

-My Lady-
Chapter Three: Let Go
by Havoc

“The secret of happiness is freedom. The secret of freedom is courage.”
- Thucydides

When her daughter came back into their quarters, Lady Miri Amani was at her desk looking over a tall stack of documents. She glanced up as the door opened and closed, watching a moment as Li'ren walked across the floor and sat down on a couch in their shared living room. Then she turned her attention back to her papers, finishing up the page she was reading before pushing it away and turning in her chair.

“Welcome home, child,” Miri said. “And how was your day? Did you get caught up with your studies?”

Li'ren shrugged her shoulders, looking at the stack of books in her lap. “Mostly,” she answered. “I still have a few things left to do, but they shouldn't take long.” The younger Ailian leaned forward, setting her books down on a low table in front of her chair. She sat back in her seat, closing her eyes and smiling a little, her tail waving slowly from side to side.

Miri was amused by her daughters posture. “You seem in a good mood, Li'ren.”

“Well...,” Li'ren said, opening her eyes again. She straightened up again, folding her hands in her lap and trying to be a bit more proper. “It was a pleasant day. I studied in the palace gardens. They remind me of home, mother...”

Feeling a wave of sympathy for her daughter, Miri got up from her desk and went to her, sitting down on the couch next to her. She put an arm around Li'ren's shoulders. “You are homesick.” Drawing her daughter close, she hugged her, clutching her head to her shoulder and ruffling her ears.

“I miss father,” Li'ren admitted, her voice a little shaky. “And everyone else. I miss being at home. Sometimes I wish I didn't have to be here.” She wrapped her arms around her mother.

Miri patted Li'ren on the back. “I know, child.” She sat back from her, brushing a tear from her daughter's face. “I miss your father, too. I wish everyone could have come to Lirna with us. But it wasn't possible. Your father had his patients to tend to back home, and it was best for your brothers to stay with him.”

“I know,” Li'ren said quietly.

Smiling softly, the elder Ailian curled her tail into her lap, crossing one leg over the other. “Take heart, child. I am still new here, so it would be improper to ask, but in a few months I will ask Her Majesty for leave so that we can visit home.”

Li'ren felt her mood lift a little at that. "That will be nice, mother." She wagged her tail slightly, though that was mostly for show. Inwardly, she was wishing that her mother would go ahead and ask for leave right now. Waiting months for the chance to see her father and brothers again wasn't her idea of good news, but then again she supposed it was better than nothing.

"And speaking of Her Majesty," Miri continued, "I have some good news for you. The Empress has taken notice of the work you have been doing for me. She told me that she is impressed, especially considering your age." Miri looked at her daughter with an expression of pride. "She asked me to pass along her compliments."

"Really?" Li'ren perked up considerably more at that bit of news. Hearing that the Empress herself had taken notice of work that she had done was certainly something to be excited about. "I...well...T-Tell Her Majesty that I'm pleased she approves of my work, a-and that I'm grateful for her kind words." She clasped her hands tightly in her lap, feeling them start to shake a little with sudden glee. Recognition like this could be the first step towards a very illustrious career.

Lady Amani squeezed her shoulder, getting up and going back to her desk. "So, you studied today," she said, picking up the document she'd been reading. "Did anything else happen?"

"Ah...Now that you mention it...", Li'ren said, adopting her relaxed posture again, "there was one thing."

"Oh?" Miri looked over the document, an intriguing analysis of the current political situation in the Nuretan Empire. Their government was based on a curious system of elections, in which the political leader was subject to possible overthrow every ten years by means of a popular vote. Even more curious, this system rarely resulted in any sort of social unrest, and instead had been carried out peacefully without fail for nearly five millennium. Of course, as an expert on the Nuretans, Miri knew all of this, though she didn't pretend that it made sense to her. *Much more natural for rule to be inherited...*, she thought to herself.

"Yes," Li'ren said. "When I was studying in the garden, Kr-...the Princess happened by. She invited me to lunch."

Miri's eyes stopped moving across the page she'd been reading. "Did she now?"

"Yeah, she did!" Li'ren said, excitedly. She leaned forward in her seat, fairly bouncing now. "I was reading some case law, and she asked me about it. She seemed really interested." The younger Ailian could tell that she was getting a little too eager, but she didn't care. Surely her mother would be pleased that she was making friends in her new home, especially if said friends happened to be highly placed. "After we talked for a while, she invited me to eat with her, and we talked some more."

Setting her papers down again, Miri turned back around to face her daughter. "What did you

talk about with Princess Kri'a?" Her voice was calm and neutral, but Li'ren could see that her ears were slightly laid back. That gave her pause, making her a little worried herself.

"W-Well..." Li'ren said, thinking for a moment. Maybe her mother wouldn't be quite as pleased as she had thought. Li'ren certainly wouldn't want to tell her *everything* that Kri'a had discussed with her, most of all because some of it had been very personal. "We talked about our families, mostly. I talked about what it was like growing up on Arbaros, and the Princess told me what it was like growing up in the palace. It was very interesting. She also talked about her career in the military, and...you know, about the war and things like that."

Lady Amani seemed to relax a little, her ears returning to normal and her dusky blue fur smoothing down. "I see. I'm glad you had a pleasant time." She stood up, smoothing down her robes before gathering up her papers to put them away. "But...Li'ren, let me be serious for a moment. I would be very careful about developing any sort of friendship with Princess Kri'a."

Li'ren tilted her head to one side curiously. "Why? She's very nice, mother."

"I'm sure she is," Miri allowed, opening a locked drawer in her desk and filing the documents away carefully. "But there are lots of rumors about her, and everyone knows that she's on suspension from her military posting. I don't want you to get caught up in any of it. I don't want people starting rumors about *you*, child. You have your future to think about."

There was no response from Li'ren for a few moments. Of course, she knew exactly what rumors her mother was referring to considering that she'd heard them as truth from the Princess herself only a few hours ago. What Li'ren had learned was certainly shocking, and to many Ailians having such things said about them would have been the worst kind of offense. The Princess had not seemed offended to know that people were talking about her behind her back, and to her, obviously, the contents of the revelations hadn't been bad in the slightest. Kri'a, in fact, had seemed rather proud of who she was, and hadn't seemed to care what others thought of her personally apart from harboring a certain weariness of her society's views. Li'ren, though, did find something offensive about the way her mother was talking about Kri'a. After all, she was the Princess and deserved a certain level of respect, and Li'ren respected her very much for being so open about herself.

"You shouldn't talk about her like that, mother," Li'ren said. Her mother looked at her with an astonished expression on her face, and with good reason. Miri had never been talked back to by her daughter, ever. Li'ren knew she had just gone too far in one fell swoop, but she pressed on. "E-Even...Even if those rumors are true, so what? What harm is there? What the Princess might do doesn't hurt anyone, so...so why should anyone hold it against her?"

Miri took a very long time in answering. "You are still young, my child, so you can perhaps be

forgiven for not understanding.” She took a deep breath. “Our society is built on the traditions of our culture. And many people believe that people like...like what the Princess is rumored to be run contrary to those traditions, threatening our society.”

Gritting her teeth a little, Li'ren squeezed her hands into tight fists, standing up abruptly from the couch. Staring at her mother, her jaw muscles twitched as she forced down the sudden, inexplicable anger that had formed inside of her. Finally, after several very tense minutes, she managed to speak. “Well, maybe those people aren't worth listening to, mother.” Then she turned away from Miri, leaving her study materials behind as she rushed off from the living room to her own bedroom.

Thoroughly taken aback by the abrupt change in her daughter's demeanor, Lady Amani gazed after her long after she had disappeared through her bedroom door. *Li'ren...*, she thought to herself, as she remembered at last to lock up her desk properly. *What has gotten into that girl...?*

The next two weeks were some of the busiest that Miri had experienced since she arrived on Lirna. The daily staff meetings that she had to attend with the Empress and the rest of her advisers were increasingly taken over by matters related to the war with the humans, pushing out other official matters including relations with the Nuretan Empire. Instead of asking for her to work on normal channels of communication with their allies, Empress Solan was leaning on Miri to find out what sort of aid the Nuretans were willing to give them militarily. Time and time again, Lady Amani was put in the uncomfortable position of having to remind the Empress that the Nuretans were not a warlike species. Although they possessed a formidable navy, they were unlikely to get involved in the Ascendancy's border conflict with the humans unless it was a direct threat to their own sovereignty. While the Empress kept saying that she understood that, she still kept asking Miri to lean on the Nuretans for some sort of aid commitment.

Miri didn't understand why the Empress was even asking her to work on such a thing. Though military matters weren't her area of expertise, she knew that the Ascendancy Navy was composed of sixteen different fleets, each of them composed of a hundred ships of varying classes. She also knew from the intelligence briefings that accompanied each staff meeting that the humans also had a respectable navy, though the figures that were quoted by Chief Admiral Me'lia placed their total strength at a little under seventy percent of what the Ascendancy could field. What Miri couldn't understand was why the Empress would need the aid of the Nuretans when they outnumbered the humans enough to push them back from Ascendancy territory. Privately, she felt that the Empress was relying too much on Chief Admiral Me'lia for advice. Ara'lana's idea of military strategy could best be summed up with the phrase “shock and awe”, and Miri could sense that strategy behind the course that

the Ascendancy was taking. Miri thought it a rather poor example of what first contact with another species should be, but of course she couldn't say that out loud in the meetings. She was far too junior in the Empress's inner circle for that kind of contrary thinking.

And so, Miri attended her meetings like an obedient adviser, giving the Empress what advice she thought was best. She kept her contacts with the Nuretan Empire open, continuing to forward the Empress's requests for military aid while doing. At the same time, she worked as hard as she could to reassure them that the Ascendancy valued them as more than just a convenient ally to be called on when they were in trouble. As she was effectively the chief diplomat to the Nuretan Empire, this was her job anyway, but the war fever that was rapidly overtaking the leadership of the Ascendancy was making her job very difficult.

In the meantime, Miri had other things to worry about as well. Despite the advice she had given to her daughter, she knew for a fact that Li'ren was continuing to associate with Princess Kri'a. Thankfully, Miri had not heard anyone in the palace spreading any rumors about her daughter. She heard far more from Li'ren herself. Whenever Miri asked her about the Princess, the teenager positively gushed about her. It was obvious to her that Li'ren admired Kri'a very much, though from what Miri could get from her it seemed as though they were just developing a good friendship, which gave Miri no small amount of relief. What worried her was that the Empress had noticed their friendship as well. One could hardly have expected anything else, and Miri only hoped that the Empress wouldn't grow suspicious. She was just waiting for her to say something in one of their daily meetings.

At the end of one such meeting, Miri thought that it was coming. She was the last speaker at this meeting, giving the advisory council an update on the state of the economic exchange between the Ascendancy and the Nuretan Empire. When her report was completed, the Empress made a few closing remarks and then dismissed everyone. As Lady Amani gathered her things to leave, a shadow fell over her place at the long meeting table. Looking up, she saw the Empress and her chief aide, Lady Shi'ala, standing over her.

"A word with you, if we may, Miri?" Shi'ala said.

With a sinking feeling, Miri gave a short nod, quickly standing. "Of course, m'lady." Doing her best to keep her ears from flattening all the way to the top of her head, the Ailian diplomat followed Shi'ala and the Empress out of the meeting chamber to a smaller, more private room. Inside, Chief Admiral Me'lia was waiting for them. They all took seats, and the Empress spoke first.

"I know you are busy, Miri, so I'll keep this brief," the Empress said. "I need to speak with you of a matter concerning my daughter."

The sinking feeling deepened even more. "I see," Miri said shortly. Her mind was racing now,

and she thought of what she might be able to do to minimize the damage of what was surely going to be a near-lethal blow to her career. “Let me assure you, Your Majesty, that whatever might be happening, I...I'll do whatever I can to make it right.”

Lady Shi'ala, Admiral Me'lia, and the Empress all exchanged quizzical looks. Miri watched the expressions play out on their faces, and immediately she began to wonder if she might have misread the situation. A minute later she was sure of it as Admiral Me'lia leaned forward in her seat, brushing a hand back through the short white fur on her head.

“I believe there may have been some sort of misunderstanding, Lady Amani,” the admiral said. “You haven't been called in for some kind of disciplinary action, or anything of that nature.” The military officer leaned her head to one side, looking at Miri curiously. “What did you mean by 'make it right'?”

Faced with the combined stares of the other three Ailians, Miri took a moment in answering. Somewhat weakly deciding to deflect the question, she clasped her hands in her lap, squeezing her grip tightly to try to calm herself down. “Perhaps I misread the situation,” she said to the Empress, in as calm a voice as she could manage. She curled her tail around her ankles, doing her best to look as composed as possible. “What did you need to speak with me about, m'lady?”

After eying her for several seconds, the Empress seemed to dismiss Miri's odd outburst. “As I said, I wanted your input on something concerning my daughter,” she said. “As you may know, the Princess has been due for a promotion to admiral for some time now, however she has been on official reprimand.” The Empress glanced at Admiral Me'lia. “After consulting with Ara'lana, we have determined that the suspension has gone on for long enough.”

“Ah...,” Miri said. She still didn't see what any of this had to do with her.

“Commander Solan will be receiving her promotion to admiral in a few days' time,” Admiral Me'lia informed her. She laid a hand on her knee, tapping her finger there rhythmically. “With the war with the humans escalating, we need experienced admirals in the field. Commander Solan, though her discipline leaves a little to be desired, is a very capable officer and should fit the role of a fleet admiral nicely.” Ara'lana smiled. “Admiral Te'rou will be rotating out of his command of the Second Fleet to a staff position, and I plan to assign our new Admiral Solan to that posting.”

“Well...Good for the Princess,” Miri said slowly. She looked to the Empress. “Please forgive me, Your Highness, but I still don't understand why you needed me.”

The Empress nodded. “I understand your confusion.” She leaned back in her seat, crossing one leg over another. “Naturally, since the Princess is an admired figure in our Empire, we will be holding a state dinner for her promotion. However, the date of promotion is going to coincide with the arrival of a

delegation from the Nuretan Empire, and as you have so admirably reminded me over these past several weeks, we cannot neglect our allies. Therefore, I wish to make this state dinner a joint venture. I wanted your input on this idea.”

Miri's eyes widened as she finally understood. “Ah, I see, m'lady.” She considered the idea carefully. “Nuretan culture is not as highly focused on personal and group honor as ours is. They likely will not view sharing festivities with the Princess as a slight or insult. As a matter of fact, they may even view it as a compliment. By making them guests of honor at a state function with Princess Kri'a, we elevate them to the same status as her.” There were nods all around the room at that. “It's...It's actually quite a good idea, Your Majesty.”

“Then I believe that shall be my final plan,” the Empress said. “And of course, as our resident expert on the Nuretan Empire, you must be involved in the preparations for the ceremonies. Your daughter, Li'ren, should attend as well, at least for the formal dinner. It's about time she had her introduction to a formal state function, and she can consider it a reward for the marvelous work she has been doing for you.”

“An excellent idea, Your Majesty,” Lady Shi'ala agreed. She looked over at Miri. “After all, she is here on Lirna to learn the ins and outs of diplomacy. What better for her to see than a ceremony involving our allies.”

And that, at least, was something that Miri Amani could most definitely not disagree with. Considering that Li'ren seemed to be growing such close friends with the Princess, she likely would have asked to attend anyway. Having an official invitation from the Empress would be even better.

“Stop fidgeting, Li'ren. Your dress looks fine as it is.”

Li'ren froze, her hand an inch away from the opposite cuff of the sleeve of her robes. All evening, she had been fixing little flaws that she perceived in her appearance, trying to make sure that she looked absolutely perfect. This was a big night for Li'ren. For the very first time ever in her life, she was attending an official state function, and she was doing so wearing an outfit of formal diplomatic robes just like the ones her mother wore. When she had been presented the robes by her mother, she had been overwhelmed with excitement, made all the better by the news that the Empress herself had requested her attendance at the dinner commemorating Princess Kri'a's promotion and the arrival of the Nuretan delegation.

“I'm sorry, mother,” Li'ren apologized, taking her hands and clasping them in front of her. She looked down at herself, resisting the urge to pluck at a nearly microscopic speck of lint that she had just noticed on the front of her robes. “I just...I worked really hard to look good tonight. I want the Empress

to be pleased. I don't want this to be the only official event I'm ever invited to.”

Miri smiled at her daughter, softening the blow of her admonition a little. “No fear of that, child. You look gorgeous.”

Li'ren beamed, her tail swishing madly behind her for a few moments before she brought it under control. She really had worked hard at making herself look fantastic. Underneath the pure white, flowing robes, she was wearing the same clothes that she usually wore, but of course nobody was meant to see those. Because these robes were meant for a formal occasion, instead of day-to-day work, they were trimmed in gold along the sleeves and the hems around her ankles. Li'ren was also wearing thin gold cuff-style rings in her ears, polished to a high shine. Whenever she turned her head, the lights in the room caught the polish on the jewelry, crowning her head with a shimmery gold sparkle. She also wore a gold necklace, though this was not a piece specially worn for this event. The necklace had been a gift from her father when she was ten. Composed of two golden chains, a large one and a smaller one connected at the back of her neck, inside of each other, the necklace hung low to her breasts with an emerald pendant attached to it.

What would have made the evening absolutely perfect would have been if Li'ren was allowed to attend the actual promotion ceremony for the Princess, but that hadn't been possible. Only high-ranking members of the military, the government, and the nobility were allowed to attend official promotion ceremonies. What Li'ren was allowed to do, and where she was right now, was to be in the receiving line at the dinner. Standing with her mother, she was also near Lady Shi'ala and several other members of the palace entourage, greeting dignitaries and military officers as they entered the palace's giant ballroom through the side doors. The room was richly decorated for the occasion, with polished wooden tables placed around the perimeter of the room, set for dinner. The center of the room was empty so that people could mill about before the meal, chatting and talking business.

“Lady Miri Amani! It has been far too long.” At the heavily accented voice, Li'ren looked up from her absent-minded inspection of her robes. Coming through the receiving line now were three individuals of a species that she had only seen in pictures and video.

The three people were Nuretans, two males and one female, members of the delegation from their empire that were some of the guests of honor for the evening. Nuretans had a culture almost as old as the Ailians', though they were a species of aquatic origins rather than desert-dwellers. Able to breathe in air and water, they looked very different from Ailians, though both species were bipedal. Rather than fur, their bodies were covered in slick amphibian skin of varying shades of green. Their flat, slender faces were adorned with mottled blue patterns, thickest around the eyes, and their heads were topped with long, flowing white hair that hung nearly down to the smalls of their backs. They

averaged shorter than Ailians, only two and a half meters at the tallest, and were tailless. Most striking of all, their eyes tended to be vividly colored, in neon shades of green, orange, and blue, with dual diamond-shaped pupils.

“Ambassador Vetalg, so nice to see you again!” Miri exclaimed. She clasped the hands of the Nuretan in the lead. Li'ren noticed that his long, thin fingers were webbed. “You are looking quite well. My goodness, it has been more than fifteen years, has it not?”

“At least,” the ambassador agreed. His voice had a watery, whispering tone to it, imparting the feeling of deep, rushing water. “Nearer to twenty, I would say, though. You have gone up in the world since then, I see.” He smiled, showing off a set of orange-colored, predatory teeth.

“And your Ailian has greatly improved.” Miri turned, placing a hand on Li'ren's back and urging her forward. “Li'ren, this is Ambassador Wouz Vetalg of the Nuretan Empire. During my time as an envoy to the Empire, he was my liaison with their government. Ambassador Vetalg, this is my daughter, Li'ren.”

With a nervous smile, Li'ren bowed very low to the Nuretan ambassador. “I'm very pleased to meet you, Ambassador,” she said.

Nodding to her, Ambassador Vetalg took her hand. To Li'ren's surprise, his skin was not cold and clammy as it appeared by sight, but warm and smooth. “The pleasure is all mine, I'm sure, Li'ren. You are very lucky to have a role model as skilled as your mother.” Looking back to Miri, he waved a hand to the other two Nuretans with him. “This is Minister Peche Oseyan of the Trade Department...” The other male inclined his head. “...and General Kalma Soumaren of the Imperial Marines.” The female nodded as well. “They have accompanied me here to speak in regards to your government's requests for aid. We were hoping to have an opportunity to speak with you, and perhaps the Empress as well, later this evening.”

“I shall certainly see what I can arrange with Her Majesty,” Miri promised. She clasped his hand once more with a diplomatic smile. “Please enjoy the evening for now.” The Nuretans moved along the receiving line.

Li'ren stood dutifully next to her mother as the rest of the guests came into the ballroom. Before long, the room was filled with a crowd of mostly Ailians, with the delegation of Nuretans spread about in twos and threes. After the last guests came in, Li'ren and her mother went to their places at the dinner tables, with everyone gradually following suit. As one of the advisory council members present at the event, Lady Amani was sitting at the head table, with Li'ren sitting next to her. Li'ren felt a little awkward being what felt like the center of attention, though she knew of course that few people would be paying her any mind. Still, she couldn't keep her tail from wagging underneath the table. Being here

made her feel very important, and she knew she was getting a preview of what was to come if she really followed her mother into the diplomatic service.

Then, once all of the guests were seated, the main doors leading into the ballroom opened. Two members of the elite Royal Guards proceeded in and took positions on either side of the doorway. Escorted by two more guards, the Empress walked in after them, dressed in all of her finery and holding her head high. She looked as solemn and regal as ever, causing the room to fall silent instantly as she impressed the crowd. And then, following close behind her, was Princess Kri'a, the main guest of honor for the dinner.

As soon as Li'ren saw Kri'a, she found her breath taken away. The first time she had met the Princess, she had been wearing her everyday dress uniform, and each time after that she had worn the flowing robes of royalty. Tonight, in keeping with the ceremony commemorating her promotion to the rank of admiral, Kri'a was wearing her formal military uniform. Of a similar cut to the uniform she had worn before, this one looked brand-new, and hugged the contours of her athletic body almost perfectly. Instead of the black color of the normal uniform, this one was deep blue with red striping along the legs and arms. The high, stiff collar of the uniform jacket was adorned with shiny new golden admiral's rank insignia. All of her awards were pinned to her chest in neat rows. Her muzzle was split in a proud smile, and she looked around the room at all of the assembled guests. As her eyes fell on Li'ren at the head table, her smile widened, and the tip of her tail twitched behind her. Li'ren felt a flash of warmth rising in her cheeks, and she glanced away shyly.

She...She's absolutely gorgeous, Li'ren thought to herself, her heart thudding inside of her chest. She placed a hand over her breast, as though that would calm her heartbeat. *Why do I feel this way every time I see her?*

The Empress and the newly-promoted admiral crossed the ballroom towards the head table, followed by a small group of officers, including Chief Admiral Me'lia and Admiral Jin Te'rou, the commander of the Second Fleet. They all took their places at the head table. The Empress was seated to the left of Miri, with Princess Kri'a seated on the Empress's left. Li'ren looked over at Kri'a, feeling another flash of warmth. She was looking back at her. For a moment, it appeared as though Kri'a was going to lean over and say something, but then the Empress stood to speak.

“Honored guests, friends...” The Empress turned to the table at which the Nuretan delegation was seated, extending a hand to them. “...and valued allies. Thank you all for attending this dinner. We're gathered here tonight to welcome our esteemed visitors from the Nuretan Empire, as well as to offer our congratulations to my daughter on her ascension to the rank of admiral.” There was a light smattering of applause around the room at this. “I am certain we shall have time for many speeches

during this diplomatic summit, but for tonight let us put this aside and enjoy each others' company. I hope you all have a very pleasant and enjoyable evening, and again, thank you all for honoring me with your presence.” The Empress sat down again, and then servants streamed into the ballroom, bringing the food in and officially kicking off the formal dinner.

Li'ren enjoyed the meal, though she felt increasingly out of place as the meal went on. The food was excellent; that wasn't the problem. What made her feel out of place was the dinner conversation. Surrounded by senior diplomats and officials, the talking was mostly about high-level trade negotiations and military matters, and while Li'ren understood most of what they were talking about there wasn't really anything she could add to the conversation. So she ate her food silently, keeping her eyes down at the table for the most part until she was finished.

After the tables were cleared, everyone left their places at the table and entered the center of the ballroom for the social part of the evening. During the meal, a small ensemble of musicians with traditional Ailian stringed instruments had been brought into the room, and they were now playing a light, formal series of musical pieces that created a pleasant atmosphere without being overwhelming. At one end of the room, near the musicians, some of the more festive-minded members of the crowd were dancing in pairs. The majority of the room was taken up by groups of five or six people each, engaging in continuations of the conversations they had begun during dinner.

As the youngest person in the room by far, Li'ren really had nowhere to fit in. She didn't feel much like wandering through the room like a lost child, and so she stood against the wall in an unobtrusive spot, alternatively watching the Ailians and Nuretans milling about and staring at her feet, her hands behind her back and her tail hanging limply. The young feline felt awkward and wished she could leave, but she knew that would be impolite, and if the Empress noticed it would reflect poorly on her mother.

“You don't look like you're having a good time at all.”

Li'ren looked up, seeing Princess Kri'a coming her way. Her older friend looked even more beautiful up close, and Li'ren started to feel her heart racing again. She glanced back down, feeling shy again, though she had no reason to be. It wasn't as though she hadn't grown accustomed to being in Kri'a's presence.

Kri'a came and stood beside her, against the wall, adopting the same pose as her. “Not a dancer, are you,” she said, smiling as she looked down at Li'ren. She nodded her head towards the small group of people dancing at the other end of the room. “Too bad. I bet there's at least one person in the room who wouldn't mind dancing with you.”

“Oh, I...I couldn't,” Li'ren said. “I'm not a very good dancer at all. I'd trip over my own feet.”

“Well, we can't have that, can we!” Kri'a said, with a small laugh. “Not in front of so many important people. I shall keep you off the dance floor, then.”

Li'ren managed a smile of her own. “Congratulations on your promotion, Kri'a,” she said. Her tail began to wave slightly as she looked up at the Princess. She felt a little better now that someone she felt comfortable with was talking to her. “I'm really glad your suspension has been lifted. I think you deserve it.”

“Thank you, little one,” Kri'a said with a broad smile. She laid a hand on Li'ren's shoulder. “I was going to tell you earlier, before my mother stole the moment with her little speech. You look absolutely stunning in your robes. You look just like the diplomat I know you're destined to be.”

Heat rose to Li'ren's face again, and she looked down sheepishly. “Thank you as well. You, um...You look gorgeous in your uniform. I wish I could be as beautiful as you.”

As her smile changed to a softer one, Kri'a tightened her grip on the younger Ailian's shoulder, just slightly. “No wish is necessary, Li'ren.” After a moment of quiet between them, she posed another question. “What do you think of the evening so far? How has your first formal state function been?”

Li'ren thought about it for a moment, wondering if she should be honest or polite. True to her upbringing, she picked the diplomatic option. “It has been interesting,” she said. “But I feel a little out of place. I don't think I really belong here, not yet.” Her tail twitched a little, and she looked up at Kri'a, her ears twitching forward curiously. “Are you enjoying yourself? This dinner is mostly for you, after all.”

“I think it's pretentious,” Kri'a said honestly, gazing out at the crowd. “I have never enjoyed formal occasions such as this. They feel so contrived, so false.” She looked back at Li'ren. “I was thinking of slipping out, in fact. Would you care to join me?”

Her eyes widening a bit, Li'ren looked out at the ballroom. “Is that a good idea?” she asked. “You're the guest of honor, after all. Won't people notice if you leave?”

Laughing, Kri'a gestured to the crowd. “Not at all. Look at them all.” She swept her hand across the room, taking in all of the people gathered there. “They're so absorbed in their own matters, barely paying attention to what's going on around them. Nobody will miss us.” Lowering her hand again, she held one of Li'ren's. “Come on, let's go. We can find a place to sit and talk, away from all this stuffy formality.”

Smiling, Li'ren felt a sense of mischievous fun as she allowed Kri'a to pull her towards one of the side doors. “Alright,” she finally agreed, giggling a little. “Sounds like fun.”

Kri'a wound up bringing Li'ren out of the ballroom and through the halls of the palace, which were largely deserted. Most of the guards and servants were with the guests in the ballroom, keeping an eye on things there. They walked together until they reached an open-air courtyard, bordered on all sides by tall hedges, with a gently flowing fountain surrounded by stone benches in the center. With a clear view up to the starry sky and the full Lirnan moon, it was a very pleasant place to be.

"This is *much* more relaxing," Li'ren said with a sigh, sitting down on one of the benches. She looked up at the sky, breathing deeply the fresh, cool nighttime air.

Kri'a sat next to her. "It certainly is." She reached for her collar, unbuttoning the top button and looking relieved as the constriction around her neck was lessened. "That's better. I do hate wearing this jacket. I wish I could have worn my normal uniform, but they insisted on the full formal dress. It looks nice, but it's like being tied up."

Turning on the bench, Li'ren watched Kri'a for a moment. In the darkness of the courtyard, her dark blue fur and uniform blended in with the surroundings, but her eyes still gleamed like sparkling rubies in the moonlight. They looked so pretty to her. "So, now that you've been promoted, what will you do now?"

"Well, I've been taken off of suspension, so I'll be going back to active duty soon." Kri'a looked at Li'ren. They could see each other better now as their eyes adjusted to the darkness, and Li'ren thought she could see just a little sadness on the Princess's face. "You saw Admiral Te'rou in the ballroom, yes? The male admiral? He'll be leaving command of the Second Fleet in a week or so and coming to Lirna for a staff position. Chief Admiral Me'lia has informed me that I'll be taking over his command." She shrugged a little. "I don't know where exactly my orders will take the fleet, but I know I won't be anywhere near Lirna."

"Oh..." Li'ren felt a dull feeling inside of her at that. Somehow, she'd allowed herself to believe that the Princess would be staying at the palace. She should have realized that eventually her military career would take her away, but Li'ren had been so delighted to have a friend in Kri'a that she hadn't been willing to face that eventuality. She stared at the water in the fountain, seeing the shimmery patterns of the moonlight in the gentle current.

After a few minutes of silence between them, Kri'a reached over and laid a hand on Li'ren's knee, sliding closer to her on the bench. "What's wrong, Li'ren? You're very quiet."

"It's nothing, just..." Li'ren took a deep breath. "This is going to sound childish. It's just that I've gotten used to having you for company, Kri'a. Now you'll be going away again." She shook her head slowly. "I won't have anyone to talk to anymore."

"Your mother will still be here, little one," Kri'a said. "And it's not like I'll be vanishing. You'll

be able to write to me if you wish, and I'll come home from time to time."

"I know, but...that won't be quite the same." Li'ren looked down at her knees. She brought a hand up, laying it over Kri'a's. "I feel like you understand me. Better than my mother, better than anyone, really." She tried to look back up at the older female, but couldn't quite meet her eyes. "I know it seems stupid. We've only been friends for a few weeks. But...But that's how I feel..."

"Li'ren...", Kri'a said. "You have been a very good friend to me. I promise you that no matter how far away I am, I will be thinking of you." She brought her other arm up, pulling Li'ren into a hug. She touched her nose to the top of her head, breathing deep as she held the younger girl against her.

When Li'ren felt Kri'a nuzzling between her ears, she felt like time was slowing down. She looked up as the Princess lifted her head away, her eyes locking with hers for what felt like an eternity. The sound of her heart seemed as loud as thunder, but at the same time all she could focus on was the face of the older Ailian inches away from hers. Before she quite knew what was happening, Li'ren was lifting her face closer to Kri'a's, and then their lips were pressing together. Kri'a breathed in sharply in surprise, but soon she relaxed against Li'ren, allowing her to kiss her, unpracticed as she was.

As the kiss ended, Kri'a leaned back a bit from Li'ren, a look of surprise and wonder on her face. Her ears were pricked straight up, and her tail had come up to curl over the young girl's lap. Li'ren's hand came up to her mouth, her eyes widening in shock at what she had done. She was trembling, afraid at what the reaction from the Princess might be.

"I'm...I'm sorry!" Li'ren stammered, her voice hoarse. "I...I didn't...I don't know what..." She couldn't even finish a sentence right now. She couldn't believe what she had allowed herself to do, but something inside of her had just taken over her body.

The corners of Kri'a's mouth turned up in a gentle smile. "Not bad, my little one," she whispered. Her hands came to Li'ren's shoulders, holding them lightly in her grip. "But I think you meant something more like this..."

Kri'a brought Li'ren closer to her once more, and she kissed her again. This time she tilted her head to one side, locking their lips together firmly. The younger female gave a soft whimper, melting against her as Kri'a slipped her tongue inside, playing it gently around her mouth. She brushed her palms along Li'ren's shoulders and up the sides of her neck, finally cupping her face in her hands. Both females began to purr as they embraced and kissed each other, alone in the moonlight. Their tails curled together, twisting tightly around each other as they sat there.

Under the watchful gaze of the Lirnan moon, they remained there, the peaceful trickling of the fountain their only companion.