

-My Lady-
Chapter One: Meeting
by Havoc

“Deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance.”
- Oscar Wilde

“Straighten up, child. And don't stare. I want to make a good impression, and I need your help to do it.”

Hearing her mother's voice ringing in her ears, the young girl blinked, looking over at the elder female standing beside her. The heat of the day bore down on both of them, the desert environment so different from their home planet. The daughter was grateful for the brief, traditional clothing that she was wearing, though she longed for elegant, flowing robes like the ones her mother wore. But she had not earned the right to wear such things, not yet, and likely would not for years to come.

However, being on Lirna meant that the sort of life which would eventually bring such an honor was near at hand. And Li'ren Amani was a lady destined for such things, owing to the family she had been fortunate enough to be born into.

Just fifteen years of age, not yet old enough to be considered an adult by her peoples' standard, the young Ailian was the daughter of a noblewoman. Born on the Inner Ascendancy colony world of Arbaro, a lush, temperate planet in contrast to the harsh desert world of Lirna, her mother had been one of the principal advisers to the Royal Governor of the planet. Li'ren had been brought up in luxury and comfort, though her mother was strict and her education had been all-encompassing. For Li'ren, after all, would one day enter the same diplomatic career that her mother was in.

Like all members of her species, Li'ren was a being of feline appearance, tall and powerfully built. Though she was still growing, barely more than two meters tall as of yet. She was more slender than most, as well, having not reached the age of military service yet. And likely she would never enter the military, so long as her path to a diplomatic career remained straight. Like her mother, she was covered in a coat of dusky blue fur, crisscrossed with a tiger stripe pattern of gold, and her wide, intelligent eyes were a deep, jewel-like hue of red. Unlike her mother, she was dressed in clothing not dissimilar to those that regular, common Ailians would wear: A pure white, calf-length skirt made of wrapped bolts of silken cloth, and a wrapped top to match which covered her body from mid-torso to just below her shoulder, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. As she entered diplomatic service, the traditional dress would be replaced by regal white robes, identical to the ones that her mother now wore.

“Yes, mother,” Li'ren said dutifully, turning her attention back to the building that stood before

them. Hayikwiir Palace, the home of the Royal Family of the Ailian Ascendancy, was a magnificent residence composed largely of white marble, rather than the dusty sandstone that composed many buildings on Lirna. Trimmed here and there with gold, the palace was bracketed by brilliant gardens containing flowering plants gathered from the hundreds of worlds across the Ascendancy. In truth, Li'ren could not help staring. Though she was no stranger to luxury, the palace was far beyond anything that she had witnessed in her life before now.

Frowning slightly, Miri Amani eyed her only daughter judgmentally. Miri had been working her entire life, striving to be the best in the diplomatic service of the Ascendancy. Now all of her hard work had paid off, and she was to be assigned as deputy chief adviser to none other than the Empress herself, Empress Kri'a Solan III. Though normally such a posting would have necessitated leaving her family behind at home, Miri had elected instead to bring Li'ren along with her. She'd felt that Li'ren would benefit from the experience, and perhaps even gain some practical experience from accompanying her. Though that would mean that her daughter would need to suppress her natural curiosity and rather improper ease of distraction. It was something that Miri had worked most of Li'ren's childhood to erase, with some success but less than she would have liked. Li'ren was just too earnest and too willing to speak her mind rather than keeping quiet and knowing her place. But perhaps living here, in the palace, would help her overcome that.

"I said not to stare, Li'ren," Miri ordered her daughter again. She placed a hand on the small of Li'ren's back, nudging her forcefully. "You are about to meet the Empress, and I don't want Her Majesty thinking I cannot even raise a daughter correctly."

Relenting, Li'ren turned her eyes respectfully to the ground, her tail twitching sheepishly. She knew that her mother was right. This was an opportunity for both of them, one that was a high honor, something that had been stated to Li'ren many times on the week-long journey from Arbaro to Lirna. Despite the need for calm, Li'ren couldn't help but be excited. Every citizen of the Ascendancy, from the highest noblewoman to the lowliest slave, would be breathless at the chance to meet the Empress.

"I will do my best not to disappoint you, mother," Li'ren promised. She schooled her face into a solemn expression, calling on all of her willpower to suppress the excitement she was feeling. Her mother's face softened somewhat, a faint smile drawing on her lips.

"I know you will, child," Miri said. She moved her hand to her daughter's shoulder, ruffling the fur there. "Come along, now. The Empress will be waiting for us."

Escorted by her own detachment of guards, Miri Amani and her daughter began up the long pathway to the front doors of the palace. The doors were bracketed by combat pairs of soldiers from the

Royal Guards, elite soldiers whose sole duty was to protect and defend the life of the Empress. The soldiers were taller than normal, with bodies like tanks, equipped with the best weaponry and the toughest armor. Like many elite soldiers of the Ascendancy, their fur was jet black, either their natural color or dyed to match.

When the two Amanis reached the foot of the stairs, their guards left them, returning back to the wheeled vehicle that had brought them from the spaceport to the palace. Miri was unconcerned. There was no danger, here, after all. This was the home planet of her entire race, and the safest place that anyone could be anywhere in the Ascendancy. She looked up at the guards, who regarded her with impassive expressions. They were consummate professionals, and they had been instructed that this person would be arriving.

Upon announcing herself and her daughter, Miri was taken into the palace. Once inside, she breathed a quiet sigh of relief. The interior of the palace was air conditioned, much cooler than the rest of the planet. While her species was naturally inclined to warmer climates, Miri had spent her entire life on Arbaro, and she was used to cooler temperatures. She would have to get used to the hotter days of Lirna.

Li'ren trailed slightly behind her mother, amazed at the richness of the palace. The floors were made of polished, smooth marble, and her feet clicked lightly on the stone as she walked. There was gold everywhere, and rich tapestries and colorful paintings hung from the walls. Here and there, slaves, servants, and fellow nobles walked the halls, going about their business without paying the newcomers much mind. Some of them took note of the young, amazed-looking Ailian walking with the older noblewoman, and privately they recalled feeling the same way when they first arrived at the palace. The sight was a source of private amusement for them, though they pitied her if she did not learn to hide her emotions better.

A long staircase was at the opposite end of the receiving hall from where they had entered. At the foot of the staircase stood a woman, wearing the same color of white robes as Miri. Coated in light orange fur with black stripes, her cheeks and muzzle streaked with touches of gray that showed her to be of middling age, she had her hands clasped in front of her.

“Lady Miri Amani,” the woman said in greeting. “My name is Lady Tara Shi'ala. I am Her Majesty's chief adviser. Welcome to Hayikwiir Palace.”

“Thank you, m'lady,” Miri said. She bowed slightly to the senior noble. Turning to one side, she extended a hand to Li'ren, standing respectfully at her right. “This is my eldest child and only daughter, Li'ren.”

“Your daughter?” Lady Shi'ala looked at Li'ren, seeming to size her up. “Unusual to bring a

child along for an off-world posting...”

“I’m aware of that, m’lady.” Miri’s tail twitched, betraying a little bit of anxiety. She was well aware that the way she phrased her explanation could mean the difference between keeping her new job and losing it. But then again, nobody had ever advanced in the diplomatic circle as far as she had without taking a few calculated risks. “But Li’ren is fifteen. She will be an adult in five years, yet she is already far along in her legal education. She will be following in my footsteps, I hope, and I thought that accompanying me to this posting would be a good experience for her. She can continue her education on Lirna while getting a look at the practical side of things.”

“Ah.” Lady Shi’ala nodded, apparently satisfied with that answer. Turning to Li’ren, she inclined her head. “Welcome to Lirna, Li’ren. I hope your time here is enlightening.”

Clasping her hands at her waist, Li’ren bowed low, nearly horizontal at the hips in the manner she had been taught by her mother. “Thank you, m’lady. I’m very grateful to my mother for this opportunity, and to you and Her Majesty for your hospitality.”

Lady Shi’ala’s ears twitched forward in surprise. “How well-mannered for a child!” She smiled broadly at Li’ren. “I believe Her Majesty will be delighted to meet you both. But for now, I’m afraid, I must ask you to leave us, Li’ren. I must introduce your mother to Her Majesty, and then we shall get you both situated in your new quarters.”

“Yes, of course, m’lady.” Miri looked over to her daughter. “Wait for me here, Li’ren, and do keep out of trouble. I am sure someone will be along to collect you shortly.”

“Yes, mother.” Li’ren straightened up. She kept her eyes on the luxurious marble floor.

“Come, Lady Amani,” Lady Shi’ala commanded. “We mustn’t keep Her Majesty waiting.”

With a squeeze to her daughter’s shoulder, Miri followed her new boss up the staircase. She felt that familiar flutter in her heart. She had met the Empress once before, nearly ten years ago, and she was no stranger to the upper crust of the nobility, but she still felt anxious. Empress Solan was the leader of her people, after all, and it was the highest of honors to be summoned to her. She hoped that she would make a good impression.

After her mother left with Lady Shi’ala, Li’ren was alone in the receiving hall. Not even any other nobles were walking about, and all was quiet. She looked about the huge room, which seemed large enough to fly a starship through. The large portraits of nobility that hung from the wall drew her attention more than anything else. The women in the portraits, and they were all female, were all so beautiful and regal looking. Li’ren recognized many of them as Empresses and Princesses from past centuries. The young Ailian wondered if someday she would be like them. She retraced her steps down

the hall, admiring each portrait in turn. With a sigh, she realized that it was just a fantasy. As fortunate as she had been in the family she had been born into, Li'ren was only a minor noble. She would never be as important as these beautiful women.

Remembering that her mother had instructed her to stay out of trouble, Li'ren found a bench sitting along one wall and sat down to wait. Curling her tail into her lap, she found herself feeling very out of place. Li'ren half wished that her mother hadn't brought her along. She missed her father and her brothers, as well as the few friends she'd had back on Arbaros. Li'ren had never been one to make many friends. She just felt different than many Ailians her own age, for reasons that she couldn't quite explain even to herself. While her schoolmates were at the age where they were talking about going out with males or attending parties, she had no interest in such things. Males held no appeal to her, and she preferred to spend her free hours at home, either studying or helping her mother about the house.

With another sigh, Li'ren leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes. The journey from home had made her very tired. Travel always did, for some reason, though she had only left her home planet a handful of times, and only on vacations. If she was lucky, maybe she could just take a nap until whoever was sent to retrieve her arrived.

“Are you lost, little one?”

Jumping in surprise, Li'ren snapped open her eyes. Sitting up straight, she looked about for the source of the voice, and then she saw someone standing before her, in the center of the hall. Just under three meters tall, several feet taller than Li'ren, and dressed in the crisp, black uniform of an Ascendancy Naval Commander, was another female Ailian. The soldier seemed to be about thirty years old, and her fur was a very deep blue, almost black, with no discernible striping. Her eyes were soft and intelligent in appearance, very kind, and a shade of red much like Li'ren's. Her uniform was immaculately tailored, tight to her body, which had the strong, athletic figure of a professional fighter. A double row of award bars was affixed over her left breast along with her rank insignia, which was also present on each of her shoulders. All that Li'ren could think of when she looked at her was that she looked more beautiful than any of the royalty in the portraits around her.

“Are you quite alright, child?” the commander asked. She walked towards Li'ren, her tail swishing behind her. She seemed rather amused at the teenage girl who had been about to fall asleep in the royal palace, and when she stood before Li'ren she leaned over slightly. “You don't look as though you belong here. What's your name?”

“Ah...” Remembering her manners, Li'ren rose to her feet and bowed properly. “Forgive me, ma'am. I was waiting for my mother. My name is Li'ren Amani. I came here with my mother, Lady Miri Amani. She's been posted to the palace as an adviser to Her Majesty.”

“Ah, I see.” The soldier returned Li'ren's bow with a nod of her own. “I've heard your mother's name before. Then if she is to be an adviser, I would guess that she brought you with her as a sort of learning experience. Am I correct?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Li'ren clasped her hands behind her back, looking at her feet. “I'm supposed to wait here until she is finished meeting with the Empress. She told me to stay out of trouble.”

The elder female nodded. “Sensible advice. Making a fool of one's self in the royal palace would be a mistake, indeed.” Standing in a relaxed stance, the commander smiled at Li'ren. “Is this your first time to our homeworld, little one?”

Li'ren nodded. Though the older woman was obviously someone of importance, her relaxed attitude was putting her at ease. “It is. It's...It's very different from the planet I was born on. It's a lot hotter here.”

The commander laughed, a light and musical sound that would have been infectious if Li'ren hadn't still been feeling nervous. “It is hot here, yes. But you seem dressed appropriately for the weather, at least. Your outfit is quite fetching.” She waved a hand at the clothing Li'ren was wearing, and Li'ren felt a warmth rise to her cheeks at the compliment. “And you wear the colors of a diplomat. I'm sure your mother has high hopes for you.”

“Yes.” Shuffling her feet a little, Li'ren finally looked back up at the female's face, curious. “Forgive me, ma'am, but may I ask who you are?”

“Me? Oh, I'm just a humble commander in Her Majesty's Navy.” Li'ren thought she could see a flash of mirth in the commander's eyes, but it quickly vanished. “I was summoned to the palace on official business, but it's not my time yet, so I was just walking around to pass the hours until I'm needed.” She tilted her head to one side. “You know, if your mother is meeting with the Empress, it might be a while until someone comes for you. I'm sure you must be bored waiting here all alone. Would you like me to give you a little tour?”

“A tour?” Li'ren was grateful for the offer, especially from someone who seemed so important, but she was uncertain. “I...I'm not sure I should, ma'am. My mother told me to wait here. I don't want to do anything wrong or get in trouble.”

The commander waved her hand, unconcerned. “It won't cause any trouble, little one. As I said, it will only be a little tour. There can't be any harm in that, can there?”

Li'ren looked over to the staircase that her mother had gone up, still feeling a little worried. If her mother returned and she wasn't there waiting for her, she was almost certain to be upset. But then again, it wasn't as though she was going to be wandering about the palace by herself. If she was with someone, perhaps that wouldn't be so bad. And Li'ren really was curious now to see the rest of the

palace.

“A-Alright,” Li'ren finally agreed. She bowed to the commander again. “Thank you for your kind offer.”

The soldier laughed again, her eyes shining. “Such a nice girl you are. Very well, come this way.” Placing a hand gently on Li'ren's shoulder, she guided her back through the hall towards the front entrance. “Now, the very first thing anyone must see at Hayikwiir Palace is the gardens. They're flowering this time of year, and they're simply divine.”

As she allowed herself to be led along, Li'ren felt a wonderful welcoming feeling in her chest. First impressions were everything, and right now she was getting a splendid first impression of life at the royal palace. She found herself wondering how long the older female was going to be around. She would very much like to have the opportunity to get to know her better.

Lady Shi'ala led Miri up to the second floor, down a long hallway towards a set of unassuming double doors. When they came to the doors, Shi'ala stopped, turning to Miri and gesturing to them. “This is Empress Solan's meeting chambers. You will be spending a lot of time here, helping to advise the Empress on the day-to-day workings of the Ascendancy. Since you have so much experience as a diplomat, I'm placing you in charge of matters dealing with our allies in the Nuretan Empire.”

“Yes, m'lady,” Miri said, feeling a thrill. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, and exactly what she had been hoping for. Miri was an expert on relations with the Nuretans, having spent several years as an ambassador to one of their worlds.

“Well, if you'll come in with me, I shall introduce you to Her Majesty.” Opening one of the double doors, Shi'ala walked in with Miri following close behind.

The room within was large, though nothing like as large as the receiving hall at the front of the palace. The walls inside were finished in a chestnut-colored wood paneling, rich in appearance, and was very well-lit though there were no windows. A long, hardwood table stood in the center of the room, lined with high-backed wooden chairs. A holographic projector was set in the middle of the table. At one end of the table, a single Ailian was seated. She was very serious in appearance, cold and regal, wearing rich blue robes trimmed with gold. Her dark blue fur blended almost seamlessly with her clothing, and her eyes were coal black, with a hard intelligence to them. She was older than Miri, near to seventy years of age, but when she saw the two other Ailians entering the room she rose to her feet with no hint of difficulty.

“Tara,” the woman said in greeting.

“Your Majesty,” Lady Shi'ala said, bowing very low indeed. “May I introduce to you Lady Miri

Amani, your new deputy chief adviser. She has just arrived from Arbaros. Lady Amani, Empress Kri'a Solan the Third."

Slightly breathless, Miri bowed just as low as Shi'ala, keeping her eyes off of the Empress until she had been properly acknowledged. "My Lady," she said. "Mere words cannot described the honor that I feel at being selected as one of your advisers. I am very pleased to be here, Your Majesty."

After a moment, the Empress waved a hand. "You are very welcome, indeed, Lady Amani. Please, come closer and be seated."

"Certainly, m'lady." Miri raised her head, finally allowing herself to look at the Empress. She was every bit as impressive as she remembered from their first meeting. Kri'a Solan III had been Empress for nearly forty years now, though her mate had been dead for almost half that time. The former Emperor had been a native of Lirna, and had seen fit to choose his mate from a field of countless possible females. In somewhat of a surprise, Empress Solan III had been selected from one of the Outer Colonies, the daughter of the governess of one of the largest colony planets from that region. As Empress, she had taken power surely and confidently, gaining the trust of her people through years of competent, though very strict, reign.

Miri took a seat very close to the Empress, as instructed, and Lady Shi'ala sat opposite her. The Empress sat as well, folding her hands on the tabletop.

"Well, Lady Amani, your reputation is quite impressive, from what I have been told. You have been in the diplomatic service for thirty years now, is that correct?"

"Yes, m'lady," Miri said, nodding with a smile. "I spent my first five years as a minor diplomat on my home planet, Arbaros, before I was posted to Regis for five years. I then served as an ambassador to the Nuretan Empire for several years before returning to Arbaros as the chief adviser to the royal governor there. I have been there for the last seventeen years."

"A very swift rise you made," Empress Solan said. It was not said as a compliment, merely as a statement of fact. The Empress lifted a small data viewer that had been sitting on the table, examining it for a few moments. "It says here that Governor Saleh was very impressed with your service. It was his glowing recommendation that brought you to my attention. I do need the best advisers, and I think you qualify on that score." Here she offered the barest of smiles, which seemed to be more out of politeness than true friendship.

"Thank you, m'lady," Miri said. She was not offended by the cold nature of the Empress. Her reputation was as such, and she hadn't expected anything more.

"And I do need advisers more than ever these days." The Empress set the data viewer down. "What do you know of the war that is developing on our borders?"

Miri blinked. Apparently she would be beginning her duties much earlier than she'd expected. "Not much, I'm afraid, m'lady. I only know what I've heard from official news, which hasn't been very much. Apparently there is some new species causing a stir near the Outer Colonies?"

"Indeed." It was Lady Shi'ala who spoke now. "They call themselves 'humans'. An odd race. We've known about them for some time now, but they're expanding their territory much more rapidly than was once expected. They're encroaching on our borders, which has led to several small-scale battles. Nothing serious as of yet, but we fear it will become so."

"I see...," Miri said slowly. "It's certainly something to be concerned about. Have we tried to make diplomatic contact with them yet?"

The Empress shook her head. "We have not. For now, our actions have been limited to trying to warn them off. Bite them on the hand to see if they learn. So far, they have not." The Empress sighed heavily. "But I am getting ahead of myself. If you don't know more than that, talk right now is pointless. I will get you all the relevant documents you will need, and you can go over them at your convenience."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'll make it a priority once I am settled."

"Good. Now about your other responsibilities..."

"What do you think of the palace so far, little one?"

Li'ren's head was fairly spinning. She had never been anywhere so wonderful in her life. The gardens had been only the start, and they had been marvelous. Flowers of all colors, smells, and sizes, with petals blowing in the breeze, and more types of trees than she had ever known to exist. Then their tour had gone inside the palace, where she had seen many long hallways full of gorgeous paintings and stone carved statues. Most of all, Li'ren had been impressed by the palace's massive library, which was filled with books and digital media of all kinds. She could have spent years in that library, and she wouldn't have been able to read even five percent of what was in there.

"It's amazing, ma'am," Li'ren said. Her voice was shaky with excitement. She knew that she would be living here with her mother, and it was dawning on her just how incredible that was. "I've never seen anyplace like this before. I thought the governor's mansion on Arbaros was big, but this is...I don't know how to describe it."

"I know how you feel," her guide said. She had a smile on her face at the enthusiasm of her younger companion. "I have been many places in the Ascendancy, but I always come back here and find myself humbled."

"Are you often at the palace?" Li'ren asked. She tried to make the question sound casual, but a

hopeful tone still made its way into her voice. Not having had many friends before, she wanted to know whether or not she could expect the commander to be around fairly often. She seemed the friendly sort, especially for someone who was of such a high rank in the military.

“Oh...Not as often as I would like.” The commander's smile turned a little wistful. “I grew up here. My mother has been here for a very long time.”

“You grew up here?” Li'ren looked over at her, surprised. “Really?”

The older female's smile widened again, her tail waving back and forth in amusement. “Yes, really.” She nodded her head absently, looking around the hall they were walking down now. If Li'ren had her sense of direction right, they were going back to the receiving hall. “But I will probably be spending more time here in the future. Depending on how the business I was called here for turns out.”

They walked through a doorway, and came back into the receiving hall. It still seemed as empty as it had been when they'd left it. Li'ren looked up at her tour guide, smiling. “Thank you for showing me around, commander.” She interlaced her fingers, swishing her tail from side to side. “I feel strange, not even knowing your name.”

“It was my pleasure, little one.” The commander patted her on the shoulder. “My name is...”

“Li'ren!”

Li'ren felt the fur raise up on the back of her neck, and her heart plummet down into her stomach. Turning her head slowly, she saw her mother coming down the stairs, looking livid as she rushed ahead of Lady Shi'ala and another, older female in regal blue-and-gold robes. Before Li'ren could say anything, Miri Amani had come up to her, grabbing her by the arm.

“I told you to wait for me!” her mother hissed to her. “Have you been wandering around the palace all this time?” Miri couldn't remember the last time she had been this angry. She had trusted her daughter to follow her directions and wait for her, and now she found her walking around the palace as though she had even begun to earn the right. How dare she embarrass her like this, in front of the Empress herself, no less! “Li'ren, I have never been so disappointed in you.”

“But...Mother, I just...”

The oldest female in the blue-and-gold robes stood just a few paces behind Miri. “I assume this is the daughter you spoke of, Lady Amani.”

Miri stiffened, turning around, her hand still gripping Li'ren's arm tightly. “Yes, m'lady. I apologize, she is usually much more well-behaved than this. I specifically instructed her not to go anywhere until someone came for her.”

“And someone did come for her.” These words came from the commander who had been showing Li'ren around the palace. “You must be Lady Amani. I assure you, ma'am, that Li'ren has been

perfectly well-behaved the entire time she was with me.” She looked among the gathered Ailians, seeming unconcerned to be faced by this many nobles at once. Despite the situation she found herself in, Li'ren was admiring of the poise that the soldier was showing. “I was passing through the room, and I saw her sitting alone. I thought she might like some company, and perhaps to be shown around a bit while she was waiting. No harm was done.”

Miri bared her teeth, her ears slightly back as she was irritated by the other female's intrusion, as well as the liberty she had taken going off with her daughter, but she covered it well. “I appreciate your input, Commander,” Miri said carefully. “But I know how to raise my own daughter.”

The commander inclined her head slightly. “I am certain you do, Lady Amani. I only wished to let you know how impressed I was by your daughter. She is very mature and proper for her age, and quite a pleasant girl to speak with.” She smiled down at Li'ren, then looked back to Miri. “And she speaks very highly of you, I might add. I think she will make you very proud one day.”

Taken aback somewhat, Miri blinked, her fur smoothing down as she recovered herself. “Well...Well, thank you, Commander. Please forgive the way that I behaved just now.” She nodded to the soldier. “May I ask your name?”

“Certainly, Lady Amani.” The Ailian commander straightened to her full height, schooling her face into a blank expression and clasping her hands smartly behind her back. “I am Princess Commander Kri'a Solan the Fourth, of the First Fleet.” She looked between the two of them, her smile creeping back as she saw the expressions on both of their faces. “And I'm very pleased to meet the both of you.”