

Civil War: The Semset Schism

Book 1: The Battle of Drakar

Prologue: The Enemy

February 2nd, 474 ASC

Dawn broke early over the snow-capped peaks of Sodbrys, the secluded Southern mountain city. Prince Kortalsk Dracaria, once again, rose late from his bed. Padding to the window, the young dragon opened the shutters and looked out over the snowy landscape around the city. It was still early, and the streets were still asleep below the castle. It was bitter cold outside, he could tell. His breath fogged up the window, and he irritably wiped it away with the side of his hand.

“Another day.” It had become a mantra of his in the last few months. Winter always depressed him, and he knew the lack of sun was the culprit. Even though the palace was set high on the top of the tallest mountain in the Onkatur Mountain range, they still got very little sunlight in the winter. He found it much easier to deal with if he didn’t look at a calendar to remind him of how much longer winter was going to last.

He was pulled from his thoughts by a loud knock at the door, and a girl’s voice rang through it as clear as the crisp air outside. “Kortalsk! You missed breakfast again!” The voice never failed to bring a grin to his face, and today wasn’t the day where that trend was broken. He threw a black silk robe over his nude body, tying it around his waist just as the door crashed open.

In the doorway was a dragon girl, half his size and age. She held a tray almost as large as she was, and set it down on the large desk on the opposite side of the room. Patterned with gold scales on her back and pure white on her belly, she was almost a clone of Kortalsk himself. Aside from the crop of black mane that ran down the back of her neck as well, that is. “You’re lucky I fixed you a tray; now get to eating before it gets cold.”

Kortalsk couldn’t help but chuckle. “Maya, you sound like Mother when you talk like that.” He sat down at the table, examining the plate that consisted of a couple fried eggs, a generous portion of ham, and strong black coffee. While he’d felt hungry when he woke up, he felt his appetite start to wane as he stared down at the plate in front of him. Still, he figured it would be best to eat, and he tried to force it down. He managed to choke down an egg and half of the ham before he felt that he’d had enough. With a bit of a sigh, he picked up the mug of coffee.

Maya huffed, eyeing him sternly as she always did when he didn't feel like eating. "Well, Mother left me here to take care of you when she went north to Brys. So that's what I'm gonna do." Wrinkling her nose at the unfinished meal, she took it away after he'd picked up his coffee. "You really need to eat. You're gonna be a king, and who wants a skinny king? They're supposed to be fat and loud and happy."

Kortalsk snorted. "Like that bloated tub of an Emperor? I'd rather live with scale rot."

Maya punched his arm, wagging her finger at him. "You should know better than to talk like that. You never know what reporters are around. Someone could be on their way to Arcadia Prime with a recording of you saying that right now."

Ordinarily, Kortalsk didn't find his youngest sister irritating, but today he could feel her mannerisms starting to irk him. "It wouldn't be any worse than him getting news of a certain princess skipping her daily studies. You ought to get back to them, I get the feeling I'm going to be very busy today."

Maya made a face, but she took the tray and scampered off, leaving him with the pot of coffee beside him. Kortalsk booted up his datapad, a square piece of computer hardware roughly the size of a large book. Of course, it was only a quarter inch thick, and much lighter. He read through various news articles, looking in particular for anything interesting in the World & Galaxy section. He got halfway down the page before he got bored, then closed the news program and loaded up a game.

He played for about an hour before he glanced up at the clock display at the corner, and realized that he was running late. Shutting down his datapad, he left the cold coffee on the desk beside it and rushed to bathe himself and dress in time for opening the Great Hall.

“Mother, I’m worried about Kortalsk. He hasn’t answered any calls in three days.” Mia kept her head still as a servant girl combed her thick silver hair, carefully braiding it as well. “I know how winter affects him, and it seems like he gets worse every year.”

Gracia looked up from her book, a bit of amusement in her blue eyes. “Mia, your father was the same way. He’ll come out of it when spring starts, as he always does. Besides, if anything happened to him, you know Maya would be the first one to tell you.”

Mia and Kortalsk were born identical twins, and she had always been the more reserved one, and the worrier. Kortalsk had loved taking risks and thrills when he was younger, and it was always Mia who tried to tell him that it wasn’t a good idea. She’d had many “I told you so” moments whenever Kortalsk ended up in the castle’s infirmary. She was always in some state of concern for his safety since he left for Sodbrys after their uncle and father perished in a hunting accident two years ago.

After her hair was finished, braided neatly and tied together with several bands of woven silver, she slipped her slender frame into an emerald green dress that nearly reached the floor. The sleeves reached down to her elbows, and the squared neckline put her dark sapphire pendant on display over the pure white scales on her chest.

She was just in time for the opening of the Hall, and for the meeting with the concerns of her subjects on the northern hemisphere of Drakar. They were largely territorial, and of very little importance to her. She was glad that she was in for easy work, as she couldn’t take her mind off of Kortalsk. She found herself growing restless by noon, and she felt that if she had to listen to another farmer’s complaint about their town’s governor declining a zoning reassignment, she was going to scream.

By the time that the lunch hour came about, Mia practically sprang out of her throne. She left the castle through a back door as she usually did, taking in a deep breath of the chilly afternoon air. She pulled her cloak tightly around her as she followed the path from the castle down to the city below. The docket for hearings was already exhausted by lunch time, which left her free to spend the rest of her day as she pleased.

As she walked through town, she felt the reassuring weight of her P2K repeater pistol in a concealed pocket of her cloak bouncing against her hip. It was small and light, which was the exact reason why she carried it. She hadn’t had to draw it ever since she’d gotten it several years ago, but she could never be too careful when walking along the street.

Mia walked through the market district, looking in the windows of various stores and wondering how people afforded some of the ridiculous prices that the war brought on. As she stopped to sit on a bench for a while and watch the pedestrians, she overheard two police officers talking as they leaned against their patrol speeder. “Shit, man. I’m glad Drakar hasn’t declared a side in this war goin’ on. We’d be totally fucked if they did. Did you hear? Empire’s got warships all around this leg of the galaxy; we’re in the middle of a goddamn hornet’s nest.”

That conversation did nothing to calm Mia’s already frayed nerves. She’d been getting more and more pressure from Emperor Rin-Landek to declare Drakar’s loyalty to the Empire. A prosperous mining planet, the vast iron and gold reserves were a valuable target on its own, but the massive reserve of Larkuronium made Drakar a very popular planet in the magical community. She’d been able to dodge the question for several months, but he was growing impatient, and she feared that he would try to force her hand.

Practically fleeing that area of town, she returned to the castle, where she spent the rest of the night, reading and researching. But most of all, she spent the night worrying.

February 4th, 474 ASC

“Princess, there’s a transmission coming through.”

At those words, Mia felt her heart leap into her throat. She knew exactly who it was, and she knew exactly what he would want. She pressed a button on the arm of her throne, and a massive viewscreen ascended from the floor. At once, the face of an old bloodhound appeared in front of her, and he looked none too happy.

“Your Radiance, I didn’t expect you to call this early in the morning,” Mia said. From the look on the Emperor’s face, she could already tell how the conversation was going to go. Her finger hovered over the call button, prepared to call in her council as soon as the connection was terminated.

“With all due respect, Princess Dracaria, we can skip the introductions. Now, as you know, your planet is very abundant with three things we need. Iron, gold, and Larkuronium. You’ve been a very faithful subject of the Empire since the beginning of history.” His tone was kind, but she could practically taste the venom behind it. She wasn’t going to be able to dodge him this time. “You’ve dawdled for too long, and talked about meeting with your council. It’s time for you to make a decision, princess.”

She was silent for a few moments, stunned for a reply. She fumbled around for a moment before she finally managed to speak. “I cannot make that decision without consulting my brother in Sodbrys. The castle there has been having issues with their transmission receiver.”

Instantly, the Emperor’s face went from unhappy to pure rage. Baring his teeth at her, he shook his fist at the screen. “You’ve delayed long enough! Make your decision or I will have my entire army kicking down your door! Declare your loyalty to the Empire or you will be branded as a traitor like the rest of those weak planets that side with that damn Confederacy!”

Almost as if on instinct, she pressed a button, and the transmission ended. Her chest felt tight, and she could hardly breathe. Her heart was racing, and her hand gripped the arm of her throne. She knew as soon as that screen went dark that she’d made an informal declaration of war. Jabbing at another button, she called for her council to convene immediately, and placed an urgent transmission through to Sodbrys.

“Well, I guess we’d better start gearin’ up for war, sis,” Kortalsk said. He was seated at his throne, one elbow propped on the arm rest and his head leaning against his fist. “Sounds like you cheesed him off big time.”

His casual manner of speaking about it infuriated Mia. War! People would be fighting and killed! And he was sitting there acting as if it was all some backyard game! “I’ve already spoken to my council. Troops in the northern hemisphere have been mobilized. Our naval patrol hasn’t reported anything in the area yet, but I wouldn’t take that lightly. Kortalsk, I’m begging you to take this seriously. I can’t launch your half of the army, and I don’t want to see us lose our planet because you think he’s bluffing!”

Kortalsk simply shrugged. “How many times has he threatened to storm Drakar now? I stopped counting after ten. I’m getting the feeling that it’s just something that he does when he wants to scare you, and it’s finally worked. Sis, you really need to talk to one of the doctors and get on some medication for your anxiety. It’s starting to mess with you.”

Mia’s hands curled into fists, and she could already feel tears springing to her eyes. “Please, Kortalsk! You’ve never listened to me when we were kids, and I was always right! Mobilize your army and get ships into orbit! Do *something*!”

With a yawn, Kortalsk waved a hand. “Alright, alright. Once you hang up, I’ll get my council organized and we’ll deploy. Happy?”

Mia let out a defeated sigh, jabbing the button to end the call. Wiping her eyes, she turned to Gracia standing beside her. “Mother, he won’t listen to me. Drakar is going to be attacked, and he’s just going to let it happen.”

Gracia closed her eyes, and was quiet for a moment. “I don’t think so, Mia. I’m sure he’ll listen to you this time.”

February 5th, 474 ASC

Kortalsk had gone to bed heavily drunk that night; a habit that he'd noticed was becoming much too frequent. His conversation with Mia had unsettled him a bit, but he simply chalked it up to his own mental issues. Winter was taking its toll on him as it always did, and he was letting her anxiety get to him too. Beer was the only thing that drowned out his thoughts that night, and he passed out in his chambers at around midnight.

He was awoken at around 6am by a thunderous explosion and shouts from the hallway. Stumbling out of bed, Kortalsk darted to the window, and was stunned by the sight.

Sodbrys was burning.

Imperial starfighters screamed through the sky, their blaster cannons raining fire on the buildings below. Townsfolk screamed as they fled towards the gates, trampling each other in their panic and desperation. What military had managed to assemble tried to fight back, only to be mowed down by the onslaught of Imperial soldiers.

Kortalsk threw on his robe, grabbed his AP4 repeater pistol, and darted out into the hallway. Castle guards stormed the halls, taking up defensive positions as they prepared for the inevitable assault. He checked his pistol to make sure a round was chambered, and kept it in his hand. He started when something grabbed his leg, looking down to see a panicked Maya.

"Kortalsk! What's going on?" she asked, glancing about at all of the armed guards with a fearful eye. "Are we being attacked?"

Kneeling down, Kortalsk gave Maya the last embrace he'd ever give her. "Listen to me, Maya. I want you to get down to the private hangar. People are going to be evacuating, and they'll be going to Brys. You get on one of those shuttles and get out of here. I'll stay here and help these guys fight them off, and I'll meet you there when we're done. Okay?"

Maya began to cry, hugging him tighter. "I don't want to leave you behind! You have to come too!"

Kortalsk looked over his shoulder down the hall. The guards were shouldering their rifles, and he knew they didn't have much time. "Maya, I don't have time to argue with you. I'll meet you in Brys when we're done fighting. Now get going or they'll leave without you!" Maya hesitated, but eventually she let him go and ran down the hall. Kortalsk watched her go, praying to gods he didn't believe in to lead her to the hangar safely.

With that, he ducked behind a pillar, flicked off the safety, and waited for all hell to break loose.

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He awoke with a splitting headache, and he could feel that his wrists and ankles were bound. He remembered defending the hallway with the guards, his repeater bucking in his hand as he returned fire against the invading Imperial soldiers. All around him, the guards' R20 assault rifles had snarled, launching a hail of bullets in their direction. Unfortunately for them, the better-trained soldiers had slowly pushed them back, overwhelming the castle's guard entirely.

The last thing he remembered was turning to fight off a soldier, his pistol empty. The butt of a rifle collided with the back of his head, and he was unconscious. Evidently, they had been given orders ahead of time to capture him alive.

He was on the floor of a dungeon cell. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust, and even then, his vision was terribly blurry. He became aware of a severe ache in his shoulder. Turning his head to look at it, he saw dried blood soaked into his robe from what was probably a gunshot wound. He felt sick to his stomach, although whether that was due to a hangover or a result of the rifle butt to the head, he wasn't sure.

The door to the cell hissed open as it slid aside, and he could barely make out the shape of a tall figure flanked by two Imperial soldiers. They trained their rifles on him as their officer approached. Kneeling down in front of the bound prince, the officer grinned. A clean-shaven human of roughly fifty, there was no kindness in the slate gray eyes.

"Why didn't you fight back?" he asked, lifting Kortalsk's head to look at him. He couldn't find the strength to resist. "Your North end had an impenetrable net of warships and fighters in orbit. And you had nothing. Didn't your sister tell you we were coming?"

Kortalsk could do nothing more than look at the face of his captor, and curse himself for doubting Mia. As he had when they were kids, he thought she was worrying too much, and didn't listen. And once again, she'd been right.

She'd always been right.

The officer smiled again, standing up. "Well, not that it matters much to you, but my name is General Robert Werts. I'm in command of this little excursion. Luckily for your sister, she'll have more of a chance than you did. I'm feeling gracious, so I'm going to give her some time to consider her situation before she surrenders. I'm not stupid enough to launch a full-scale assault directly on Brys, but I will lead a march to the north. I'll burn, destroy, and kill anyone and anything that gets in my way. If your sister continues to resist, she'll meet the same end you will."

Even through his blurred vision, Kortalsk could recognize a repeater pistol being drawn from a holster inside of General Werts' coat. He couldn't see the black mouth of its barrel pointed at his forehead, though. There was a brief flash, and he was thrown into cold darkness.