

Alien Revolt Chapter 1

Hope Nath's thoughts were wrapped around her younger sister's latest hijinks as she traveled the battlecruiser's corridor. She controlled the urge to stomp from the teenager's classroom back to the department where she worked. She noticed little around her as she went. The corridors of the battlecruiser *Sword of Truth* were ever the same: the carpet beneath her feet threadbare, half the computers and readouts set in the walls dim from failure, the air musty from constant recycling. The hum of the engines was so omnipresent as to be unheard, and she didn't note the soft tread of the few crewmates who hurried past her.

She came back to the present in an instant when she turned the corner and crashed right into a big, solid—and immovable—Kalquorian body. The collision with the man's torso, reinforced by a blue armored formsuit, knocked her back a couple of steps.

"Watch it, boy," the owner of the body snarled in a raspy voice.

Hope looked up and up at the huge specimen and his bigger companion. Being diminutive, she was used to gazing up at others, but Kalquorians averaged well over six feet tall. The one she'd plowed into was no exception.

The face staring down at her blinked blue-purple, cat-pupiled eyes. They shone bright with intelligence in the well-lit corridor, widening as the man took her measure. His elegant features, slightly offset by a heavy jaw, softened with a note of apology. "Oh...Matara?" He shot a startled expression at the black-uniformed, bearded brute standing by his side.

The brute shook his head slightly.

The Kalquorian blockade she'd plowed into recovered his composure and scowled at her. "I thought the Earthers kept their women under lock and key, Captain Kila."

"Maybe this female slipped her chains, Admiral." The other man smirked. Despite his primitive aspect, he had a wild handsomeness, similar to a tiger or other magnificent beast.

With their faces settling into unimpressed countenances, they stepped aside and continued on their way without a backwards glance. Hope turned to watch the behemoths stride in their one-piece uniforms that molded to their bodies...especially their backsides. She caught herself admiring the curves before she could help herself.

Big jerks with nice butts. One with bad eyesight.

Hope couldn't fault him for initially mistaking her for a boy. Her baggy brown technician's uniform wasn't exactly flattering. She was compact without the curves men seemed to appreciate. Hope often found comfort in lacking a figure that made men glance twice. For some reason, it stung this time.

Of all the males to have her feelings hurt by, Kalquorians should have been at the bottom of the list. She scowled. As she turned her back on the pair hurrying on their way, she muttered under her breath, "Alien bastards. I'll be glad when you Kalqs finish self-destructing with your stupid civil war."

She got moving again, counseling herself to be glad she hadn't impressed them nearly as much as they'd impressed her. Earth's propaganda against the Kalquorians had claimed they were determined to rape her home planet's women. It hadn't turned out to be true for the whole alien race, however.

A number of Kalquorians had revolted against their empire for allowing Earther women to live with them. It was that group the pathetic remains of Earth's military fleet fought on the side

of. Two species who hated each other and yet held the same cause dear: no mixing the races, not even to save themselves from extinction.

Hope sighed as she neared her work station. Politics. Fanatical beliefs. They had shaped her entire life and showed no sign of abating. She and her father were no closer to stopping the madness despite their efforts.

They'd been so close once. They'd been right at the wire, readying to overthrow the Holy Leader on Earth. Years in the making, the rebellion Hope's parents had helped spearhead had been mere weeks away from being realized. Then the Kalquorians invaded their space, triggering massive nuclear annihilation. Hope, her sister Charity, and their father had managed to get on the ship which spirited Browning Copeland and a few others off Earth moments before the cataclysm. Hope's mother, who'd been meeting with their contacts in Paris, had been killed. Lost, like billions of others, the last casualties in the war between Earth and Kalquor. Lost, like Earth itself.

Everything they'd hoped for was long gone, like the revolution that would have ended Holy Leader Browning Copeland's tyranny once and for all.

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Piras clenched his fists as he replayed his reaction to the young woman he'd almost run over. He spoke to Kila in Kalquorian, reasonably sure the few Earthers they passed wouldn't understand him. "Fuck. I damned near exposed us."

His subordinate and clanmate turned his eternal smirk on him. "Try not to worry about it. Pretty faces distract me too. I can never think straight around you."

Piras's scowl deepened. He shot his Nobek a warning look. "Stop playing. I'm serious, Kila. The moment I realized I'd nearly run over a woman, I came close to bowing and begging her to let me make up for my inattention." He shook his head and thought about punching the dingy wall he passed. "I swear, I'm the worst spy in the fleet."

"You're not. What you are is a perfectionist who doesn't accept anyone's dumb-assery, least of all your own." Kila's mocking grin deepened. "Don't worry. I'll be glad to punish you for the lapse later."

The word *punish* had an instant effect on Piras. His groin gave a throb of excitement, which pissed him off all the more. "Don't tease me when we're about to deal with Browning Copeland, or I'll punish *you*. Better yet, I'll have Lokmi do it."

Kila growled low in his throat, but his mocking smile never wavered. "Maybe if I'm a good boy and give him the upper hand, he'll agree to join our clan."

Piras's stomach lurched with want and hurt. Lokmi was the only Imdiko he could imagine joining his and Kila's newly-forged clan. The man was perfect for the two of them, the one person who could fit with their particular challenges. Unfortunately, Lokmi had significant issues of his own, problems which had thus far kept him from becoming their third.

Love had always been a hateful bastard, in Piras's opinion. For far too long, misplaced love for the wrong Nobek had kept him from realizing Kila was the right one. It was a wonder his clanmate hadn't given up and walked away. Instead, Kila had forced him to face and get over his heartbreaking sixteen-year relationship with Nobek Lidon. Piras hadn't wanted to relinquish his hurt, the sense of being cheated. It had made his and Kila's path to clanship difficult.

It would be so much easier if Piras could live without love, but he'd found he couldn't. He needed Kila and Lokmi. It was as simple as that. At least he'd won the Nobek. Now he needed

Lokmi to get past his fears. A tall order. The Imdiko would be far less forgiving than Kila if Piras screwed things up.

Piras had a tendency to screw up quite a bit. It was an unwanted talent.

I'm doing better. Lokmi will see he's meant for us, and we'll be complete. Piras had gotten used to giving himself such pep talks.

"Turn here," Kila said, consulting his handheld. The landing bay officer aboard the battlecruiser had grudgingly given them directions to where they needed to go. Browning Copeland hadn't bothered to send them a guide to his inner sanctum. It probably amused the Holy Leader to think of two Kalquorians bumbling around a hostile Earther battlecruiser.

Piras's thoughts turned from the struggles of love to the struggles of war as he sighted the guarded doorway halfway down the corridor. The pair of Earther men in red and gray uniforms on either side of the door snapped to attention as Piras and Kila neared. A third guard behind a table across from the doorway stood up from his chair and eyed them with open hostility.

"I take it you're Admiral Piras and Captain Kila?" The man spoke slowly, as if he thought he dealt with imbeciles.

Piras snapped a nod. "We are."

"Your weapons aren't allowed in the presence of the Holy Leader." The guard gazed significantly at the two blasters and four knives sheathed in Kila's utility belt. Piras wasn't armed.

Though Kila's gaze drilled into the guard's with aggressive intensity, his almost-constant smirk remained in place. The bearded Nobek's rough but handsome features weren't softened by the ceaseless smile that made it seem like he enjoyed a private joke at everyone else's expense. The guard twitched with obvious discomfort, though Piras couldn't be certain if it was from Kila's unnerving expression, his bulging physique, or the plethora of weapons he laid on the table. In addition to the knives and blasters from his belt, he pulled a long blade from a scabbard which lay against his spine, which had been hidden under his mass of black hair. He followed it with another knife, taken from its hiding place within his right boot. He removed a couple of explosives from the left boot. Piras thought there were at least another couple of knives secreted elsewhere on his clanmate. He said nothing as Kila held out his hands and turned around for inspection, indicating he was done.

"Do you want to search us?" the destroyer captain offered in a pleasant tone that somehow managed to imply death to anyone who took him up on it.

The guard stared at the massive man before him, at the scarred arms which spoke of dozens, if not hundreds of fights. He drew a breath to steady himself. "You look clean, but I have orders to check." He gazed at Piras. His expression suggested he was asking the senior officer to keep Kila from gutting him for following directives.

"I'm unarmed, but you're welcome to do your job," the admiral told him. His raspy voice held a note of polite warning. *Check but don't fuck with us.*

The guard came around the table. Glancing at the other two Earthers waiting by the door as if for reassurance, he conducted a sloppy pat-down on Piras. When he got to Kila, whose natural smirk had disappeared for the moment into a threatening glare, his search became shoddier yet. He found no weapons on the looming Nobek.

Kila sneered, "Are you done, sweetheart? Or should we have a few drinks too?"

The guard jerked, revulsion joining his fear. Same-sex liaisons among the Earthers were punishable by torture and death. The Kalquorians' easy acceptance and frequent indulgence of such relationships were well known and abhorred by most Earthers, at least in public.

Piras suspected only the uneasy alliance between the Holy Leader and the Kalquorians who revolted against their government kept the guard from reacting violently to Kila's suggestive comments. The Earther put the desk between himself and the pair in a hurry. He jerked his head to the guards by the door. "They're clear. Let them in."

Kila couldn't resist a parting shot. "Make sure all my toys are waiting for me when I'm done here, or you'll get a royal fucking...and not the kind I think you'd like." His smile had returned, but it was the snarling version he wore when he was his most dangerous. Big, terrifying, full of white teeth. The guard recoiled with open fear.

Piras nudged his clanmate. Kila was on the receiving end of the warning tone that time. "I doubt that'll be necessary, Captain. Come along. The Holy Leader is waiting."

They turned to the door, and it opened. Under the watchful eyes of the guards, they entered.

Piras was immediately struck by the tableau before him. Kila snorted softly.

Copeland is exhibiting himself as a god. Or his idea of what a god would look like. He would have laughed, but it wouldn't be productive to the start of their relationship. Though the admiral's ultimate aim was to destroy the man and his forces, he had to treat the so-called Voice of God with grave seriousness.

It took little effort to consider the view with tremendous solemnity. Some of Copeland's props made Piras's stomach turn. Any and all hilarity died a quick death as he took in the scene.

Copeland himself was awe-inspiring, at least in presentation. The man's wavy hair was combed back from an aging but handsome face. The luxuriant tresses were so white as to be blinding beneath the spotlight that shone down from the ceiling. The robe he wore, a garment of flowing hem and sleeves, was also white. Or it had been, before years had conspired to age the fabric. It had a grayish cast, especially when compared to the Holy Leader's thick mane of hair.

Crystalline blue eyes regarded Piras and Kila with detached interest, the corners of which were marked by creases of steadily encroaching age. For an Earther man in his seventies, Copeland appeared healthy. The glowing aspect of hair and lighting enhanced the vision.

The massive chair the Voice of God sat upon was elaborate, no doubt the Earther equivalent of a throne. The carved arms, legs, and back shimmered gold, but there was enough wear on the detailing to show it was painted wood. Gold stitching embroidered the maroon velvet upholstery. Had Copeland been one inch shorter, his bare feet wouldn't have rested on the raised dais the throne perched upon.

The alabaster walls of the chamber had the appearance of marble, but Piras doubted such a material would have been installed on a warship. No doubt it was a faux veneer, designed to give the room grandeur. Portraits of the Holy Leader adorned the walls' surfaces. Each depicted Copeland handing down blessings to adoring followers, being uplifted by winged humans Piras had heard were called 'angels,' or standing in assorted tableaux that were no doubt meant to convey his sanctified position. It was another element which would have made Piras laugh had other items in the room not made it ghastly.

A few jarring details took away from the aura of opulence. A simple table sat in a far corner. A uniformed officer sat there, tapping on one of several computers. The second was the presence of armed guards, hard-looking men whose faces appeared as if they'd never laughed. A dozen of them glared in overt threat at Piras and Kila.

It was the final ingredient that made the whole scene repugnant in the extreme. Like a madman's collection of horribly paired sets, a dozen women, as many as there were guards, knelt behind and on either side of Copeland's throne. Robed in black, the gaunt creatures spanned a

variety of ages and careworn states. They stared at the floor before them, their expressions ranging from deep sorrow to blank disconnect.

The youngest of them, clad in red and kneeling at the left of Copeland's throne, was barely more than a girl. Piras was no expert on human aging. Much of the alien species rarely made it beyond half of a Kalquorian's lifespan. Still, he was rattled as much by the female's seeming youth as the bruises on her face. A few others were similarly marked. Some of the elder females were scarred.

Piras saw abuse in those marks. Had they come from Copeland himself?

The women were silent and still, macabre decorations placed by some demented stylist in the Holy Leader's design scheme.

Piras's notoriously nasty temper flashed red for an instant before he quelled it. He'd had to suppress many of his urges for justice in the past few weeks. He'd committed his share of evil acts in the desperate hope of ending the war and salvaging the empire. He'd sent brave and honorable men to their deaths in order to save more lives. This was another of those terrible situations in which he had to look beyond immediate wrongs to secure the greater long-term benefits.

I hope crushing Copeland's skull will be among those benefits. Outside of clanning Kila and hopefully Lokmi as well, Fleet Admiral Hobato and Rear Admiral Tranis's ruse to get Piras close to the Holy Leader had come with damned little reward thus far. He might have been devoted to his empire, but he was itching to enjoy compensation for his sacrifices. Taking the Holy Leader apart would be a decent start.

Piras and Kila stepped to the dais. Piras's sensitive sense of smell caught a whiff of a sweetish cologne, overlaying the sour odor of unwashed skin. His nose wrinkled as he bowed in the traditional Kalquorian greeting to Copeland. He added another bow to the two men standing at the so-called Voice of God's right. "Greetings, Holy Leader Copeland. I'm Admiral Piras. This is the captain of my flagship, Nobek Kila."

Copeland inclined his head, his attitude benign. "Welcome, Piras and Kila. Dramok Sitrel has told me of your bravery and ability to command your fellow Kalquorians. We're delighted to have you assist our holy war."

Piras blinked. Assist their holy war? Was he serious? Earth was a dead rock in space, its people scattered among colonies, space stations, and the few ships that had escaped. Copeland and the Earther battlecruisers remaining loyal to him were employed to help the Basma's war against the empire.

Piras shot a glance at the Kalquorian standing next to Copeland. He'd recognized the narrow visage of Dramok Sitrel right away, the Basma's right hand. He was apparently also the main representative for this portion of the rebel fleet.

Sitrel bowed to Piras, his stark features pulled into an expression of irritation. In a placatory tone, he said, "We're delighted to help each other achieve our disparate but compatible ends. It's good to see you, Admiral."

"At last, we make our personal acquaintance, Dramok Sitrel." Piras couldn't express delight at the meeting. The sight of Sitrel, handsome despite his beaklike nose and haughty demeanor, made him want to give his fist a personal acquaintance with the other man's face. Unfortunately, cratering the traitor's features would make no better an impression than cracking Copeland's skull open.

Unaware of Piras's fantasy of an impromptu face rearrangement, Sitrel managed a smile. "I've read your report on how you escaped Kalquor when you were found out as a spy. The

account has excited our forces. It's incredible a single vessel could remain almost unscathed after fighting its way out of a cordon of the empire's best destroyers. I told the Holy Leader you should have been annihilated. Yet you came away with no more than minor damage."

Piras gave him a modest expression. "All the credit goes to Captain Kila and his engineering crew. Their upgrades to the ship made all the difference."

Avarice lit Sitrel's eyes. "Upgrades I hope you'll share with the rest of us?"

Piras glanced at Kila, who had managed to tone down his usual smirk to a politer version. The Nobek said, "Certainly. Along with the training to handle such power. It does take a careful, judicious touch."

Piras barely restrained a snort. When it came to speed and power, Kila wasn't known for being careful. And there was no way in hell they were giving the Basma's fleet any of the secrets that made Kila's destroyer so dangerous.

Piras smoothly redirected their attention to the planned offensive looming on the horizon. "I expect you have reports for me on the Haven and Rokan defenses? No doubt the Basma and the Holy Leader are eager to get past the destroyers protecting those colonies. I need to know everything so I can plan our attack."

Copeland, who'd shown little interest in the conversation thus far, waved a long-fingered hand dismissively. "I'm not so concerned with the Rokan mining colony. It's Haven which must be taken down and its people brought to judgment."

Sitrel gave Piras a significant stare. "The Basma concurs with the Holy Leader, though we're still interested in Rokan for its resources. Haven is the main target, however. The Earthers and their hybrid children occupying empire space must be removed with all haste."

"You plan to take custody of the Earthers and hybrids once we've claimed Haven, Holy Leader?" Piras knew the answer to that, but he wanted specific information as to Copeland's plans for those innocent civilians, a great many of whom were women and children.

Copeland's tranquil smile morphed into a sorrowful expression. "They must be brought before me to face judgment for their sins. For their brazen disregard for what is sacred." He sighed, as if disappointed in the people of Haven. "You must understand, I don't wish to be harsh. It's painful to punish them, even for their wicked deeds. I love my children, but transgressions against me must be dealt with...severely."

"I understand."

"With your help, we'll burn away their sins and cleanse the universe of their evil. We'll purge not just your empire, but all creation. The abomination of our races mixing must be eradicated."

It was clear Copeland was talking about extermination. Like the Basma, he was determined to slaughter people for the crime of falling in love and having children. Two different men from two different cultures had arrived at the same murderous plot.

Piras had assumed the part of someone who agreed with such a mindset. He, Kila, and Kila's entire crew were there to play along until they could dismantle this portion of the Basma's forces. Ultimately, they hoped to bring both Copeland and 'The Basma,' Dramok Maf, to justice for their crimes against the Kalquorian Empire and Earth.

Copeland's tyranny and fanaticism had been the source of Earth's demise. The Holy Leader had been complicit in the massive nuclear detonations beneath major cities.

His Kalquorian counterpart Dramok Maf was every bit as intent on obliterating Piras's people by consigning them to extinction. Both monsters deserved the most severe penalties that could be meted out.

Piras shoved aside his ardent dislike for the pair who'd brought so much misery and death on their peoples. "I'll need to work with your fleet to guarantee our success, Holy Leader. You have a military liaison who can coordinate with us?"

Copeland nodded to the Earther soldier standing on the other side of Sitrel. The stocky man had remained silent, though his thin, angular brown eyes were bright with interest. As Piras had spoken to Copeland and Sitrel, he'd been acutely aware of the black-haired man's pinpoint attention.

Copeland introduced him. "General Borey Nath is in command of my forces. He'll supply you with whatever information and tactics he deems necessary for the task ahead. I have instructed him to render aid in any way possible. He, above all my commanders, knows my desire for the successful capture and cleansing of our lost sheep."

Borey Nath. Piras knew the name, as did most of those in the Kalquorian military. Nath had been one of three Chiefs of Earth Forces during the war. He was recognized as a brilliant tactician, the kind of man soldiers rallied around no matter the peril of their situation. Unlike many of his ilk, Nath had been among those who'd shown mercy, especially to civilians of any species who'd found themselves caught in the crosshairs of the fighting. Even Kalquorians.

Piras's respect was genuine when he bowed to Nath, though he wondered how a man with the general's reputation could countenance attacking Haven. The Earther offered a slight smile and bowed in return.

Piras was struck by the notion that Nath bore more than a passing resemblance to the young woman who'd crashed into him in the corridor. Same eye shape and color, same black hair, same round cheeks...though the woman's face had been an oval. Nath's tended to a squarer contour. Were they father and daughter, perhaps?

"A pleasure, General Nath. I look forward to accomplishing our mutual interests." Piras relegated his curiosity to the same corner as his temper.

"As do I, Admiral Piras." The general's voice was light, almost gentle. A pleasant, soothing tone, as if they exchanged observations about the weather rather than death and war. His expression was polite, showing none of his inner feelings.

If he was like most Earthers loyal to Copeland, he no doubt felt disgust for Kalquorians. Yet Nath hid any aversion. Piras's respect went up a notch. With his own infamous temper, he often found such control difficult to maintain, though it was indispensable given his current mission. War made for interesting bedfellows, and espionage made one a gifted actor or a dead man.

"When would you like to go over our combined resources? I'm still waiting for detailed reports on the condition of my fleet." Piras gave Sitrel a pointed glare, reminding the other man that Kila's ship needed to be tied into the destroyers' shared computer system. "Until I have that, I worry our strategy will be difficult to finalize."

"Completely understandable." No ripple of emotion disturbed Nath's quiet countenance.

Sitrel, however, appeared disappointed. "You don't have the information yet? I told the destroyers to report to you as soon as possible so we could get on with this."

"There's no problem with a slight delay," Nath interjected before speaking to Piras again. "I've requested the latest ship-readiness reports from my captains, and will hopefully have specifics by late tomorrow afternoon. Would that be acceptable?"

"Thank you, yes. I hope to have my reports then as well." Piras hid his relief. He'd been afraid the Earthers would rush him into attacking Haven's defensive fleet right away. The longer he could stall, the better the chances he could keep the little farming colony safe.

Copeland seemed to share Sitrel's impatient mindset. "No more than the shortest of waits, yes, General?"

"Of course, Holy Leader." Nath's calm face turned to Piras once more. "The sooner we help the Basma claim these territories—and we, our people—the better." He darted a peek at Copeland, the first ripple in his thus-far perfect composure. Perhaps Nath wasn't so keen on punishing the Havenites after all.

If that were the case, Copeland knew nothing of it. The Holy Leader gave Nath a pleased expression, like a master with a well-trained pet.

"Agreed." Piras earned his own gaze of approval from Copeland. Again, the urge to smash the man's head sang in the admiral's heart.

He noted Sitrel appeared put out. The traitor's comments had barely gained notice. No one except Piras had given him the least bit of attention.

It was no wonder. Dramok Sitrel appeared far from the distinguished aide who'd once served at Maf's side on the Empire's Royal Council. Next to Nath's immaculately polished uniform and quiet strength, Sitrel looked like a beggar. His clothing was shiny with wear in spots. The fact Maf had sent him as his mouthpiece for such a meaningless assignment was further evidence of a fall from grace.

Piras was taking pleasure in the traitor's obvious unhappiness when screams drifted into the room. Kila went on alert at Piras's side, his fierce gaze going to the open but guarded doorway at the back of the chamber. It was from there the sounds of someone in great distress floated in. Sitrel also jerked with startled reaction before relaxing back into his pout. Even Nath reacted. His pleasantly neutral expression tightened for an instant. His lips and brows drew inward, creasing his face with dismay. A moment later, it smoothed out once more.

Only Copeland showed no reaction, except to turn his gaze to the man sitting bolt upright behind the bank of computers. In a lazy tone, he asked, "Is it that time already?"

The man hurried from the table to kneel at Copeland's feet. "Yes, Holy Leader. I would have told you, but I thought this meeting took precedence."

"Right you are. Our business of this initial consultation is concluded, and I must attend to the sinner as he suffers his penance."

As he spoke, the screams continued, high-pitched shrieks of agony. Piras would know the sound of torture anywhere, having made such an uproar himself in the not-so-distant past. He had barely healed from wounds inflicted on him by Fleet Security after they'd found him out as a supposed traitor. Had Kila and Lokmi failed to pull him out when they did, Piras's mission would have ended on Kalquor.

In the empire, torture was a last-resort method for gathering intelligence. However, in his capacity as a spy, Piras had been implicated in the deaths of many brave and loyal Kalquorians. Their bereaved relatives working within Fleet Security hadn't been overly worried about protocol when they'd interrogated Piras. He didn't blame them. He had no use for turncoats either.

His stomach roiled to hear evidence of such brutality. Somehow, he kept his expression impassive. Kila recovered as well, but it was jarring to see him without the mocking smile he wore instinctively. Those who knew the Nobek would understand the absence of a smirk was a sign that something was very wrong.

Copeland wiggled as if he were a small boy about to enjoy a treat. "The greatest pain of the savior is keeping his people on the path. A lesson I'll be glad to share with those on Haven who have offended me with their wickedness. Good day, Admiral Pira and Captain Kila. Be blessed."

He made a strange motion toward them with his hands. Piras guessed it to be a symbolic benediction of some sort. Copeland rose from his throne. With a swirl of his once-perfect robes, he glided to the rear doorway. He didn't acknowledge the kneeling women he passed as he went, though a couple scrambled awkwardly to get out of his path. His assistant followed on his heels. The women rose and waited for the red-robed girl who'd knelt closest to Copeland to lead them out.

Nath gave Piras and Kila a nod. "I'll see you tomorrow then, Admiral. And you, Captain?"

"I won't be needed for your meeting, unless you deem it necessary," Kila said.

Another scream speared the air. The general and Kila winced. Piras blinked to see them look identical in their discomfort.

"I look forward to seeing you again at a future time." Nath squared his wide shoulders and headed toward the door through which everyone else had departed. Though his steps were resolute, Piras thought he detected reluctance in Nath's demeanor.

"At least the general doesn't seem to be without a heart," Kila said in an undertone to Piras, using their language. He'd noticed the small indications of Nath's unease.

Except for a few of the guards, the two Kalquorians were alone in the chamber. Sitrel had slunk off without a word or a bow. Piras sighed. "I guess we're dismissed."

"And here I was beginning to like the place. At least we scored a blessing from the holy one." Kila sketched the motion Copeland had made in the air before Piras's face, adopting the same lofty expression Copeland had worn. He gave no indication he noticed the scandalized stares of the Earther guards. They'd have been even more offended to understand what he said. "May your endeavors be successful as you plot the ruin of your enemies and your cocks stand strong and unwilted during acts of love."

"Captain."

Piras's one-word warning halted any further attempts at humor that wasn't welcome when the screams were coming faster and more terrible than before.

The two men headed out of the chamber. They walked fast to get away from those hellish sounds; sounds Piras feared wouldn't end until the victim's life did.