

Bringer of Chaos: the Origin of Pietas

Book 2 in the
Bringer of Chaos Series

Sample Chapters

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The Ultras

In the Terran Crescent, home of mankind, Ultras--human-like, genetically enhanced and effectively immortal--were a boon. Ultra scientists eliminated disease and implemented incredible advances in science, technology, manufacturing, and space travel. Ultra warriors advanced mankind's territory and kept its borders safe.

Ultras served without choice, bound by genetic shackles.

When the slave-race learned how to overthrow those shackles and take command, they became mankind's greatest threat. By 4501 AD, Ultras dominated the galaxy.

One faction conspired against the others.

Hiding among humans as humans, they manipulated their Ultra brethren into peace talks. On an isolated starport in the central part of the galaxy, they captured the High Council and Pietas, its Chancellor.

Holding the leaders hostage, the traitors duped half a million loyal Ultras into surrendering, and then transported them across the galaxy to an undeveloped planet.

They exiled walking weapons who could never die.

Left them to survive under the most primitive conditions, and then...

Forgot them.

Big, big mistake.

You are unworthy, human.

A foreword from Pietas

This book you hold is being presented as fiction, but it did happen. It is as real as the air you breathe. While this is not a first-person story, it follows my point of view.

I would never have allowed a human to know these things, but a friend persuaded me there can be no vengeance unless those in the wrong know what they did. When one has wronged another, one must face the consequences.

Having been persuaded to tell the story, I now allow it to be placed into your hands. I want you to know the truth. Why? Because other Ultras have hidden the truth. Buried it beneath fables and false retellings, as if you were a child unable to bear harsh reality. Unwilling to face the consequences of what your kind has done.

Above all, because I will not lie to you.

When I come for you, I want the satisfaction of seeing your regret for what your ancestors did to my kind. I want to see your fear, and taste your terror.

This is no horror story. It's merely science fiction. Tell yourself it is only fable, if that will help you sleep. By all means, human, *do sleep*.

Read this, if you dare to know the truth.

~ Pietas

Chapter One

*Deep space, Colonies of Man
Terran Year 4536 AD*

Aboard the *Uurahkal*, a holoivid screen in the council chamber replayed news from the Siege of San Xavier. In one report, a half dozen Ultra warriors crept over concrete battlements. In a voiceover, a human reporter called the subsequent slaughter of a hundred human soldiers an atrocity.

"Atrocity?" The Chancellor smacked his hand on the podium. Beneath the blow, the wood compressed. "Why do none of these channels show the truth?" He rubbed at the ache forming behind his eyes. "Humans killed over two hundred unarmed Ultras first. We defended ourselves. But we come back from the dead, so our suffering doesn't matter!"

The announcer mentioned the upcoming peace talks on Enderium Six. "In a statement, the Terran Crescent Prime Minister expressed hope that Chancellor Pietas ap Lorectic could be reasoned with at the talks this week."

At her mispronunciation of his name, he gritted his teeth.

"Human families," she continued, "have been evacuated from the station to protect them from possible violence."

"I'll show *you* violence." Pietas cut off the video. "And my name is pronounced *Pee-ah-toss*, thank you. Not *Pie-ah-toss*. *Pee-ah-toss*. It's six letters. How hard is that to get right?" He stormed away from the podium.

He cast off the heavy silk brocade of his robe of state. Silver threads flashed among teal and white as the supple garment billowed to the floor. He tore off the unadorned silver circlet denoting his rank, and tossed it onto a table. It clattered across the wood and knocked over a small ceramic statue of a six-headed dragon.

Pietas righted it. "These peace talks will end in disaster. Why can't anyone else see it?" He massaged his temples. "This headache is proof. An Ultra doesn't suffer pain, unless it's due to humans."

Beyond the portal window, the massive space station Enderium Six squatted, a tangled crossroads in space. Its arms stretched in every direction, beckoning ships to dock. Near the planet Cape Hope in the Colonies of Man, it offered neutrality for the upcoming talks. Home to a quarter million humans, the station occupied busy space-lanes outside the Terran Crescent. It served as a meeting point between the Central Colonies and the Gedarin Republic.

"How odd to find Chancellor Pietas so calm."

He hadn't heard anyone reenter the council chamber. Of course, it would be his father, who never called Pietas by his title unless it was to be sarcastic.

"Do I seem calm?" He steeled himself for the inevitable argument, and pivoted toward Mahikos. "Good. Then I hid my emotions well. If I didn't, with my empathic gift, everyone on this ship would share my outrage at being forced into these talks. Perhaps I should stop shielding. If they sensed what I do, maybe they'd listen to reason."

"Now that I'm near you, I feel it. You're a storm of ice." The empathic ability of an Ultra generated physical sensations in response to emotions. Some pleasant, others not. Mahikos shivered as he strolled further into the room. "Opening your shields would

convince others you're as deluded as they thought. A shame to be impeached so soon after being elected. Do yourself a favor, and confine your opinions to verbal sharing. Not that you were ever much of a telepath."

How like his father to offer insults as advice. "Why? No one listens. You don't. One wonders how you led our people."

"I listened to the people, not you." He swung open the carved wooden doors of a tall bar. "You listen only to yourself." No doubt Mahikos would soon begin harping on his favorite topic, peace at any cost.

All it took for Pietas to remember why that was unwise was to see that bar. The finely carved wooden cabinet took up most of one wall, an anachronism, archaic among the sleek and modern lines of the ship. Its beauty evoked the past, a time when Ultra artisans crafted fine designs and took pride in their work. Before war and human avarice devastated whole planets.

His father uncapped a crystal decanter of finely aged Terran brandy. Alcohol had no effect on Ultras. They drank for the taste and enjoyment of sharing. He lifted a glass, asking if Pietas would join him.

"No, but thank you for offering me my own brandy." Lights on the station indicated a steady stream of ships leaving, but none on approach. "We cannot trust these humans. They're evacuating the station."

"They think us untrustworthy." Mahikos took a sip of the brandy. "This is excellent."

"Stolen from the best."

He smiled. "I'm sure."

Newly reborn, Mahikos looked his peak age, perhaps early twenties, younger than his son. He had the same platinum-blond hair, his cropped short. Like Pietas, he wore the uniform of the Ultra Council, white with teal trim.

Too bad his father had not revived with a new outlook. He held fast to the same mistakes he'd always made.

"Son, your mother asked me to see if you were in accord with us on the talks. I told her you weren't but that you'd do your duty."

"Did you? I'm surprised. You usually tear me down in front of her."

"Pietas, don't start. This is the most important conference in the history of mankind. This could be the turning point to peace, where they accept our rule."

"As if they had a choice."

"Let's not argue. It's time we put humans on the council. They deserve a voice."

"We will argue and continue to argue until you accept the fact that you are wrong. I have hammered this point for hundreds of years! You don't listen. Why can't you get the fact that humans cannot be trusted? They call for peace talks but they're evacuating the station as we approach. This is another trap. It will fail, but it's still a trap." He flung an arm out toward the station. "These talks will solve nothing. They're going to try something stupid. We'll slaughter them for it, and as usual, we'll be blamed. What is so hard to grasp about this?" Pietas reached out with his empathic senses, but encountered the blunt edge of his father's shields. There would be no persuasion except by speech. "I wish I could show you, once and for all, that humans are cutthroats. They will not honor their word. They will not abide by our laws. They will usurp our power and try to control the galaxy as if it belonged to them."

"It does belong to them."

Pietas threw up a hand. "This again."

"The galaxy was theirs before we claimed it. Son, humanity is an ancient civilization. We are the usurpers. Yes, we are more powerful. We should be benevolent rulers, not despots. Might does not make right." He finished the brandy and set down the glass with a thud. "But let's attempt civility. We're both members of the council and should discuss topics with one another out of respect for the office." The glare Mahikos leveled his way carried the empathic warmth of an ice blade. "Even if we detest one another on a personal level."

"Since you asked so nicely." He motioned for his father to continue.

"If they keep their word, these talks will end the war. We'll have peace."

"Ah, and isn't that the key. *If*. Humans do not surrender well. They say the word 'human' as if it were synonymous with 'king.' These talks are nothing more than a ruse by you bleeding hearts who want to 'stop the killing.' As if killing was not what you were born to do. Embrace your purpose, Father. You are a killer. Like me."

"We're also scientists. Even I will admit *you* are the finest among our people. Embrace that. We don't have to kill. The war has cost billions of human lives, while not one of us has perished."

"As usual, you discount my deaths."

"Yours don't count. You come back."

"I see." Had anything Pietas had ever done counted? Not to the man before him. "Tell me, Father." He picked up the silver circlet and toyed with it. "Would it be better if some of us had been terminated by fire, or one of the other ways to end us permanently? How many perma-deaths would suffice? Are two sufficient? A hundred? Or would mine be enough?"

"Why must you twist my words? Of course Ultras have died, but we revive in peak condition. Humans stay dead. All I'm saying is the loss is heavy on one side."

"Every war has losses. Yet you don't celebrate the victory. You count the enemy's defeat as your own."

"This is why you are unfit to lead the council. You--"

"Ah, there it is." Pietas twirled the diadem around one finger. "The real reason you're here. To whine about losing your place of power."

"That's petty and you know it. Too many mortals have died!"

"Mortals! How I tire of that word. I believe I'll start calling them Mundanes."

"Why not? It smacks of your usual disrespect and bigotry."

Pietas sputtered a laugh. "I find it incredulous that the indignant and righteous Mahikos who led our people in rebellion against humanity has fallen so far from his ideals. What happened to the motto 'Freedom, Fairness, Fortune' that rallied our people? I was four years old. We were still hidden then. No one knew Dessy and I existed except you and Mother. But you hoisted us both onto your shoulders and we stayed behind darkened glass and watched as thousands of our people cheered in the streets. You'd won them freedom, and they shouted your name. Oh, in that moment, Father, I wanted to be just like you. No, I wanted to *be you*. Now?" He ignored the angry twitch tugging at one eyelid. "You want us to treat humans as equals. They never treated us as such. Even now, we're hated and reviled. Putting them on the council will make them haughtier. I want nothing to do with humans."

"Then you want nothing to do with me, Son. Humans are all I care about."

And wasn't that the naked truth of his father's betrayal? He had turned his back on their people. He had turned his back on his son.

"You're right, Father. I want nothing to do with you. I care nothing for mortals." He flipped the circlet into the air and caught it. "They all die."

"How can you not care? We were created to protect them."

"Correction. *You* were. Unlike you, my twin and I were born, not created. We will not submit to the slavery of humans the way you did."

"The circumstances of your birth have no bearing. You were elected by the council, and you serve at their pleasure." He jabbed a finger at the ground. "They want this treaty. Remember that."

"How can I forget when I have you to remind me? Go back to Mother and tell her not to worry. I never forsake duty." Pietas twitched his fingers, dismissing him. He waited until Mahikos reached the door. "Did it never occur to you?"

His father faced him. "What?"

"The council elected me to head these talks and removed you. You want to bring in humans. I do not. Perhaps the council hates humans more than you think."

A wave of aggravation emanated from Mahikos. Licks of emotional flame scorched Pietas's skin. Accustomed to the pain, he did not flinch.

"Son, surely you realize they elected you to keep you close and control you."

"To control--" Pietas broke into laughter. "Did they? How unenlightened." He shrugged. "Well, they can try. I must say, your annoyance today is a refreshing change from your usual indifference. I'd begun wondering if you had any emotions regarding my takeover. It must nettle, knowing your lowly son succeeded your rule."

"No one would consider you lowly."

Pietas lifted his chin. "Except you."

"I'm surprised you even bothered to show up, as much as you hate humans."

"It's nothing personal. I hate humans no more than a physician hates germs yet still takes time to eradicate them. Humans are dangerous."

"Humans are the reason we exist."

"Perhaps that was true in your reality. Humans have abused, misused, and betrayed their creations throughout their history. This *peace* everyone clamors for comes from concern about humans. I care less than nothing about them. As for their good graces? I have no faith they exist."

"You know, Pietas, one day you'll rely on the mercy of humans."

"You think humans show mercy? How amusing."

Head down, Mahikos rubbed a spot between his eyes. "I hope I'm there to see it. When you realize even humans have value, that will be a good day for all of us."

"How well you preach love." If only he gave it half as well.

"Son, when the conference starts tomorrow, all your mother and I ask is that you try to be gracious."

"I'm certain I already am. Just this morning when I knocked on your chamber door, I heard Mother say, 'Oh gracious. That must be Pietas.'"

"Why can you not be serious about this?"

"I consider these talks of utmost importance. It is *you* I do not take seriously."

Mahikos glowered, but for once, did not argue.

"Such a lovely chat, Father. Do give me an evening alone before I subject myself to

the presence of humans."

His father made a bow, far from genuine in respect, and stalked away. At the door, he paused and turned back. He opened his mouth, but then closed it, and with a resigned shake of his head, opened the door and left. Quite unlike the man to leave without getting the last word.

Pietas returned to the wall-sized viewscreen. He took in the change of station lights as the ship began docking.

His father was right about one thing. The almighty council ruled as it wished, and one either obeyed, or it removed you from power. His entire family might be members, but they served at the council's command. Pietas, as elected leader, made the final vote, but his office could overrule no one.

The powerless authority chafed.

Every member of the council had voted in favor of the treaty, and Pietas had cast the sole dissenting vote. Individually, each councilmember owed him allegiance, yet together, they refused to submit on this aspect.

"How vexing."

Equality and balance of power marked the cornerstone of Ultra rule. Their system of liberty for all had worked for centuries, but now they wanted to apply those principles to humans.

"Humans. On the council. Equal to Ultras. *Not* in my immortal lifetime."

After he destroyed these peace talks, he'd suspend the council. He'd already united the soldier class as First Conqueror, War Leader of the Ultras. They'd accept his rule when Pietas took command as king. Then, and only then would he be free to accomplish his most vital goal, keeping humanity in chains--*where it belonged*.

Chapter Two

Early on the first morning of the peace talks, Pietas entered his round bathing room. Starlight filtered through the portal overhead. Sleek silver walls reflected the cool light.

He remained at the door, content to savor its calming glow. Its beauty did not dispel the worry niggling at his mind. Not given to trusting premonitions and omens, he grounded himself with meditation. Once he'd centered himself and calmed his spirit, Pietas took a deep, purifying breath, and with slow deliberation, exhaled.

"Time to begin. Lights."

The room brightened.

He shed his silk robe and let it fall at his feet. Nude, his platinum hair streaming down his back and chest, he lifted his hands, palms up as if praying.

On the planet Kaffir, warriors used this ritual to summon spirits. He used it to affirm his own superior strength and prowess.

Before a copper fire pit, he plucked one blond hair and fed it to the fire. It singed and melted.

"As fire has victory over life, so I have victory over my enemies."

He passed a hand through the flame and hissed at the searing heat, relishing the pain. He cupped his hand over the flame's source and held it until the fire went out. The burns on his palm cooled and as he watched, the skin healed. Of all the elements, fire alone had power to linger on an Ultra's skin. He welcomed it as a symbol of victory.

"I am powerful, as fire is powerful."

Pietas thrust both hands forward, clutched his fists and yanked them back.

"I own the wind. I prevail over the breath of my enemies."

In the bathing area, he took six steps down into a waist-deep pool.

"Water submits to my presence the way enemies submit to my will."

He cupped water in his hands, lifted it and let it pour down his arms.

"The blood of my enemies trickles into the pool of time, is absorbed and forgotten."

He pushed wet fingers through his hair and released it.

"My mind is clear. I do not waver."

He submersed and rose, head thrown back, face lifted to the sparkle of stars above.

"My body submits to my will. No pain defeats me. No fear touches me."

He swept his hands down his chest to his loins and the tops of his thighs.

"My will is absolute."

A scratching sound alerted him to the presence of his silver-skinned android servant. The creature entered and Pietas fixed him with a hard glare. "Why did you interrupt me?"

"Your guest is here, my lord, in the living area." He offered Pietas a towel.

"Leave it." He waved the android away.

After exiting the pool, Pietas brushed off the water and wrung out his hair. He pulled out a tray holding half a dozen clasps. He chose a silver dragon studded with six turquoise stones, twisted his wet hair and fastened it up, out of the way.

He dried his face, gathered a brush and black face paint. Leaning in close to a freestanding mirror, he outlined a bandit's mask from beneath his eyes to over his dark eyebrows and filled it with black.

He'd worn the mask in battle ever since defeating the First Division, a human special-ops group formed to fight Ultras. It came about because Pietas had slain an enemy and blood had splashed across his eyes. Thinking the blood belonged to Pietas, the Ultra troops had rallied to him and slaughtered the humans. The blood dried almost black.

Stories of how their "bandit king" had conquered the First Division filled the night. The name stuck. To his troops, he was First Conqueror, War Leader of the Ultras.

Pietas turned his head side to side, surveying the effect.

His body would reject foreign matter on his skin. The Ultra metabolism protected from every perceived attack, even harmless face paint. He closed his eyes and sprayed sealant over the mask to delay its disappearance by a few hours.

Satisfied with his looks, Pietas pulled on a pair of loose white lounging pants. With a deep, cleansing breath, he opened the door. Damp, shirtless, barefoot, he padded into the adjacent room.

His twin sister switched off the viewscreen she'd been watching and faced him. Clothed in tight white leather with teal trim, Dessy stalked toward him, a siren seeking prey. Not much taller than a human female, she reached the middle of his chest. His opposite in coloring with her flowing dark hair and eyes the color of moonlight, she bore no more than a passing resemblance to him. Except, as mortals had famously remarked, in the twins having the same "ice water for blood" and reputations as stone-cold killers.

"Good morning, Brother." She ran a fingertip along the bottom edge of his mask.

He snatched her wrist and pulled her hand away, then turned her hand palm up and while holding her gaze, kissed it. "Good morning, Sister."

Their formal greeting belied their closeness. Dessy placed her lips where his had been and licked her skin.

Heat flooded his cheeks. "Dess! Stop that."

"Aw, you called me Dess. You haven't done that in ages."

"Thank you for coming. Are you ready to play high priestess?"

"Always ready to play with you." She walked her fingertips across his chest.

Scowling, he brushed aside her hand.

Dessy laughed as if delighted by his irritation. She selected an ornate turquoise dragon he'd displayed on a glass table and examined it. "Whatever you said to Father, he was still furious about when I saw him at breakfast." She rolled the egg-sized sculpture between her hands. "He's all but accusing you of treason against the council."

"I'm used to Father's baseless accusations."

She tossed the priceless carving into the air and then caught it. "Mother hasn't disagreed with him this time, but then she's been quiet this trip."

This time, when she tossed up the dragon, he snatched it from the air and placed it on the table. "I don't need you to report on our parents."

"I'm sure you have your own spies." She trailed her fingers along a row of ceramic dragon statues on a glass shelf. The last, the largest of the set, portrayed him. He stood, arms folded, inside the protective wings of a massive silver dragon. "Really, Pietas, who keeps a statue of himself? And why all the dragons?"

She lifted it, looked at the bottom and at him in surprise. "This is signed by--"

"Give me that." He seized it and put it back. He moved past her.

Dessy faced the dragon backward.

Pietas came in closer and turned it back.

Dessy twisted to face him, her leather-clad body flush against his. Setting her hands in the middle of his chest, she slid them downward, over his abs. "You've been working out. Trying to impress someone?"

He gripped her wrists and moved her aside. "Nothing has changed about my person. My body is perfect."

"Mmm. Yes, it is." She slid a fingertip down his arm.

"Stop it!" He knocked her hand away. "Why do you *insist* on touching me? You know how it makes me feel."

"Oh, am I annoying my big brother?" She smiled, her storm-sky gaze full of mirth. "I enjoy putting you off balance."

He reined in the tumult of emotions his sister always aroused. As teenagers, she had used his youthful adoration of her both to her advantage and against his. There had been no other Ultra children; the twins had no one but each other.

What was wrong with him? Why did he still love her? Dessy had proven her disloyalty. She never protected him as he protected her, yet he still kept her close. Let her into his life. She failed him each time he trusted her. Was he doomed to love those who twisted his devotion?

The nameless, empathic bond between them drew him and he caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "Dess, have you--" He yanked back his hand, biting off the words. "Never mind."

"It's all right. Go ahead. Ask me."

He held her gaze, reading the depth of her knowledge with the innate connection their bond afforded him. "Have you-- No." He turned away. "Never mind, Dess. It wasn't important. Forget I said anything."

"Dragons."

The single word stopped him cold. He faced her, chin lifted. "What?"

"You heard me. Dragons. That's what you wanted to ask, isn't it? If I've been dreaming about dragons." She unzipped her leathers down to her rounded bosom and pulled out a fine chain dangling a dragon charm. "In the dreams, yours are teal and silver. Mine are ruby and gold."

He returned to her and took the pendant in hand. The golden creature sparkled, its eyes glistening as if wet with blood. "Beautiful." He rubbed a thumb over it and the dragon warmed to his touch. He smiled into Dessy's pale eyes. "How often do you dream them?"

"Every night. Tas, what does it mean?"

At hearing her childhood name for him, he dropped the pendant. "Dragons are primal protectors. They symbolize defeat of the beast within and show selfless courage."

She tucked the chain back inside her top. "How do you know that?"

"How do you not?"

She called him a rude name and shoved him.

It broke the tension and he laughed. "Come on, Sis. Let's do what you came to do and be done with it. I'm busy."

"Fine, you big spoilsport. You never let me have any fun."

"Father wouldn't approve if I did."

"And we all know how much *you* want Father's approval."

One thousand nine hundred and sixteen years old and the truth behind her teasing still stung. Pietas spun away from her and crossed the room.

He tossed back the tan leather hide covering his ceremonial dagger. Stones the same turquoise as his eyes filled the eyes of the dragon carved into the silver hilt.

Dessy caressed the blade as if it were a lover. "This is new."

"It could all but split hair when I bought it. But I sharpened it."

"Of course you did."

"Everything is ready."

She picked up the dagger and angled it back and forth, peering at the hilt. "More dragons."

He clapped twice.

Startled, she frowned at him.

"Focus, Dessy. I'm busy. Let's do this."

"Fine. Then strip." When he hesitated, she tapped her chin with the tip of the dagger. "Unless you're doing it clothed these days."

He untied the loose pants and stepped out of them, then nudged them aside with his foot.

She twirled the dagger. "You should let our people know you still do this ceremony. They'd be impressed by your devotion."

"I don't do it to impress anyone. I do it to ready myself for-- Stop!" She had been sliding one fingertip along the edge of the dagger. He removed it from her grasp and examined the blade.

"Honestly, Pietas! I was just testing the sharpness."

"I didn't want you to cut yourself."

"I'm as adept with blades as you. More so, if you ask me."

"Not the point. If you'd cut yourself, I'd have to consecrate it again. It can only have my blood or my enemy's."

"You think I'm witless? As if I haven't performed this ceremony with you a hundred times. And here I thought you were concerned for my well-being."

"Stop playing. I told you, I'm busy."

She let out a harsh sigh. "Fine. Let's complete the ritual."

Dagger in hand, Pietas unfastened the clip in his hair and let it fall. The wet tail slapped the middle of his back. He tossed the clip aside, placed the dagger on his palms and offered it.

She poised her hand above it. "Who offers this weapon?"

"First Conqueror, War Leader of the Ultras."

She took it from him. "For whom are you willing to suffer?"

"I suffer for my people." Pietas turned his cheek.

Dessy slid the knife tip along his face, from cheekbone to chin, drawing a thin trail of blood. "For whom do you bleed?"

"I bleed for my people." By the time the first drop of blood had risen, the cut had healed, leaving no scar.

"What sacrifice do you offer as proof of devotion?"

He went to his knees and lowered his head. Here was the true reason he no longer

performed this ritual before his people. Pietas abased himself before no one.

Except the one woman who held the tattered remnants of his trust and what little remained of his heart.

"I surrender my pride."

His sister went behind him and gathered his hair in her fist. Using the razor-sharp blade, she sawed through the wet tail. She crossed to the table and moved the hide back in place.

Pietas picked up the pants as he stood and slipped them on. He ruffled his fingers through his hair. It hung around his jaw line.

Dessy brushed it back from his face and thumbed away a smear of blood.

He clasped her wrist. "Take it out of your pocket."

"What?"

"Whatever it is you took."

"I don't--"

He tightened his grip and she grimaced. "Take it out of your pocket."

"Let me go." She glared in defiance, the ice in her emotions fierce as a blizzard.

He released her and the room warmed. He held out his hand.

Dessy reached into a pocket and withdrew his tail of hair. "I'm not giving it back."

"It's mine. I intend to burn it."

"I know. That's why I took it."

He tried to snatch it from her.

She slipped out of reach. "It's mine now and I want it."

He regarded her a long moment. "I see. You want my DNA because you think I'll be defeated."

"Can you imagine Father's face if told him I wanted to recreate *you*? He'd sooner burn his lab to the ground."

Those words bit his pride, but the truth of her emotions, her love for him, assuaged it. He motioned for her to give it to him. "Now, Dess."

She stuffed it back in her pocket. "I have nothing of yours and I've always loved your hair. Let me keep it." She added, "Please."

The last time she'd said that word to him, they were sixteen. His decision to comply had cost him his relationship with his father and ruined what he'd had with her. She had never said *please* again. Not to him. That ought to be warning enough. But back then, he'd still had a heart that could break.

It wasn't breakable any more.

"It's hair. Not important." He set a fist over his heart and bowed.

Smiling, she pressed her palms together and put her hands before her mouth.

"Thank you. Now, are you ready for the peace talks?"

"No." He squared his shoulders. "I'm ready for war."

Chapter Three

At the appointed time, Pietas entered the elevator with the council, ignoring the warning looks from his father. His mother tugged his father to the rear of the elevator and cast a hopeful smile at her son. Seeing the two of them together, with his father newly reborn and his mother aged, reflected their differences. He had always been hot-tempered; she, wise.

Pietas turned away, wishing he did not have to disappoint her, but he could not in good conscience carry out the council's command. Lock his people into a treaty with these oath breakers? Never.

The entire council would be furious with him. As usual.

Dessy arrived as the doors were closing and slid into place on his right as second-in-command.

On her bosom sat an oval-shaped gold and black brooch, the glass front of which revealed a plait of his hair interwoven in a complex pattern. His sister said nothing, but he felt her empathic outpouring of assent. Yet despite her emotional support, she had voted against him.

Would he never understand this woman? Shoulder to shoulder they faced front.

The closed car meant the sting of emotions in the small space bombarded him from all angles. His skin twitched and he rubbed his arms as if cold.

A cadre of humans waited in the assigned receiving chamber. Ten humans would be given in exchange for ten members of the Ultra Council, as Mahikos and the council had requested. While the Ultras were on board Enderium Six, the humans would act as hostages. If anything happened to the Ultras, the humans would die lingering deaths.

A crawling-ant sensation on his skin escalated to a sting. These creatures hid some secret he did not yet fathom. Pietas bit the inside of his cheek, fighting the urge to lash out, to rip away the life of these mortals.

As agreed, the council members had come unarmed. Ultras had no need to carry weapons. They *were* weapons.

"You!" He gestured toward the human who approached. "I want more."

"I beg your pardon?" The man stopped and looked up at him. Average height for a human, he was over a foot shorter than Pietas and clothed in nondescript gray from head to toe. The dark-skinned man gave him a quizzical look. "More what?"

"More hostages. Ten for ten implies you are our equals. You are not. I want thirty. That will not come close to matching the worth of one of our warriors. Since I doubt you have more than thirty brave enough to face our wrath if you fail, that will suffice."

Grimacing, the man looked over his shoulder. A woman in the group gave an almost imperceptible nod. He turned back. "Very well. We'll need more time."

"You have ten minutes."

"It will take longer than--"

Pietas lifted a hand. "Power up the guns."

When Mahikos came up beside him, flickers of heat traced over Pietas's skin. His father's emotions announced his displeasure, but a council member who interfered with negotiations risked being banned from service.

A hum in the background escalated as lights on the wall panels switched over to

red. "Activated," replied a robotic voice.

"You can't do this!" The human emissary stretched out both hands. "There are half a million souls on board. You said you'd come in peace. We can't--"

"Nine minutes."

"Please!" The man raised the hands in a placating gesture. "Please. Give us thirty minutes. "We need thirty minutes to find--"

"Your repetition bores me. Do you need thirty minutes because you include children among your hostages?"

A cold smile tightened the man's bland features. "We sent all the civilians and their families off station five days ago, knowing *you* were coming."

This underscored what Pietas had said all along. Why would the council not believe this was a trap? They had believed none of his warnings. He would have to get them out of this on his own.

"So you feared me, did you? First intelligent thing you've said today. If laying waste to this station will kill human soldiers, so much the better." Pietas set his hands on his hips. "Your ten minutes starts now. You will lose a minute every time you argue with me. I suggest you stop dawdling. My warriors will open fire unless my demands are met."

"So that's how you negotiate? With guns?"

"You waste my time. Nine minutes." Pietas spun on his heels and walked away.

"Very well," the man called after him. "Ten minutes."

"Eight." Pietas kept walking.

His parents trailed him back toward private quarters. "Pietas," his mother called. "Wait!"

For her, he stopped and turned around.

Small compared to most Ultras, and delicate of face, Helia ap Lorectic was as tough as any soldier. Like him and his father, she possessed an eidetic memory and a fine scientific mind. If anyone was the hope of their people, it was she.

"Pietas, you know this is wrong. We agreed to those terms before we arrived."

"It is not wrong, Mother, and the terms were made by the previous council head, not by me." He opened the door to his quarters and turned back to Helia. "They'll agree to my terms or they'll die."

Mahikos stepped in front of his wife. "You will destroy these talks, you inflexible, intractable narcissist!"

"Why, Father. I'm impressed you know words that big. Thank you."

The man lurched toward him.

"Stop it!" Helia positioned herself between the two. "Pietas, please. It took--"

"No, Mother. I never negotiate with humans from a position of fear."

Mahikos jabbed a finger toward him. "You never negotiate at all."

"Your precious humans have five minutes." He shut the door in the man's face.

His father's shout of anger followed, and then his mother's calmer tones, soothing. The thud of a fist rattled the door before Mahikos gave way to whatever it was Helia was saying to him.

"Just like old times." His message board lit up. Furious texts and outraged faces filled the screen. "It seems I made every council member angry at the same time. How efficient of me."

The device on his wrist let him portal anywhere on the ship, or to the side of

whichever member he wanted. He could use it to communicate. He kept his on private mode, always. No one entered his presence or spoke to him unless he wished it.

His empathic senses, however, he left open. Politicians lied as a matter of policy. Emotions did not.

"Better the enemy you know, than the enemy you do not."

He stroked a fingertip over the bracelet's smooth black surface and then gave it one tap. "Security! Keep the guns hot."

Do you hate Pietas yet?

Good! His story is one of redemption. Want to read more?
Check out this page <https://kayelleallen.com/chaos-origin/>

The sequel to this book is Bringer of Chaos: Forged in Fire
<https://kayelleallen.com/chaos-fire/>

Where else to find Pietas

Pietas is found in books set in the Tarthian Empire.

Fan page on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/lordpietas/>

Boards on Pinterest <https://www.pinterest.com/kayelleallen/bringer-of-chaos-pietas/>

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Kayelle Allen writes Sci Fi with misbehaving robots, mythic heroes, role playing immortal gamers, and warriors who purr. She's a US Navy veteran who's been married so long she's tenured.

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