interior of the governess' residence, and showed the dark-clad humans rushing in and engaging Royal Guards in combat. Aria suppressed a snarl as she saw her soldiers, many of whom she had personally trained over the past month, falling one by one as the enemies advanced through the halls. Not for the first time since the attack, she had the thought that everything might have been different if she had been there. And not for the first time, she also told herself that if she had been there, she was just as likely to be one of those who had been killed.

Te'rou continued with his presentation as the videos continued to play. -Once they reached their goal, which was the personal chambers of Empress Amani, they abducted her and got her, along with at least two others, into the transport, which left as reinforcements from the Royal Guard barracks in Ar'bre arrived.- Several pairs of eyes looked towards Aria when that bit of information was recounted, which she did her best to ignore. Even with all that she had done to prove herself, and all of the support that the late Empress' propaganda campaign had generated, there were still those who viewed her with suspicion because of who her mother was. Te'rou pressed a few buttons at the projector controls near his seat, and the picture switched to an entirely radar-based view. -At about the same time, our defensive lines detected a sizable Pteryd fleet entering the space around Arbaros. These ships acted as a screen for the fleeing transport, preventing us from pursuing long enough for the transport craft to get clear of the gravity of Arbaros and enter hyperspace. Fortunately for us, the Pteryd did not appear interested in engaging in battle, and we only sustained the loss of a small number of our picket ships.-

One of Admiral Te'rou's aides, a commander in the intelligence division of the Navy, took over at that point. -We were only able to track the transport for a short distance through hyperspace after it vanished,- he reported. -They didn't do very much to cover their tracks, however. We've intercepted numerous communications from Lirna and between units of the rebel forces which indicate that the Empress is being held there, most likely in or nearby the palace. Our assessment is that our discovery of this information is no accident. We believe that Ara'lana Me'lia...- More glances towards Aria.

-...very purposely wants us to have this information. She is hoping to draw us into a trap.-

-Whether it is a trap or not is of little consequence,- Admiral Te'rou said. -Lirna is absolutely crucial to the survival of the Ascendancy, and we have a duty to the civilian population to retake the planet. Above all else, we must rescue our Empress.- He spread his hands on the tabletop. -No matter if Ara'lane Me'lia expects us to come or not, we *will* be making the final preparations for retaking the homeworld, with the mission to be launched within the next twenty-four hours. To that end, I'll be laying out the general plan for the invasion.-

At Te'rou's instruction, one of his aides stood up and moved to his spot at the table. The officer withdrew a data card from her pocket and plugged it into a port at the projector's controls, while Admiral Te'rou began walking around the table. As he started speaking, his voice carried around the room, and the projector began displaying documentation and visual aids which were timed along with his recitation. Aria knew that, if anything, Te'rou was an efficient and proficient planner.

-This operation will involve the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Sixth fleets, along with a number of units which can be spared from the Eighth and Eleventh Fleets,- Te'rou began. As he spoke, a representation of Lirna was displayed on the projector, and icons marked with blue representing the fleets materialized around them. -Our forces will be augmented by the 82nd and 101st Imperial Armadas of the Nuretan Empire. We will conduct a close-in hyperspace jump, exiting hyperspace just outside of the gravity well of Lirna. This will be risky, but with careful timing and precision it can be done. The jump will be timed so that all of our ships arrive at approximately the same instant. Once our ships are in place, we will engage the rebel fleets which surround the homeworld.- Icons in red began appearing around the planet. -Intelligence reports tell us that we will be opposed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Outer Colony Fleets. Furthermore, we can expect the presence of a sizable number of Pteryd ships, though reports indicate that they are largely occupied with operations in the rest of the Ascendancy. There are also human forces in orbit around the planet amounting to at least one fleet's worth of ships. Though by and large smaller and not as heavily armed as our own warships, they are much more maneuverable and carry superior armor, so a note to all ship captains should be given: do *not* under any circumstances underestimate the contribution they can make to the battle.- He paused in his pacing and turned to face the display. -By all accounts, the fleets around Lirna are being personally commanded by Admiral Selina Kris.- An image of the black-furred Kris was superimposed over the display for a few moments. -Admiral Kris is a veteran of the Royal Guards and probably the most dangerous admiral the Ascendancy has known in many centuries, apart from Ara'lane Me'lia herself. You may expect that she will put up a brutal fight.- With that pronouncement, Admiral Te'rou gestured with one hand to Kalma Soumaren, the Nuretan officer. -I'll turn things over to General

Soumaren now. She will be in charge of the ground operations on Lirna. Her experience with infantry matters is far superior to my own, and she graciously agreed to take the lead in this matter.-

The green-skinned, neon-eyed Nuretan nodded and rose from her chair as Admiral Te'rou went back to his. -This battle, I'd wager, will be one of the largest infantry engagements in the settled universe to date,- she said, speaking Ailian in her bubbly accent as she brushed her long white hair back with one webbed hand. -While the fleets keep the rebel ships occupied in space, we will begin the landing.- The image of Lirna returned, and dots of blue began appearing on the planet's surface, spreading into large splotches as the general described the plan. -In all, the landing force will be comprised of nearly two million ground troops and seventy-five thousand armored units. They will be augmented by Nuretan and Ailian air support, along with planetary bombardment from the fleets in orbit. I do not expect that all landing ships which are deployed will reach the planet's surface. I will consider a loss of twenty percent to be an acceptable margin of losses which still offer favorable odds for success.-

General Soumaren stated this figure in a neutral tone that belied the gravity of what she was saying. Twenty percent casualties was an enormous number to contemplate. Assuming that her estimates were accurate, that meant that, at worst, the Nuretan general was anticipating the loss of four hundred thousand soldiers and fifteen thousand armored vehicles, all before the ground battle even began. Aria couldn't begin to imagine that many people dead, let alone who else would fall during the struggle to reclaim the planet. And that was just on the side of the allied forces. Surely the rebels would experience losses just as severe.

-Each unit's commander will receive their own objectives prior to landing,- General Soumaren continued. She pointed at the screen, which had zoomed in on the area surrounding Hayikwiir City, the capital of the planet which included the royal palace. -However, our main objectives will be the capture of Mat'aar Airbase, the main military facility in Hayikwiir, and the taking of the royal palace. Owing to the essential nature of this task, the responsibility for that objective will fall upon the Lirnan Royal Guards.- The Nuretan woman looked to Aria and her executive officer, Lieutenant Ayalis. -Captain Me'lia, you will be aided by our Imperial Marines, with armor support. You are to be accompanied by three divisions of Ascendancy Naval troops, who will assist in your assault operations. Once the Empress has been secured, air support and any available ground units will sanitize the area and facilitate an evacuation, at which point you will be freed to continue combat operations.- General Soumaren clasped her hands behind her back. -This will not be an easy fight. The enemy is well-trained, well-equipped, and well-fortified. This may be an extended battle, but I am praying that with diligence, perseverance, and a little bit of luck, we will prevail.-

Admiral Te'rou cleared his throat. -I only wish we had more forces to work with,- he admitted. The admiral looked to Governess Miri Amani. -Lady Amani, what word do you have from the envoys which were sent to the humans?-

Governess Amani, who up until now had been completely silent, now spoke. As she did, Aria could hear the pain and distress in her voice. Without a doubt, she was thinking of her daughter, the Empress, who was part of the subject of this operation. There was a very real and significant likelihood that, despite good planning and effort, Li'ren Amani would not make it out of this alive, and the governess knew it very well. That she could bring herself to be present at this meeting at all was a miracle in Aria's mind, and a demonstration of how professional and dedicated to her job Miri Amani could be.

-I have received very little information from the representatives I sent,- the governess said with regret. -I must admit, I had really counted on being able to work something out with them, but unfortunately it appears that they are planning to stay on the sidelines. I didn't think they would trust us, but I did hope they would be able to see the benefit of a partnership in this matter, at least.-

Aria spoke up. -This is a matter of the slavery issue, is it not?- Heads turned towards her, but she kept her eyes on Governess Amani.

The governess gave a low growl, her eyes narrowing. -It would appear so. That was a sticking point from the very beginning. It is why my daughter planned to make the announcement that we would be releasing all slaves in the Ascendancy. She hoped that would serve to break down the barriers that have kept us from reaching an agreement.-

-Why can it not still be made?- one of the other diplomats in the room asked. -The Empress was planning to do it anyway. Can't we still...-

-There is no time,- Governess Amani said, cutting her off as she shook her head. -Her Majesty made that plan several weeks ago, but we were keeping it a secret. We didn't want the rebels to get word and make moves to counter it.-

Aria raised a hand again. -Did anyone negotiating with the humans know, apart from you and Her Majesty?-

The governess hesitated. -Well...We did send word, ten days ago, by personal courier to the heads of each diplomatic mission to the humans,- she admitted. -The chief diplomats have their own latitude in the negotiations, but they were requested not to speak of the matter until the Empress gave her speech. I have to assume that they would stick to this request. There have been so many problems with the communications networks lately, so I suppose I could be wrong, but...- She shook her head, looking down at her lap. -We were not anticipating making our move to retake Lirna for many months

yet, but our hand has been forced by Ara'lana's actions. I am afraid we cannot count on the humans to aid us. We must be content with the forces that we have, and I hope to the gods that they will be enough.-

The soldiers who had escorted Li'ren back to where she was being held opened the door courteously for her, but rather discourteously gave her a push to send her inside. The young Empress managed to keep her footing without tripping over the carpet. She looked over her shoulder, the fur on the top of her head bristling and her tail twitching irritably, as she threw a withering glare at the guards. They appeared not to notice, and merely closed the door firmly. A double set of clicking noises signified the door being locked from the outside, securely shutting her in the suite of rooms. Li'ren listened near the door for a moment, and then she gave a little huff and turned away to look into the room.

Though she was a captive, one would not have been able to tell just by looking at the rooms that she was being held in. The suite was one which had been designed to be occupied by visiting dignitaries and other guests of the royal family. It consisted of a spacious common area with a circular low table surrounded by two curved couches. The room was decorated with large urns containing live flowering plants, and although they appeared not to have been tended to very much since the conquering of the planet, they still filled the space with a pleasant fragrance. Off to either side of the common room were single doors which led to separate bedrooms, and though smaller than the room she had shared with Kri'a or even her room back on Arbaros, they were comfortable enough that they each could have accommodated two Ailians with no trouble. Neither Sami nor Li'ren had spent much time in the rooms, however, preferring to keep company with each other in the six or so hours that they had been on Lima.

As Li'ren stepped over to one of the couches, intending to sit down, the door to the bedroom on the left opened up and Sami emerged from within. She was wide-eyed, and had obviously been drawn by the sounds from outside, but once she saw that it was only Li'ren in the room she calmed down markedly.

-Oh,- the orange-furred Ailian said, her voice somewhat shaky. -They brought you back. I'm glad. I was so worried when they took you, I thought...-

-Hush, little one,- Li'ren said teasingly, forcing herself to smile for Sami's sake. It was a weak jest, but sufficient enough for the situation; though Li'ren was three years her senior, Sami was noticeably taller. She sat down, patting the cushion beside her. Sami walked over and sat as well. -Never mind what you thought. I am fine. I am just as relieved to see that you are still here.-

-Where did they take you?- Sami asked, as Li'ren took one of her hands.

Li'ren pursed her lips, and her ears laid back slightly. -They took me to see your mother,- she told Sami, glancing down at her lap. -Ara'lana wished to present the facade of negotiating our surrender. I do not see that as an acceptable option.- She squeezed Sami's hand, and decided not to elaborate further on what Ara'lana had spoken of. There was no sense in alarming the other woman further.

-You...saw mother?-

Li'ren looked back up, blinking in surprise at the earnest look on Sami's face. The younger girl's eyes looked somewhat shiny, and she thought she could see tears beginning in them. Her ears were low as well, and the Empress was certainly taken aback. -Yes, I did.- She tilted her head imperceptibly. -Is something the matter? Beyond the obvious, of course.-

-No, it's just...- Sami looked away. Her hand had gone limp in Li'ren's, and her tail was drooping over the edge of the couch to the floor. -I guess I knew mother would be here, but...- She went quiet again.

After a minute or so of stillness, apart from the slight shaking of Sami's shoulders, Li'ren broke the silence. -You want to see her,- she said gently. The blue-furred female put her other hand on Sami's knee. -You have not seen your mother in three years.-

With a little gasp, accompanied by a tear running down her cheek, the other Ailian nodded. -I do want to see her...,- Sami said, suddenly squeezing Li'ren's hand very tightly. -But at the same time, I do not. I don't know who she is, anymore.-

-You were close to your mother.-

Sami sniffed as another tear dripped down her face. -Not as close as Aria was,- she said. -but we were close. I loved my mother, very much. When she died, when we *thought* she died, I mean, it...- She stopped and took a few deep breaths, doing her best to calm herself. -I can remember once when I was a very little girl, still in school. I got in a fight with one of my classmates. I was never a very good fighter. Aria has tried to teach me many times, but my heart was never in it.- She gave a weak laugh. -The both of us were sent home for disturbing classes. Father was off of work, and when I showed up at home and told him what had happened, he gave me such a scolding. He had never scolded me before, and when he was done he sent me to my room. I cried so hard, because mother was on Lirna at the time, and I knew she would arrive home soon. As soon as she did, she came to my room. Before she said anything, I knew father had told her everything. I knew she was going to be so mad at me.- Sami wiped her eyes with one hand. -But instead, mother sat down on my bed next to me and hugged me. She didn't say anything for a while, she just held me. When she did say something, she said she wasn't

mad at me. She said she knew I was already sorry for what I had done, so there was no point in scolding me any more. She told me she was proud of me for standing up for myself.-

Li'ren didn't know exactly what to say to that. It was not the sort of thing that she had come to expect from Ara'lana Me'lia, not since she had first met her nearly ten years ago, and certainly not in the past month. -I can see how that would be hard to reconcile with what is happening now...-

-My mother was a good mother,- Sami insisted. -Perhaps my siblings and I were the only ones to see that...I know there were many people who feared her, even back then. But to us, she was just...our mother. She could be very strict, and very demanding, but when she was at home, she was the most loving person you could imagine.- She was starting to cry harder now, the tears coming much more rapidly. -I feel so...so angry, so heartbroken, so...so everything. I want to be face to face with her, to ask her how much of that was real and how much of it was part of her act. In my heart I know it was all real, but what my heart and my head know are two different things.- Sami covered her face with one hand, sobbing freely now.

Biting her lip, Li'ren hesitated, and then she moved her hand from Sami's and placed it around her shoulders. She pulled the other woman close to her, and Sami let herself be drawn into the Empress' embrace. She buried her face in Li'ren's robed shoulder, dampening the expensive cloth with her tears as she cried in a combination of fear, sorrow, and anger. Li'ren felt so sorry for her. This was not the place to be sorting out these feelings. This was something she needed her family for. But right now, the best she could have was a friend to lean on, and a shoulder to cry on.

Li'ren hated Ara'lana Me'lia, with every ounce of emotion that someone could direct towards hating another. If she had it in her power right now, she would have ended her life without hesitation. But her friend would surely already know that, and yet she trusted in her enough to speak of these things in her company. That wasn't enough for Li'ren to be able to calm her hate, but it was plenty for her to be able to set it aside.

-She is still your mother,- Li'ren said, her voice a soothing whisper, -and she always will be. Nothing can change that.- She placed a hand on the back of Sami's head, where her fingers stroked between her ears gently. Whenever she had been upset, Kri'a had always done that. -Kri'a...Her relationship with her mother was never what you could call good. But Kri'a used to say that loving someone and approving of what they do are two different things. Love your mother for what she was to you, little one, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.-

Sami nodded fractionally, and her arms came around Li'ren as well, returning her hug as much as she could. There was a need there, and Li'ren could feel the gratitude even before she heard it in the younger woman's voice.

-Thank you, Li'ren,- Sami said hoarsely.

Aria stood before the wide viewing window on the bridge, looking out at the space surrounding the heavy battlecruiser *Krisa'la*, the flagship of the First Fleet. She could see many ships surrounding the one she was on. Other heavy battlecruisers, light gunships, scout ships, carriers, and all manner of other differently sized ships, Ailian and Nuretan, were present in the massive combined flotilla. Here and there, small fighters flitted about, keeping watch over the larger vessels in their fleets. She had never seen such a large collection of warships in one place, but there had never been a more important battle ahead, not in her lifetime. This was to be the battle that would decide the fate of her people, and very likely the fate of the rest of the known universe as well. When she saw all of the forces that were arrayed on their side, she couldn't help but feel hope. When she remembered everything that was arrayed against them, she couldn't help but feel that hope dwindle.

In just over two days time, the flotilla would emerge from hyperspace near Lirna and engage in battle over the homeworld. When that time came, Aria and her Royal Guards would join the thousands of troops landing to retake the planet. Though they were as highly trained as any soldiers in the Ascendancy could possibly hope to be, in their over five thousand year history the Royal Guards had rarely taken part in a battle of this nature. Now, though, they would put boots on the ground just like the rest, donning combat uniforms and taking to the deserts to fight the rebels who held their planet. But for now, Aria was wearing her regular duty uniform, the nondescript black fatigues which were conspicuous by their lack of adornment, marking her unmistakably as a Royal Guard. With her hands clasped behind her back, she stared out of the window at the rest of the flotilla, ignoring everything that went on around her while she waited for them to get underway.

As the Ailian captain contemplated her future, she found her thoughts slowly drifting to her recent past. Just hours earlier, she had gathered the things she needed to take with her and had bid goodbye to her family. All of them, most of all her father, Arn, had begged her not to go, but of course she had no choice even if she had wanted to stay. She knew that she had to go fight to stop her mother, and to save her sister and Jack, as well as the Empress. Her personal honor could never have withstood the cowardice of remaining behind while others had gone to battle.

-You will be careful?- her father had implored her, when he finally realized that there was no talking Aria out of it. The whole family had been gathered in the main living room of their quarters in the governess' residence, saying their goodbyes to their matriarch. -Do not do anything foolish. I want you home for good when this is all over.-

-I will be as careful as I can, father,- Aria promised him. She had hugged her father, and he had hugged back tighter than she could ever remember. For his sake she held back the tears. He had done enough crying for the both of them. When she leaned back from him, his ears were laid low and he had a slump to his shoulders. She turned to her siblings, all of whom were trying to put on a brave face. Her sister Raya, the youngest at fourteen, was crying quietly. Aria said goodbye to each of her sisters and brothers, until she came to the twins, Ana and Sana. Both of them twenty years old, Sana was the elder, having been born some minutes prior to her sister. Aria placed both of her hands on Sana's shoulders, her dye-blackened fur contrasting starkly with the bright orange of her sister's. -Sana, if I do not return, and if Sami does not either, you must be the head of the family. Are you prepared for that responsibility?-

Sana's golden eyes had widened considerably, and she had looked to the rest of her family. -I...I...- She saw all of them looking back at her, and when she turned back to Aria, her expression had set. Though she swallowed hard, she gave her a tight nod. -I will be ready, sister. But you will return. You always have.-

Coming back to the present, Aria was surprised to find a tear soaking into the fur on her cheeks. She hoped desperately to be able to see her family again, and the sooner the better. But before she could do that, she needed to free her homeworld and see her mate to safety.

-Don't let the enemy see you cry, Captain.-

Aria managed not to jump as she heard the voice beside her, although the fur on her tail did bristle somewhat. She looked to her right, where she saw Admiral Jin Te'rou standing. She had not heard him come up, but now the red-furred male was looking out the same window as she. The admiral was clad immaculately in what had to have been his best dress uniform, of deep blue trimmed with red, and bearing all of the awards he had won over his career. Surely he would change into something less formal once they were underway, but for now Te'rou would wish to present as authoritative an image as he could to his soldiers.

-Our emotions are not always a weakness, Admiral,- Aria said. -I have learned that lesson, many times over. They can be our greatest strength.- She crossed her arms over her breasts, and her expression turned defiant. She had never liked Te'rou much, though she respected him and the position he held.

To her surprise, the Chief Admiral seemed to consider her words seriously. -Perhaps so,- he said after a few minutes. -Certainly our emotions can *give* us the strength that we need, when we are most in need of it.- He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. -Are the Royal Guards prepared for battle, Captain?-

-We are ready,- Aria said, and she felt pride swell in her chest at the thought of her soldiers. Though the security forces of Arbaros would be adequate enough to protect Governess Amani and the rest of the diplomats who would remain behind, that duty still technically fell to the Royal Guards. She had given each of the Ailians under her command the opportunity to stay and take that duty. None of them had accepted, all of them preferring to accompany their captain into battle.

-Then the fleets will do everything in their power to get you to the battle,- Te'rou said. He was quiet for some time, and just when Aria thought he was going to leave and tend to whatever duties he had left to do, he began to speak again. -It seems like years since I last saw the homeworld. Did you hear the story of how I made it away from Lirna, Captain?-

Blinking, Aria shook her head, her ears pricking forward in curiosity. -No, Admiral,- she confessed. -I have heard stories of the battle from soldiers who were there, but not how you escaped.-

-It was an intense battle,- the admiral explained. -Probably...no, definitely the most difficult situation I have ever been in since I joined the Navy.- He clasped his hands behind his back, his fingers squeezing tightly around each other. -We weren't expecting it at all. When the Outer Colony fleets emerged from hyperspace, we lost nearly ten percent of our forces in the first ten minutes, before we were able to regroup and make a counterattack.- He looked back over his left shoulder, and nodded towards the elevated platform of the command center of the bridge. -I was just back there, in my command chair, directing the fleets at the same time I was commanding my own flagship. My captain, Admiral Grelen...she was conducting an inspection aboard our sister ship, the *Neran'la*, you see, so I had to flex some of those muscles that I rarely get to use.- He grinned tightly for a moment, but that quickly faded. -After a few hours, my ship had taken heavy damage. I think Selena...Admiral Kris, that is...I think she very personally wanted to ensure my destruction. She never liked me very much. I think she thought that she deserved to be Chief Admiral more than I did, and she resented me for getting the top job. Or maybe I'm just stroking my own ego. In any case, my ship was getting hammered, and I could see that the battle was already lost. I gave the order for the fleets to withdraw, but I didn't expect I would survive.-

-I can imagine,- Aria said. -I saw how badly this ship was damaged when you finally arrived at Arbaros. I was surprised it was still holding together.-

Admiral Te'rou nodded. -Indeed.- His ears laid back, and his black eyes grew distant as he stared out of the window at the black space pinpricked with stars. -We were nearly done for. The rebel ships were moving in for the kill, and I was ready to go down fighting. But then, out of nowhere, the *Neran'la* charged into the fray. Admiral Grelen, she...- He stopped, and Aria could have sworn she had heard a catch in the older Ailian's voice. But when Te'rou began talking again, it was gone. -She told

me to stop wasting time and get away. She put the *Neran'la* in between my ship and the rebels and she screened us, buying the minutes we needed to make emergency repairs and jump to hyperspace. The very last thing I saw before we made it out was her ship breaking in two and exploding. She and her crew gave their lives so that my crew and I could live to fight another day.-

Aria wasn't sure what to say to that. Thousands of Ailians had died in the battle for Lirna, all of whom had been under Admiral Te'rou's command, but this seemed to affect him more than any of it. -She did her duty. Her honor demanded that she give her life for her people. She performed as admirably as any of us hope to.-

-Yes,- Te'rou agreed. He nodded somberly. He looked at Aria, and his voice regained the roughness it had possessed seconds before. -Admiral Grelen was a very good friend to me for many years, Captain. She was a good deal older than me, in fact, and she taught me a lot of what I know about naval combat. It pains me greatly to think I'll never have the pleasure of sitting on the bridge and chatting with her again.- The admiral turned his gaze back to the ships and stars beyond the bridge window. -You say that our emotions are our strength, Captain? Well, I think that when it comes time to fight, I'll be thinking of Chara. Perhaps some of her strength will find its way to me.- He glanced sidelong at Aria. -What about you, Captain? What will you think of to give you strength? Your sister, I suppose.-

-I will,- Aria said. She tightened her grip on her arms over her chest, and she bit her lip. -But more than that, I will be thinking of my mate. I will be thinking of Jack.- She waved her tail as she thought of her human lover. For the past few days, she had been unable to think of much else. The last time they had spent together seemed a distant memory already. Whenever she had gone to sleep, whenever she had been able to bring herself to even consider sleep, the bed felt empty without his smaller form beside hers. In the relatively few months that they had known each other, the extent to which they had each come to feel dependent on the other was astounding. Aria felt like a piece of herself was missing, and it caused her almost physical pain.

Te'rou eyed her carefully for a while. -The human...yes...- He appeared pensive. -Captain...There has been something I have been wanting to say to you for some time, now.- The Chief Admiral seemed to be struggling with his words. -I suppose the easiest way to put it is that I was wrong about you.-

This time Aria had no success in hiding her surprise. -Admiral?-

-I've been thinking on it for the better part of the last month,- the male Ailian said. He turned so that he was fully facing Aria. -You're a rather remarkable person, Captain Me'lia. I, along with a number of others, did my best to get you convicted as a traitor, and executed, I might add. I couldn't

understand how the Empress could have supported you, considering what you had done.- In Aria's opinion, he looked as though he still couldn't fully understand it. -But I've been impressed by you. You were a war hero even before all you've done these past months, and you were charged with turning your back on your people. You were subjected to some of the harshest scrutiny and criticism that anyone can experience. Anyone with an ounce of logic in their head would have said you'd join your mother at the drop of a hat, especially with all that we put you through, but you kept your loyalty to the Ascendancy through it all.- He looked down at the deck underneath his feet. -We tried to strip your honor from you, but I think you might have more of it than the whole of the Ascendancy combined. I know that much now, no matter what I think of your choice of mate. So I must apologize for the way you were treated, Aria.-

Aria realized that her mouth was open, and her tail was hanging limply down behind her. Of all the things that the admiral could have said to her, she would not have expected that to be what she was going to hear today. He clearly had to work hard to admit what he'd just admitted to her, and not many officers in the Ascendancy would openly admit to being wrong, especially to a subordinate. Most of all, she never would have thought that Te'rou would ever have been one to change his mind about something like that. He had always been the stickler for the rules, the one to know every last detail of military regulations, and to enforce them to the letter. Now he was saying that he considered her an honorable Ailian, and it almost didn't matter that he had basically said he still didn't approve of her being with Jack.

Closing her mouth, the Royal Guard captain looked back out the window. A patrol ship was flying lazily past, one that looked precisely like what she had flown with the fleet. Following it was a squad of Nuretan fighters mingled with some Ailian interceptors, as they swirled around each other in a dance to practice space combat maneuvers. Beyond them were the myriad ships of the allied flotilla. Hundreds of vessels and thousands of people, drawn from all edges of the Ascendancy and the Empire, working together now towards one goal.

-Your apology is not necessary, Admiral,- Aria said. She turned to look at Admiral Te'rou again, and she dropped her hands to waist level. -You have always been a believer in doing what is expected of you. And if you go by a strict following of military law, I quite honestly did violate regulations very severely. You did not allow the opinions of your Empress to dissuade you from what you believed to be the correct course of action. There is great honor in that devotion to your duty.-

For a moment the admiral looked as though he was going to disagree with her, but then he slowly allowed a smile to spread across his face. With one final glance out the observation window, he stiffened to attention and offered a salute to Aria, which was returned immediately. Likely they would

never go out of their way to socialize with one another, but there was a new respect between the two of them.

-Good luck, Captain. We'll be getting underway shortly. Be sure all preparations are made for your deployment.-

As best as Jack and Brooke could tell, three days had gone by since Jack had woken up in the cellars of the royal palace. During that time they had received little in the way of contact from the outside world apart from their guards. Every six hours or so they had been brought food and water, nothing fancy but enough so that they had an adequate amount to share between the two of them. The guards always entered the room in pairs, and although they would leave the door open while they delivered the food, Jack never saw a good opportunity to make a break for it. The guards were always human, and they were always masked and armed, wearing red uniforms with nothing in the way of identifying patches or insignia. Several times he tried to engage them in conversation, if only to try to get some kind of clue as to who they might have been. They never responded, never said one word to either Jack or Brooke, and they always locked the door securely behind them.

"Hey, come on!" Jack shouted, as the door closed and locked for the tenth time. He slammed a fist against the heavy wooden door, which didn't accomplish anything except for making his hand sore. He cupped a hand around his mouth and yelled through the wire mesh covering the window. "Look, asshole, I just wanna know why I'm here!" As had been the case every other time, he heard no response apart from his own voice echoing in the hall outside. Sighing in frustration, Jack turned away from the door and walked over to where Brooke was sitting against the wall. He sat down heavily beside her, eyeing the food and water that had been brought to them this time. He wasn't that hungry, but he reached over and pulled it close to them so the young girl could eat if she wanted.

Brooke looked at Jack before she leaned forward and took some food. "I don't think we're ever getting out of here...," she said. She stared at the food in her hand, some sort of pastry-like concoction filled with a meaty mixture, and after a few moments she put it back down again. "We've been down here for days."

"Yeah," Jack grumbled. He crossed his legs, leaning his head back and staring at the ceiling. "I wish there was something I could do. If one of those guards would come in by themselves, or if they'd just forget to lock the door, or something..."

"I don't think they're going to be that careless," Brooke mumbled hopelessly. "They look pretty serious." She huddled up again, drawing her knees up towards her chest and resting her forehead against them as she hugged her arms around herself. "We're going to die down here. I just know it."

By this time, Jack privately agreed with the young teen, but he wasn't about to say that out loud. Instead he put one arm around her and gave her what he hoped was a comforting hug. "Hey, none of that," he said gently. "I'm not gonna let anything happen to you, not while I'm still alive, alright? So don't worry, okay?" He squeezed her shoulder. "Don't forget, the rest of the Ascendancy is still out there. I'm sure they're coming to Lirna soon."

"I don't think they're too worried about rescuing two slaves," Brooke said. Her voice sounded bitter. "Even if they come, they're going to be more concerned about saving the Empress."

"Aria will come," Jack said, putting a firm tone into his words. "I know she'll try to get to me. So that means she's coming for both of us. I'm sure of it. If I can't get us out of here myself, she'll come."

The young slave girl was quiet for a long time after Jack said that. Then she lifted her head up, and she locked her deep green eyes with his, forcing a smile. He could tell that she didn't believe what he was saying, but that she desperately wanted to. "I...hope you're right..."

They both sat in silence for a while after that, and eventually the food that had been brought to them got eaten. Like they had for the past three days, they tried to keep themselves occupied. Brooke seemed particularly interested in hearing stories about what life on Earth was like, as well as on Cerelis and other human planets that Jack had visited. Since she had been a slave for almost her entire life, and couldn't remember anything else, she had never experienced what it was like to live among other free humans. She in turn told him about the places she had been in the Ascendancy. He had sort of assumed that she had never left Lirna before being sent to Arbaros by the previous Empress, but as it turned out she'd been taken to numerous planets by previous owners. He was just as interested in the various worlds that were in the Ascendancy. They were able to take their minds off of their present situation just a little bit in this way.

Some time later, perhaps two or three hours, there came a quiet commotion in the corridor outside of their cell. Jack and Brooke could both hear someone talking, and whoever it was sounded like a woman. They heard what must have been the guards outside responding, and then came the louder, sharper sound of the door's lock disengaging.

Jack quickly stood up, his heart starting to beat a little faster. "Brooke, stay behind me...", he said in a low voice. As the door opened, he got himself ready. This, finally, might be the moment to try to attempt an escape. When it swung open, however, and he saw the person that stepped inside, the anticipation drained out of him to be replaced by an intense feeling of dread.

He had seen her painted portrait hanging on the wall of dining room, every day, at the Me'lia estate. He had seen her photograph once or twice in the weeks since the civil war in the Ascendancy

had begun. And he had once seen her during her taunting, gloating communication to Arbaros in the aftermath of the loss of Lirna. None of that could have prepared him for seeing Ara'lane Me'lia face to face.

She was easily the tallest Ailian that Jack had ever been in the presence, and would have towered over Aria were they standing side-by-side. Her fur was of the purest white shade, crisscrossed with coal black tiger stripes, which would have made her quite attractive were it not for the absolutely cold expression on her face. Her brilliantly emerald eyes reflected the dim light of the cellar room they were in. As she approached him, he noticed how solidly built she was. Even with the differences, the resemblance to Aria was apparent. The uniform she wore was even much the same, apart from the crimson color versus Aria's black. Jack stood his ground, his head slowly turning up to keep a look at her face as she got quite close. She was staring right back at him, just as intensely. Jack could hear Brooke whimpering quietly behind him, but Ara'lane seemed to be ignoring her completely.

When she stood right before Jack, she bent down so that she could look at him more closely. At this distance, the human could see, faintly through the fur on her feline face, the spiderwebbed pattern of scars around her eyes. She narrowed her gaze, and her nose twitched as she sniffed at him. Jack could feel that he was shaking, as much as he tried to hold it back. Aria's mother put a hand underneath his chin, and she turned his head from side to side, examining him. As frightened as he was, he jerked his head away, out of her grasp. Ara'lane grinned tightly.

"Such fear I smell on you," the rebel leader said, a chuckle in her voice. She spoke English with much the same accent as Aria, though more fluidly and with none of Aria's charm. "So finally we meet, human. Or should I call you 'son'?" She sneered at him. "I must say, I was rather delighted when I learned that my soldiers brought you here as well."

"Were you?" Jack asked dryly.

Ara'lane nodded, straightening up to her full height again. "Oh, yes, very," she confirmed. Her tail was wagging in a deceptively playful fashion. "I was very much looking forward to being able to kill you myself. I did promise Aria I would, after all. And an honorable female always keeps her promises."

Jack felt a chill go through his body. "How noble of you. I'm honored."

Sighing, the imperious Ailian female clucked her tongue in a very human-like fashion. "Come now, the sarcasm is hardly needed." She stroked her chin thoughtfully, and frowned at him. "I will admit, you have been a complication much greater than I would have thought a human could be." Her face darkened. "If my daughter hadn't had the misfortune of meeting you, she might have been more agreeable to joining me. Who would have thought that a mere human and my own daughter could

become so involved?”

Despite his fear of Ara'lana, Jack managed a scornful snort of laughter. “Aria would never have joined you,” he said with a sneer. He crossed his arms and presented the tall Ailian with as brave a front as he could muster. “She's loyal to the Ascendancy, and to the Empress. She's twice the woman that you are, and-”

Abruptly, Ara'lana drew her hand back and lashed out at Jack, striking him brutally in the right side of the face with a closed fist. Jack heard a startled shriek from Brooke as pain exploded in his jaw, and he was rocked to the side, hitting the wall and stumbling down to his knees. The girl started to get up, but Jack put a hand out and waved her back, worried that Ara'lana would turn her wrath against her if she tried to intervene. Brooke looked terrified, but she sank back down to the floor, cowering in as small a ball as she could curl herself into. With a dangerously low growl, the white-furred female knelt near Jack, and she grabbed his face in one hand, turning him so that he was forced to stare right into her eyes.

“You would do well to learn your place, human,” Ara'lana snarled, her lips drawn back to show every one of her razor-sharp teeth. “It will make what little remains of your life so much easier.” She shook him roughly, her strong grip exerting severe pressure on his skull, so much so that Jack was afraid she'd crush his head outright. Her claws were digging into his cheeks, cutting him. “If Aria was as you say, I would not be here now.”

He could barely speak, but Jack was able to croak out a few words. “You won't...be here for long,” he gasped. “Aria is coming, and she'll end you.”

“So you say.” Ara'lana's expression changed to a sinister smile. “If you're so convinced that Aria is more woman than me, perhaps we'll have a comparison, hm? I could show you who the better female is.” She licked her lips, sending another chill up Jack's spine. “You might consider it a favor for a dying man, yes?”

Jack's eyes widened as he saw Ara'lana glance up and down his body, and he shivered as she leaned in close. Her breath was on him, and her hand was still gripping him like a vice. He couldn't have turned away and his back was still up against the cellar wall, but he realized that his arms and legs were still free. Jack gathered up as much strength as he could, and he lifted his right foot and aimed a kick squarely for Ara'lana's stomach. His foot connected, and the Ailian gave a surprised grunt, jerking back only a few inches. That was all the room that Jack needed to bring his fist up, and he landed a hard punch on the front of her muzzle. She grunted again and shoved him back, slamming him against the wall as she shot to her feet, but Jack was free. He scrambled up to his feet, holding his hands up in front of him in preparation for the retaliation he knew would be coming.

To his surprise, though, Ara'lana just grinned wider, an amused laugh rumbling from her mouth. "Spirited. I like that." She lifted her arm and swiped the back of her hand over her nose. The white fur came away streaked with red. "Now it seems almost a shame to kill you. But I suppose such is the way of life, yes?" Her tail was whipping back and forth, either in arousal or anger, Jack couldn't tell. "How I would love to do it right now. All in good time."

Before Jack could respond, the door to the cellar room opened again, and one of Ara'lana's Ailian soldiers rushed inside. Without a look at Jack, she crossed over to the former admiral and cupped a hand around her ear, whispering to her in hushed tones that he couldn't make out. He saw a flash of annoyance pass over Ara'lana's face, and the fur on the top of her head raised, but she quickly smoothed herself out. She spoke back rapidly to her soldier, who nodded and left as quickly as she had come. Ara'lana took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Well, regrettably there is a matter that requires my attention," Ara'lana said, in an apology that rang all too hollow. She gave Jack a stiffly proper bow. "But fear not. I promise I won't forget about you." She looked at Brooke for the first time, leering at the young slave girl. "Either of you." With that, she left the room, and the door closed and locked after her.

Once she was gone, Jack slowly sank back to the floor. He raised a hand to his face and felt it, wiping the blood away from his chin and his cheeks. He worked his jaw around, and it popped loudly, but as sore as it was, it thankfully didn't seem to be broken. "Fuck....," he breathed, glancing over at Brooke. "You okay?"

"Me?" Brooke asked, astonished. She crawled over to Jack. "I'm fine. I thought she was going to kill you when you hit her." She swallowed hard, and he could see that she was paler than usual. "She's...She's insane..."

"No argument from me..."

Aria was standing on the bridge, her hands planted on the rail surrounding the command deck, with the perfect view of space outside when the *Krisa'la* emerged from hyperspace. The mottled colors blurring by the front viewport gave way to the dark black and stars, and right in front of her was the massive, desert-swathed orb of Lirna. And all around it were warships, hundreds of them, with flashes of light passing between them in a flurry of fireworks that lit up space. The battle was already well underway.

As soon as they were stabilized, Admiral Te'rou began issuing orders to the ships of the First Fleet. -All ships, maximum shields and full power to weapons!- he barked. -Intensify forward firepower, and drive a hole through the enemy fleets. We need to make more channels for our landing

craft to get through.- Te'rou tapped a button on the arm of his chair, which opened a communication channel between himself and the crew in the bridge. -I want a status report right now.-

There was a brief pause as the crew processed his orders, and then one of the officers down below called back. -We've sustained minor damage across the fleets, Admiral! We caught them by surprise at first, but the enemy is regrouping quickly. General Soumaren reports that approximately twenty percent of our landing forces have penetrated their defenses and made landfall. So far the losses are well within acceptable limits.-

Admiral Te'rou allowed himself a tight smile. -Excellent. Continue the landings and keep me updated. Launch our fighters and prep the landing craft.- He turned to the more junior admiral who served as the captain of his flagship. -The ship is yours, admiral.-

With that, the *Krisa'la* surged forward with the rest of the First Fleet at her back. Aria watched as she opened up on the rebel fleets ahead with her main guns. As one of the heaviest battlecruisers in the Ascendancy, she carried more than thirty particle cannons on rotating turrets, as well as a multitude of smaller point-defense cannons and missile ports and some of the most powerful shields available. At almost two kilometers long, she was plated in multiple layers of heavy armor with dead zones in between that would keep the ship sealed if any one layer was breached. The *Krisa'la* had three hangar bays, the largest of which contained numerous landing craft and several gunboats. The two smaller bays held two full squadrons of fighters each, and as Aria watched they began streaking around their mothership, heading into the fray. The massive battlecruiser could, on her own, hold off several smaller ships.

And there were ten more ships like her in the First Fleet alone.

The fleet flew into the battle, firing all around them as their computers gave them targets. Before long, it became difficult to distinguish the intermingled fleets from each other by sight alone. The easiest to see were the crimson vessels from Ara'lana's personal fleet, but they were comparatively few and far between. Far more numerous were the ships of the Outer Colony fleets, which outnumbered their Ascendancy counterparts. They also faced human battleships, a motley assortment of different vessels from across human space. Though they showed little consistency, they operated efficiently and lethally, and a mounting number of Ascendancy fighters began to fall before them. All around them the Nuretans, whose fleets tended to focus on smaller cruisers and fighters, flitted about and dealt significant damage wherever they went.

They were twenty minutes into the fight when Te'rou requested the next status update. -We've lost five percent of our battle strength!- an officer from the crew deck reported. -Approximately seventy percent of our ground forces have made it to the planet's surface so far. The losses are still

within the acceptable limits, but the rebel fleets have begun concentrating on the landing craft as they're deployed.-

-Dammit,- Te'rou cursed. He smacked a fist against the arm of his chair. -Draw fighters away from the battle to act as escorts, and pull off the ships from the Eighth and Eleventh Fleets to screen them as well.- As Aria looked at him, she could see that his fur was standing on end, and he caught her gaze. They both knew that if the report was accurate, they could soon be close to losing more infantry than General Soumaren had estimated would be adequate to take the planet. But it was far too late to worry about that now.

-We'll take more losses among the fleets that way, Admiral,- one of his senior officers pointed out to him.

-I know that,- the chief admiral growled. -But if we don't get as many troops down there as possible, this battle is a lost cause. Once the landing is complete, we'll be able to recall those ships to rejoin space combat. We'll have to deal with the loss of combat strength for now.-

An officer stood up in the crew deck below. -Sir, we have a message from General Soumaren, planetside. The Imperial Marines have landed on the outskirts of Hayikwiir City, and they're engaged at the perimeter of Mat'aar Airbase.-

Admiral Te'rou looked to Aria again. -That's your cue, Captain Me'lia.- He checked a smaller display on the other arm of his command chair. -All of the final preparations have been made. Deploy the Royal Guard.-

Aria nodded. She turned her head back to the forward viewport, and her gaze was consumed by the sight of the planet below. Pinprick flashes on the surface showed where the ships of the allied fleet were bombarding targets from orbit. Fighters flew by, chasing each other, while larger ships in lower orbit exchanged fire. Down there was her mother, and her sister, and her Empress, and her mate. Down there was where she would find the end to all of this, one way or another.

Turning back to the chief admiral, Aria saluted him. -By your order, Admiral.-

As she came into her meeting room in the palace, Ara'lana could hear the sounds of distant rumbling, easily recognizable to her as distant explosions. From the force of the detonations, and the way that they caused the floor underneath her feet to vibrate slightly, she knew that they were being caused by warp shells fired from orbit. Waiting for her in the room were a number of her officers, as well as the Pteryd envoy Seirin-143 and her advisor Tara Shi'ala. Standing at one chair at the table, albeit in holographic form, was her head military officer, Admiral Selina Kris. Ara'lana took her place at the head of the table and cleared her throat.

-Your report, Selina.-

The hologram of the Ailian admiral saluted her. -M'lady, the royalist forces and the Nuretan fleet have arrived,- she said. -They are engaging our ships in orbit, and they have begun landing infantry and armor on the planet's surface.-

Ara'lana smiled coolly. -And how goes the battle?-

-We have lost ten percent of our ships, with the losses somewhat heavier among the fighter corps,- Kris told her. She did not seem overly concerned. -I was expecting something like that. As you know, the Nuretans have a very strong and experienced corps of fighter pilots. They are taking a heavy toll on our own, but the losses are manageable yet. I do not see any reason to be worried just now.- She looked to the side as she checked something out of the view of her communications camera. -Reports are also coming in from our ground commanders of casualties on the ground. The losses are heaviest in the major metropolitan areas, especially Hayikwiir City. The Nuretan Imperial Marines have landed there, and they appear to be attempting to take Mat'aar Airbase. I regret to inform you that we will likely lose that post within the next several hours.-

Waving a hand, Ara'lana dismissed that. -It is of little consequence. In the grand scheme of things, the royal palace is far more important. And we have fortified here quite adequately.- She clasped her hands behind her back, waving her tail in a pacified manner. -What is your assessment of the space battle?-

-Admiral Jin Te'rou is leading the operation personally, from the looks of things,- her admiral replied. -He is a...capable officer.- She seemed reluctant to admit that. -However, he is limited in his imagination. I am far more concerned of reports from our scouts that the Nuretan general, Kalma Soumaren, is on the ground leading the infantry operations.-

That revelation did make Ara'lana growl. -That woman. That is concerning, indeed. She is better than any of the commanders I have. What numbers do we have for the enemy on the ground?-

-We outnumber them by a comfortable margin,- Admiral Kris assured her. -They have the disadvantage of requiring transport ships to get their troops to the planet's surface, whereas we are already entrenched. Our fleets and planetside squadrons are shooting down as many landing craft as they can prior to them touching down. As of now, they appear to have landed approximately one and a half million soldiers, with a proportional number of armored units. We can handle that number easily.-

-Excellent.- Ara'lana turned to Seirin-143. -Your people are ready?-

The Pteryd clacked its mandibles. *~Indeed we are. The troop divisions on the planet are awaiting my orders, and the other assets you requested are similarly waiting for their orders. We shall be ready whenever you require us.~*

-Good.- Ara'lana allowed herself a sinister grin, and she laughed to herself. -Let's allow them to think they are gaining an advantage. When all the pieces are in place, we shall reveal ourselves. This will be a battle to be remembered, and it shall be the crowning achievement of everything we have been working for these past years. We cannot fail!-

The ride down to the surface of Lirna was rough. Aria and the rest of the Royal Guards were divided between three transport craft, about thirty of them to each, and they were accompanied by a further fifty Ascendancy naval troopers with each ship. The guards were clad much the same as they had been on Arbaros, which was very different from the way the troopers were. Ailian soldiers typically wore heavy personal armor and helmets, yet they carried a single weapon each, the standard Ailian battle rifle which could be converted for a number of different functions. The Royal Guards were armored very lightly for better flexibility and agility, and they wore no helmets to keep their peripheral vision clear, but they were armed much more heavily. Each Royal Guard wore a belt with a heavy caliber pistol and a knife strapped to it, and they all carried some sort of main weapon. For Aria and a number of the guards, that meant the shortened version of the battle rifle, while others carried the standard-length version. A select few of the guards, including Aria's executive officer, Lieutenant Ayalis, carried specialized long-range precision rifles in addition to their main weapon. One of every three of the guards also had a single-use, collapsible anti-armor missile launcher strapped across their shoulders.

One the way down, the transport was frequently buffeted by near misses from shipboard weapons fire. They had escorts from Ailian and Nuretan fighters, and several smaller capital ships were accompanying their wave of landing craft to screen them. Aria stayed up near the cockpit, where she could see out into space. As they entered the atmosphere, one of the ships accompanying them received a direct hit from an enemy vessel, and it detonated in a spectacular fireball. Several small chunks of debris impacted their transport, but the shielding and armor held and they sustained only minor damage. A few minutes later and they were out of danger from the ships in orbit, and they were flying high over the deserts of Aria's home planet.

Aria turned back to face the interior of the transport. -Five minutes to drop!- she shouted at the guards and the naval troopers, holding up all five fingers on one hand. The Ailian captain walked to where her soldiers were seated, and took her own seat. She knew from previous experience during training that the landing could be just as rough as the flight in.

She looked around at the Royal Guards and naval troopers in the large craft. Some of them were talking to each other, either exchanging jokes or good-natured insults. Others were quiet, and they

checked over their weapons or tightened the straps on their gear, making sure that everything was ready for when they reached their landing zone. A few had their eyes closed, and they looked to all the outside world to be asleep, but Aria knew that they were just lost in thought. Maybe they were worried about the battle ahead, or perhaps they brimmed with the kind of excitement that made one completely still. Aria felt as though she had that sort of excitement right now. She would have liked to join in the joking, but as the commander of this group of soldiers she had to set the example of professionalism. Instead, she closed her eyes, and she leaned forward in her chair with her hands clasped in her lap.

-Liren'sa, lady of the battle...,- she whispered, quietly enough that nobody would be able to hear over the noise of the transport's engines. -Let my comrades be strong, my aim be true, and my feet be swift. And should the worst come to pass, and I fall this day...grant me the peace of my ancestors.- She stayed like that for the long, dreadful minutes until the alarm sounded through the length of the transport, at which point she launched herself back into full alertness. Now was the time.

Lieutenant Ayalis rose from her seat and began barking orders to all of the soldiers, who stood up and braced themselves against the walls of the craft. The pitch of the engines changed, and they all lurched as the pilot made a sudden dive. One of the naval troopers retched as her stomach reacted to the drastic change in altitude, and vomit splattered the floor. The Royal Guard next to her cuffed her on the shoulder and laughed, and she managed a weak laugh of her own after wiping her muzzle. Aria grinned. At least morale was high.

Seconds later the craft shook violently as it settled hard onto the ground. A hatch at the rear opened up, and the cool, filtered atmosphere of the airtight ship was almost instantly replaced by the hot, dry air of Lirna. Their ears were immediately assaulted by the sounds of battle. The pilots had landed them right in the center of Mat'aar Airbase, as planned. Aria could hear gunfire and scattered shouting, quite close by, as well as the muted “crump” of grenades going off. At a shout from Aria, all of the soldiers in the transport charged out into the fray and split up into their designated fire groups. They all had their own individual assignments, and they didn't need her supervision to carry them out. Aria and her group had one task at this point: to link up with General Soumaren and her Imperial Marine contingent at the airbase and push forward into the city to slip inside the royal palace.

-Alright, Mari,- Aria shouted, with a slap on the back of Lieutenant Ayalis. She flinched a little as a round ricocheted off the armor of their transport craft. -Let's get to it. Our rendezvous point with General Soumaren is the front gate of the airbase, and we're already behind schedule.-

-Yes, Captain,- Lieutenant Ayalis agreed. She turned to the rest of their group, composed of fifteen Royal Guards and ten naval troopers. -You heard the captain, move it! Take cover at the nearest building and we'll start pushing for the front gate!-

They started running, paying no heed to the fighting that was taking place all around them except to return fire towards incoming rounds. The sand of her homeworld felt glorious underneath Aria's booted feet, and the atmosphere of battle was even better. This was her element. It had been far too long, for her, since she had experienced combat of this sort. All around her was the stuff that legendary fights were made of. The expansive landing field of Mat'aar Airbase was as occupied as on any day, except not by ships and other flying craft this time. Armored units had landed along with the troops, of every kind that the Ascendancy and the Nuretan Empire could field. The largest of these were the towering two-legged walkers that were the mainstay of the Ailian Navy's ground divisions. Ten meters tall, made of metal as tough as that which composed a fighter, the walkers had thick legs that bent backwards, topped with a bulky, rotating pilot compartment, the right side of which was fitted with a long, large-caliber cannon that was capable of firing a 108-millimeter shell three times in a minute. These walking tanks began prowling the base, searching for and finding enemy positions close-in and far away and lobbing high explosive rounds at them. They were accompanied by smaller wheeled units equipped with machine guns and missile launchers, who fielded the dual task of protecting the larger walkers while engaging infantry. The Nuretans helped out with their curious, oblong hovering tanks, which sported independently-tracking cannon turrets that allowed them to cover multiple directions at once. Designed with aquatic terrain in mind, they had been upfitted with engine covers that allowed them to handle the sandy, hot conditions of Lirna.

Aria and her team made it to the line of buildings after a hard run, but instead of heading inside they hugged the walls and pushed on into the building complex itself. They began moving away from the center of the base, where the fighting was heaviest, and leapfrogged from building to building as they moved for their first objective. Along the way, they came across scattered squads of rebel soldiers, all Ailian, and had to stop several times to deal with these obstacles. The enemy troops were very well-trained, as soldiers of the Ascendancy could expect to be, but the Royal Guards were better-trained than them all. Every time, Aria and her guards got in close and dealt with the enemies while the naval troopers hung back and offered supporting fire.

It didn't take long for Aria to reach the vicinity of their objective. The front gate of Mat'aar Airbase was pretty much exactly that, a gate, though it was fortified and usually flanked by stationary armored units. Aria paused, afforded cover by the outer wall of a building, and peeked around to see what was awaiting them. What she saw was a company of Nuretan Imperial Marines, pinned down behind the scarce cover given to them by the hulks of several of their burned-out hovertanks. The marines were clearly trying to advance on the inside of the front gate, but they were stalled by rebel troops stationed there. The rebels were well-placed, atop the wall of the gate with snipers and rifle

infantry. As the Ailian captain watched, several of the Nuretans were picked off when they ventured too far out of cover. The situation was going to turn ugly for them very quickly, especially if rebel armor descended on the area.

-Mari,- Aria called, waving her executive officer over. -Take three guards and get to high ground. We need to thin out the enemy troops so we can take the gate. Do it quickly. We'll distract them while you get in position.-

Lieutenant Ayalis nodded and motioned three of the other guards over, and she made sure that one of those she selected was a sniper as well. They vanished behind the rest of the squad to look for a way to get on top of the building they were taking cover at. Aria shouldered her rifle and took aim at the top wall of the front gate. The soldiers around her mimicked her, placing themselves so they had clear shots while grabbing as much cover as they could. So far they hadn't been noticed by the defenders at the gate, but that would soon change.

Aria took a deep breath, and her ears pricked forward as she tuned all of her senses carefully. Without any sort of verbal command, she pulled the trigger on her weapon and sent a burst of fire towards the rebels on the wall, and the rest of her squad followed suit a split second later. Though they had little hope of hitting them from this distance, owing to the enemy's superior position, the point of it was to make them duck down and to draw fire towards her own men while Lieutenant Ayalis made her move. The tactic worked, and they soon heard the crackle of bullets striking the ground and walls around them. They ducked into cover when they needed to, but they never let up their firing for more than a few seconds.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Ayalis and her fire team had found a spot at the back of building where there were water and electrical conduits on the exterior wall. The four of them strapped their weapons to their backs and started climbing, and though the handholds were small and not easy to grip they were able to get to the roof of the three-story building without too much difficulty. Once on the roof, they low-walked across the flat surface until they neared the side that faced the front gate. All four of them dropped flat to the sandstone surface at the same time and crawled the rest of the way. The lack of sandy bursts near the edge of the roof, which would signify shots hitting the building there, let them know that they hadn't been seen.

The Ailian lieutenant and her other sniper, a sergeant, unstrapped their weapons from their backs and rested the bodies of the rifles rest on the slightly raised edge of the building's roof, letting the barrels extend out over empty space. The sniper rifles bore only passing similarities to the standard Ailian infantry weapon. The main body of the weapon was slender at the front, with a stock which broadened out from the rear end of the body and had holes carved into it for the shooting hand's fingers

to fit into. The long end of the barrel was capped with a triangular prism-shaped protrusion with slots notched into it at regular intervals, which served to dissipate the flash from the gunshot as well as to decrease noise. On the dorsal side of the rifle was a thick cylindrical scope that allowed the shooter to have an extremely clear view of their target at great distances.

Mari looked through her scope and sighted in on the top wall of the front gate. A built-in rangefinder lased the wall, and the tiny readout told her that the distance from there to her position was approximately two hundred and twenty meters. Just outside of the maximum practical range for the short-barreled rifles the two guards accompanying the snipers carried, but child's play for the sniper weapons. The lieutenant did her level best to make herself melt into the roof, and she relaxed almost every muscle in her body. Her tail was lying straight out behind her in between her legs, which were spread at an even distance, and the only parts of her body that were raised were her head and shoulders. She tucked the stock of her rifle tightly into the crook of her arm, and she let her free hand rest on top of the weapon underneath her cheek. Her eye stared unflinchingly into the scope. The black-furred female had a perfect view from here, and the targeting dot of her scope rested on the head of one of the rebel soldiers. He had impressive cover from the troops on the ground below. Not so much from above.

-Do you have a target, Sergeant?- Lieutenant Ayalis asked. Her voice was almost too low to be heard.

-Yes, ma'am.- The other sniper's posture exactly mirrored hers.

-Alright. Wait for the firing to pick up, then take your shot. Keep it up until I tell you to stop.- Mari started breathing deep and slow, calling upon all of her training to slow her own heart rate down. When she was totally relaxed, and when a new flurry of gunfire rose to a near-deafening crescendo, she pressed back on the trigger of her weapon. The rifle kicked back against her shoulder, but the sound that issued from it was barely a whisper in the cacophony of noise coming down from below. The bullet took barely a tenth of a second to travel the distance from where it exited her weapon to when it impacted the unfortunate soldier she was targeting. When it did, his body stiffened and jerked back, a greyish-pink cloud erupting from the other side of his head as the bullet made a mess of his skull. He crumpled dead to the top of the wall as another soldier three down from him did the same, felled by the other sniper atop the building.

One by one, Lieutenant Ayalis and the sergeant picked off rebel soldiers, and the fire coming down at Aria's squad and the Nuretan marines began to slack off. This gave them the chance to time their shots more effectively, and the enemy troops began falling from shots fired from the ground as well as from the roof. They spent nearly fifteen minutes on this deadly game of pop-up targets, but in the end the coast was clear and the Nuretans were able to relax a little, as Aria and her guards broke

cover and swiftly crossed the ground towards their allies.

One of the amphibian aliens came out of cover to meet her, and Captain Me'lia found herself face to face with General Soumaren, who looked a little breathless but unhurt. -Thank you for your assistance, Captain,- the general said gratefully. She was dressed in the fashion of the Imperial Marines, wearing a mottled-blue uniform and the curious tilted green cloth hats that were common among Nuretan military units. A few of the other marines echoed her sentiments of gratitude, some of them congratulating each other on surviving the skirmish while others started tending to the wounded who could be saved. Out of the company of fifty, thirty-three were unhurt, five were injured but still capable of moving and fighting, and the rest were either dead outright or would soon be. -I've heard from some of my troops over the radio. They report that the airbase is largely under our control. That's none of our concern. I have a few of your armored ground vehicles heading to us, and they'll carry us into the city. Our scouts and recon drones are telling us that the streets are mostly empty. It seems a lot of the rebel forces in the city are spreading out to try to stop our advance.-

-That would make sense,- Aria said. -There is a lot of cover in the city. They'll split up to try to take advantage of it and make us waste out time going building-to-building.-

General Soumaren nodded her agreement, and then she gave a tight-lipped grin. -We're not going to play that game. Your squad and mine will load up and lance through Hayikwiir City to the royal palace. We're not stopping for anything. I've ordered some of our air cover to break off from the main battle and clear the streets on the most direct route of any enemy armor that may be patrolling the city.- The Nuretan general's neon-colored eyes were flaring with anticipation. -I plan on being at the walls of the royal palace within the next two hours. We still have a lot of daylight left. Does that sound adequate to you, Captain?-

Aria gave a smile that was all teeth. -I like that plan.- She turned her head as Lieutenant Ayalis and her fire team rejoined the group. -Excellent shooting, Lieutenant.-

-Yes, Captain,- Mari said.

-Everyone reload and eat what you can,- General Soumaren ordered. -We have two minutes until the vehicles are here, and then I want to keep it tight until we reach the next checkpoint. Am I understood?-

A chorus of shouts in the affirmative answered her.

Admiral Kris wore a look of grim satisfaction on her face. Anyone else would have thought that she had little to be satisfied about. The combined fleet of Nuretan and Ailian ships that were opposing her in the space above Lirna were slowly gaining the advantage. Her own ships were being worn down,

little by little, as her numbers began to drop. As she checked the radar readouts from her command chair aboard her flagship, she saw another battle group drop off the screen as their ships were overtaken by enemy fire.

-Give me your report,- the rebel admiral said calmly, not bothering to look over her shoulder as one of her officers approached her from the rear.

-We've dropped the enemy down to approximately fifty-five percent of their battle capability,- the officer told her. -However, we're at nearly the same level ourselves. If the fighting continues at this rate, we'll soon be overpowered.-

-Understood, Commander,- Kris said. She grinned, her tailtip twitching behind her. -All as planned. Continue as we have. Commit what resources we can to our left flank. We can't have them breaking through too quickly.-

-Yes, Admiral.-

Selina Kris stood up from her chair and walked to the railing of the heavy battlecruiser's bridge, and she leaned over. -Have you been tracking the location of the *Krisa'la*?- Her crew pit was a flurry of activity, with officers and enlisted personnel moving about between communications and monitoring stations as they watched over various aspects of the fighting. Though it was noisy and somewhat chaotic down there, one of her senior officers heard her and reported back.

-Admiral, I have that ship's location,- the Ailian captain told her. -We lost it a number of times, but we have it again. I can transmit that information to your command console.-

-Do so,- Admiral Kris said with a nod, and she let her grin widen. -I want Te'rou's head. I must update Admiral Me'lia with our status. In the meantime, Captain, you will contact our two strongest and least damaged ships and have them form up on us. Very shortly we shall be making a run on the *Krisa'la*.- The sable woman chuckled as she saw the confusion on the captain's face. -You don't have to understand. Just follow my orders.-

-Ah...Yes, Admiral...- The captain still looked like she didn't know what was going on, but she turned back to her console and began carrying out Kris' commands.

Admiral Kris turned back around and returned to her chair. As the captain had promised, she had transmitted the location of Admiral Te'rou's flagship to her screen. Kris examined the readout for another few minutes as the excitement welled up inside of her, and then she keyed up her communications link to the planets' surface.

-My lady. We are ready.-

Admiral Te'rou was ecstatic. The battle was going far more smoothly than he had thought it

would earlier in the fight. Once the landings had been completed, he had been able to pull back the ships which had been tasked to escort the transport craft. The added firepower had turned the tide back against the onslaught of rebel fighter ships, and they had begun taking a toll on the enemy's heavier assets as well. Now they were pressing the enemy on their flanks, and he was watching on the radar screens as the opposing fleets were being rounded up into a tight group.

-We have them!- Te'rou declared, as he smacked his fist on the arm of his chair in triumph.

-Regroup all heavy fighters and begin attack runs on the enemy's main cruisers. Prepare for mass bombardment, and begin prepping our ships for precision strikes to aid the ground forces. I've got her right where I...-

-Admiral! I'm detecting a large number of vessels emerging from hyperspace!-

Te'rou's ears fell back as he abruptly stood up from his command chair. Red lights began flashing everywhere on the bridge as alarms began to sound, and voices began to rise, some of them in panic, from the crew deck. While his flagship's captain began shouting orders into his comm system, Te'rou rushed to the railing overlooking the deck and tried to make sense of what was going on.

-Report! Now! What's happening?-

His captain spoke from behind him, and Te'rou could hear the barely restrained alarm in his voice. -Admiral, we have Pteryd ships incoming on our position. At least two fleet strength. They're coming around the planet right now and will be directly ahead of us. If we keep encircling the rebel fleets, we're going to leave out flanks wide open!-

-Pull back our flankers,- Te'rou said, his heart suddenly racing due to an entirely different emotion. -Pull everyone back! Regroup the fleets and bunker down for the incoming enemy.- He swiped a hand across his face. The speed at which the battle had just turned against him was enough that he felt as though he might lose his balance, and he grabbed the railing for support. -I don't want to say it, but start looking for avenues of retreat. I don't know if we can handle *two* fresh Pteryd fleets, not in our condition.-

-But...the ground forces...If we leave...-

-I know,- Te'rou said. He went back to his command chair and sat down, bracing himself for what was about to come. -Let's hope it doesn't come to that. With any luck, our troops on the ground will have some good news for us soon.-

Aria was sitting in the lead armored vehicle with General Soumaren, in the back where the compartment was fully enclosed. The vehicles were Ailian in design, little more than elongated rectangles with eight massive wheels set at even intervals in armored housings. The carrier was armed

on top with two open gun turrets, one in front on top of the driver's compartment and one in the rear, each manned by a single Ailian soldier who swiveled around as they drove and watched for the enemy. They had been rushing their way towards and through Hayikwiir City for the better part of an hour and a half, dodging here and there and avoiding getting engaged as much as possible, and for the most part they had been successful. Apart from a few moments when they'd had to change direction quickly and fire off a few bursts at some distant enemy, the ride had been quiet.

The quietness was what worried Aria. -I don't like how well this has gone off, General,- she said to the Nuretan officer, her voice a low growl that was barely heard over the rumble of their vehicle's engine. -I was expecting the enemy to keep themselves inconspicuous inside the city limits, but I was not expecting nothing at all. We should have been attacked more by now.-

-You're right,- General Soumaren agreed reluctantly. She looked at the soldiers who packed the wheeled transport with them, and she turned to face Aria directly so that they would not be able to overhear. -I've been getting updates from our air recon. They've been reporting what we already know: except for the major chokepoints, the streets are largely empty. They can't get too deep into the city because anti-air emplacements have been erected, more than we anticipated. But they are giving us the routes we've been traveling.-

-Has it occurred to you that we are being indirectly herded?- Aria asked her, as she lowered her ears. -This is my mother, after all. I can't imagine that she hasn't prepared for us in some way.-

Soumaren looked troubled. -I've thought of that,- she admitted. -But whether we're being herded there or not, deeper into the city and to the royal palace is where we need to go. I don't see any way around it.-

-I just hope we aren't getting in over our heads.-

Before General Soumaren could respond to the Ailian, they were all jerked forward as the wheeled transport ground to a halt all of a sudden. A few exclamations of confusion could be heard from the soldiers within, and some of them wondered aloud if they were about to change direction again, but then the exit hatch to the transport opened and Lieutenant Ayalis poked her head inside.

-General, Captain,- she hissed, as her expression appeared quite urgent. -You need to come outside and see this.-

Without asking any questions, Aria and General Soumaren both rose to their feet. Aria beat the Nuretan officer to the hatch, and she followed the lieutenant outside and around the transport. Aria could tell from their surroundings that they were very near the royal palace, but still a few blocks away from their destination. What she saw as she stuck her head around the cover of the armored vehicle made her heart sink.

The royal palace was visible through the buildings, but it was behind a wall of Ailian walkers, painted with rebel colors. Her sharp eyes could make out entrenched infantry positions, and more than that, she saw Pteryd airships patrolling the sky. The fortification was a lot more than they had been prepared for, and more than their drone surveillance craft had spied a mere hour ago. Evidently, between when they had departed Mat'aar Airbase and arrived at this point, the enemy had heavily reinforced the area.

General Soumaren said it first. -Not good.-

-Not good at all.-

Te'rou was at the point where even he would have admitted he was beginning to be scared. He had fought Pteryd before, during border disputes on the edges of Ascendancy territory, but he had never fought them at this scale. Because of the telepathic capabilities of the Pteryd, their ship commanders were in absolutely constant contact with each other, and it showed in the movement of their ships. Their fleets seemed to move in concert, and if he had not been on the receiving end of their power, he would have admired it as a thing of beauty.

By now, his fleets were down to forty percent strength, and that number was falling rapidly. *His* ships were the ones in danger of being encircled now, and it was only through some fairly reckless tactics that he had avoided already getting to that point. His ship was taking damage now, and there was scarcely a ship among his combined fleet that didn't have some sort of damage to it. As much as Te'rou didn't like the idea, he needed to start looking for a way to get out if he was going to salvage something from this inevitable defeat.

-Turn us about!- he ordered through clenched teeth. -Start recalling fighters and put as much power to the shields and engines as you can. We need to get out of here. We've lost this one.-

His captain swallowed hard, but nodded, knowing that Admiral Te'rou was right. He began giving the orders, and Te'rou saw the view outside the front windows of the *Krisa'la* change as his ship came around. The engines thrummed loudly as the engineers began rerouting power.

-Admiral!- a voice called up from the crew deck. -We're being flanked!-

-I see them,- Te'rou growled as the hair on the back of his neck raised. Coming into view as his flagship rotated was the sight he least wanted to see right now. In the confusion of the onslaught of the Pteryd, an Ailian heavy battlecruiser and three smaller human warships had maneuvered around behind his battle group. They all looked undamaged, and that was not good for his ships, some of which were barely in shape for running, let alone fighting. -That's Selina's flagship...She wants me for herself.- He clenched his jaw, but then he felt himself relax. -I suppose this is it...At least I'll get to die over the skies

of the homeworld...-

Just as Admiral Kris' ship began firing towards his, a second round of alarms rang through the bridge. *What now?* Te'rou groaned inside his head, wondering how things could possibly get any worse. He got his answer a moment later from both his eyes and the shout of one of his junior officers.

-Admiral, there are unknown ships coming in from hyperspace, directly behind us!-

Te'rou's eyes widened as he saw ships begin to emerge into space, a hundred of them at least, with more of them arriving every moment. Some of them were Ailian, but the majority of them were human, and they looked much more formidable than the ones that they had faced so far. Several of them were as large as his own flagship, and as he watched a massive human fighter-carrier flashed into existence, and this one really *was* larger than his, easily the largest ship that humans had ever made.

-It must be the rest of the rebel fleet!- he snarled. He called up his sensor display as a group of the newcomers surged forward. He focused on one of the Ailian ships, and as he got a lock on its transponders he suddenly frowned. -But...that's the *Cha'ren*...She's with the Tenth Fleet, on the human border. She shouldn't be here.-

A moment later, the incoming group opened fire, and Te'rou braced for the impacts of their combined barrage. Instead, he was astonished to see two of the human ships around the rebel flagship take multiple impacts and disintegrate in a flash as their engines detonated. The remaining two enemy ships began to maneuver away, under continued assault from the attacking vessels as they rotated to return fire.

-We have an incoming transmission!- one of his communications officer on the crew deck reported. -We're being hailed by that human carrier!-

-What!?- Te'rou shouted, not really believing what he was hearing. He was frozen for a split second, but then he shot to his feet. -Get me someone who speaks human, right now!-

There was a scramble as they looked for someone, and finally a young Ailian lieutenant rushed to the communications terminal. He put on the headset that the senior communications officer had been wearing and listened for a moment. When he looked up again, his face was a mixture of confusion and glee.

-The captain of the carrier is talking to me,- the lieutenant reported. His tail was windmilling the air madly behind him in his excitement. -He says he's the commander of the Thirteenth United Nations Expeditionary Fleet, and that they were sent by order from Cerelis. They've come with our Tenth Fleet, and they say they're here to help. They're asking for our targeting data!-

Te'rou's jaw dropped open as he processed what the lieutenant was telling him. His legs felt weaker than ever, and he sank into his chair, lightheaded and shaking. He covered his eyes with his

hands as the biggest wave of relief he'd ever felt washed over him. Then he felt the fire of eagerness for battle rising up again, and he let himself smile.

-Ask the humans what took so long,- Te'rou said, allowing himself a laugh. -And then start transmitting everything we have. We might win this battle after all.- He closed his eyes and sighed heavily as his crew began to cheer.