

-Transmission Lost-
Epilogue: Signal Received
by Havoc

“In your life, you meet people. Some you never think about again. Some, you wonder what happened to them. There are some that you wonder if they ever think about you. And then there are some you wish you never had to think about again. But you do.”

- Unknown

“It really is an incredible story, Mr. Squier. What do you say to some of the people who question the authenticity of the details, or those who might say you've betrayed your species?”

Jack shifted in the chair he was seated in, the harsh glare of the stage lights making him slightly uncomfortable. This wasn't his first time in front of a camera, but it was his first time being in front of an audience as large as this one. He knew that this interview was going live across all of human space, and it was probably being picked up and rebroadcast on a delay in parts of the Ascendancy and the Nuretan Empire as well. He resisted the urge to wipe at the fine sheen of sweat that had to be gathering on his forehead on the hot stage. He had thought that he might get asked questions like what the reporter had just put to him, so he did have some answers ready.

“Well, David, I know a lot of the story seems incredible,” he began. “I mean, most of the people who will be watching this can remember the beginning of the war. I definitely can. To some people, it might seem unbelievable that a human and an Ailian can become friends, let alone go through some of the stuff that I experienced.” Jack brushed a hand back through his sandy blonde hair, and he tried not to scratch his face. The caked-on makeup the network staffer had pasted on him for the cameras was really starting to itch. “But it all happened just the way I've said it, and somewhere out there is the paperwork to prove it. I'm sure it's all classified, but hey, it's written down in some Ascendancy database somewhere.

“As far as the second thing goes? You're gonna bleep this out, but fuck those guys. I can see where they're coming from, yeah. I used to be like them. Hell, I think we all were at some point, and sure, we had good reason to think that way. Nobody is arguing that first contact was handled well, on either side.” Jack leaned forward in his seat. “But for the most part, we're all alike, you know? There are terrible humans out there, too. We've seen that these past few years, with some folks that I think we can truly call traitors. But I think the good should outweigh the bad. Our differences are cultural, not moral. As humans, we see slavery as inherently bad, but there was a time on Earth when it was all the rage. That's changing in the Ascendancy, now. Think about that. They're setting aside something that's been a part of their culture for thousands of years because they see the value in letting it go. I think that,

as humans, we can set aside a fifteen-year grudge to get something good out of it.” He sat back again, crossing his legs. “So, no, I think if anyone is betraying our race, it's those people who refuse to see reason and acknowledge past errors.”

“So you think our similarities with Ailians should be enough to cancel out the early days of the war? Thousands of colonists were killed or enslaved in those first border conflicts, after all, before we even were sure of what was out there.”

Jack shook his head. “Don't get me wrong. Nothing will ever cancel out the hurt and pain that was experienced when this all started. But again, let's think about what's happened more recently.” He laid a hand out with his palm open as he continued. “We've all been in the same boat. Both of our peoples were attacked from within. We both lost our homeworlds. Okay, yes, Lirna was under rebel control for barely more than a month, and we've only just now been able to retake Earth, but we still have a shared experience. It was shared experience that let me move past my own misgivings and prejudice. I think a lot of humans see it the same way, now. That's what we should get out of this, and it's the best right that can come of so much wrong. Especially when you consider that the whole rebellion was ultimately a proxy war on the part of the Pteryd.”

“I see,” the interviewer said. “Well, you do have a unique perspective on things, certainly. And certainly you've been an outspoken supporter of the alliance since your return to human space. One question that I'm sure is on our viewers' minds right now: The Ailian you spent so much time with during your time in the Ascendancy, Aria. Have you ever spoken with her since leaving, or has she ever tried to contact you?”

That question left Jack quiet for a while. When he finally spoke again, his voice was much softer than before. “Have we spoken? No. Has she ever tried to contact me? I'm not sure. I don't know that any attempt to contact me would have been successful. Communication lines throughout the war have been shaky, at best. Still are. And she is, or at least I assume she is, still in their military, in an elite unit. I've certainly tried to contact her, but finding the means to do so is extremely difficult. I'm certain she's tried to do the same, but I came here because of her wishes for my own safety, because of who she is. I know she wouldn't try to reach me if she thought it would put me in danger. I have to believe that if she hasn't been contacting me, it's because she's looking out for my best interests.” He managed to smile. “A lot of us have relatives, friends, or acquaintances in the military. I'm lucky in that I have my sister, who's stationed here on Cerelis now. But not everyone is that lucky. Thousands of families have to go months or even years without hearing from their loved ones. That's the definition of strength right there, isn't it? To be able to withstand the worry and stress of not knowing?”

“Forgive me for saying so, but for all you know, she could be dead. Killed in action.”

Jack resisted the urge to stand up and punch the guy in the face. “I...suppose that's true. I try not to think about that. Some days are harder than others, but I try to stay optimistic. I'm sure there are families all across your viewing audience who are dealing with similar things.”

“Indeed, that's something that we can all understand and appreciate.” The reporter shuffled his stack of notecards. “One final point. With the recent victories on Earth and in the Outer Colonies of the Ascendancy, military and political leaders have announced that the Pteryd have begun their final retreat, and that the war is officially coming to an end, some news that I think everyone has been rejoicing over these last few weeks. They've also announced that human, Ailian, and Nuretan representatives will be coming together on Earth in a few days for a formal ceremony, in a symbolic handing-over of the planet back to humanity.”

Jack nodded. “I'm aware of that. I think it's a great step in the healing process.”

“Rumor has it that you've been offered an invitation to that ceremony, considering that you were the first human to return from the Ascendancy, and also in light of your contributions to public discussion on human-Ailian relations. No pun intended, certainly. Can you comment on that?”

He chuckled politely, even though the joke had been pretty ill-made. “I wouldn't say I was *the* first. More like one of the first.” Jack cleared his throat. “But, uh, yeah. I was invited. I suppose I'll go. I'm as eager to see Earth as anyone else, and it is a real honor to be invited.”

“Well, we hope to see you there. Thank you for your time today, Mr. Squier.” The reporter turned in his seat to face the camera. “And thank you all for joining us this evening. My guest has been retired Lieutenant Jonathan Squier, a former pilot with the United Nations Navy and a former prisoner of war. His new book is *In the Den of the Enemy: My Time in the Ascendancy*, available now in bookstores. Good night, and thanks for watching.”

Jack heaved a weary sigh as soon as he walked in the front door of his apartment. He was relieved to be home, since it had been quite the long day for him. He'd been up early in the morning for a meeting with his publisher, and then it had been off to work for a few hours before going in for his television interview. Ever since arriving on Cerelis, he'd gotten back to the kind of work that he knew, though he kept a lot closer to home now than he had before. He was a cargo pilot yet again, though now he restricted himself to planetary shipments only. As much as he still loved space travel, he had learned quite the lesson about what could happen, especially during a time of open war. Luckily for him, he didn't really have to do that kind of work anymore. Since he had never formally been fired by the company he'd previously worked for, he had come home to several months of back pay at the hazardous-duty rate, which had left him with quite a tidy sum of money, enough to buy a handsome

apartment in the capital of Cerelis. Along with the money he was now about to receive as the result of completing his memoirs, he was in a comfortable situation, but he wouldn't have felt right about not working, so he still hauled freight every now and then to keep busy.

Though he really desired to be living someplace else, Jack had to admit that Cerelis wasn't bad at all. The planet was basically the same as Earth, as far as size and climate went, though it was much more heavily-populated than it once had been on account of the influx of refugees because of the war. As the headquarters of the United Nations, it was also the most important planet in human space, especially while Earth had been in rebel hands. That made for lots of interesting news and there was always something exciting going on. Since Cerelis was a lot deeper in human space than Earth, the war had fortunately been kept away for the most part, which Jack was just fine with. He'd seen enough of that to last him a lifetime. He liked staying on Cerelis, all things considered.

Another plus of living on Cerelis was that it had allowed him to reconnect with his family, a relationship that he had allowed to lag in the wake of his retirement from the military. Upon getting settled in his new life, he'd made the decision to seek out his parents and siblings. Prior to leaving on that ill-fated cargo run, his mother and father had been living on Earth, his brother on Mars, and his sister had been in the UN Navy. He'd found his sister, Penny, almost immediately. In the aftermath of the loss of Earth and the retreat of their military forces, she'd found her way to an assignment on Cerelis, which was where Jack and she had reunited shortly after his arrival. She'd given him the news that his parents had made it off and were refugees on another planet, and they'd come to Cerelis once they'd heard he was safe there. Bad news had come in the form of being informed that his brother had been killed when the rebels had taken over the rest of the Sol system. He'd been an executive with a mining company on Mars, and hadn't survived the bombardment that rebel forces had subjected that planet to. In all, though, he was glad to have been able to come back together with most of his family. And, for him, that family included another member now.

"I'm home!" he called as he closed the door behind him. Jack walked into the living room of his apartment, looking around. Even after five years, the place still seemed kind of new to him. It was not at all like where he had lived during his time on Lirna. Instead of sandy stone, the walls were made of clean, white-painted wood, and the floors were low, soft carpet instead of smooth rock.

"Hey!" a voice answered him. Jack looked to a couch in the living room, where the speaker was seated. A smiling face was beaming at him. She was dark-skinned, black-haired, and emerald-eyed, and had been watching television when he came in. In the time that they had been together, his adopted daughter Brooke had grown into just as beautiful a young woman as he had suspected she would when he'd met her. The former slave looked almost nothing like the tired, beaten-down girl that he had first

known. She had just turned eighteen, or near enough. They had never been able to figure out what her exact birthday was, but had settled on the day they'd arrived on Cerelis as a satisfactory date to use.

Jack hadn't intended on adopting Brooke at first. He'd told her that once they returned to human space, they'd work together on reuniting her with her real family, or at least finding out where they were for an eventual reunion. But over the months, it became clear that records of where she was born or who her parents were just didn't exist, so after the first year he decided that he was as close to a father as she could ever hope for. That had been fine with her, so he had taken the formal steps of adopting her, and since then had raised her like she was his real daughter.

"Hey," Jack said, taking a seat on the couch next to her. "How was your day? School go alright?" Needless to say, Brooke had been way behind in formal schooling owing to her early life, but she had proven to be very smart and dedicated, and had caught up faster than he would have thought possible. Now she was on track to graduate high school along with other teens her approximate age. College had been an idea they'd both talked about, but Brooke had expressed a desire to follow in his footsteps and become a pilot. She wanted to join the Navy and fly fighters or helicopters, and Jack was behind her all the way. He wasn't about to tell her what she could and couldn't do. She'd had enough of her life dictated to her already.

"School was fine, daddy," Brooke said. He still got a little thrill when she called him that. He would have been just fine if she'd continued calling him "Jack" for the rest of his life, but "daddy" had a nice ring to it that he never would have anticipated. "Seems crazy that finals are only a few months away. I never thought I'd ever get to go to school, much less graduate."

"I know." Jack reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm proud of you, you know? You've done good. Real good."

"All thanks to you." Brooke smiled at him, then looked back to the television. "I was watching your interview on TV, daddy. That reporter was an idiot, asking you all those dumb questions at the end."

Jack snorted with laughter. "Yeah...Yeah, I'm used to it by now. They're just looking for the dramatic angle. Hopefully that was the last interview I have to do for a while."

"That's not *really* the title of your book, is it?"

He looked up at the ceiling with a sigh. "The publisher thought it had a better ring to it than the title I wanted. I was going to call it *Final Flight*, or something less...I dunno...less cheesy. But the publisher thought that title didn't have as much punch." He chuckled. "I didn't even really write it for anyone in particular. Just...something I felt like writing, I guess. I needed to tell my story."

"Can't wait to read it," Brooke said. She looked over at him. "You don't talk a lot about the stuff

that happened back then. Stuff I wasn't around for, anyway.”

“Yeah. Some of it's pretty painful to think about.” Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Bad memories...Good memories that make me feel bad...” He slumped a little and closed his eyes. “It's a lot to keep inside. I guess that's why I wrote the book. Easier than talking about it.”

The two of them were quiet for a while, and the only sounds in the living room were the noises from the television. The news had just ended, and now there was some special-interest show going on about some crazy fad diet that a celebrity was promoting. Something about Ailian tea being the secret to longevity. Jack wasn't really paying attention to it. He was lost in thought. Talking about the book had dredged up a lot of memories, and a lot of thoughts about the ceremony he was supposed to be attending on Earth. He wasn't sure he really wanted to go. He knew what to expect: a bunch of politicians, ambassadors, military officers, and celebrities talking about how this was a turning point for the whole of populated space. There would be representatives from every major world in the colonized galaxies, from each of the three newly-allied species. As much as Jack agreed with and was enthusiastic about the need for such showings of cooperation and friendship, he just didn't want to have to face it. Seeing Ailians in person again would make him think about Aria.

Jack thought about the last time he had seen her. He remembered it like it had been only a few days ago. He'd never forget the frenzied terror of escaping the royal palace on Lirna with Brooke, and then seeing Aria being brought out on a stretcher, her dye-blackened fur matted and stained with blood. She had looked near to death. They had shared a few words, one last kiss, and then she had made him leave. Neither of them had wanted it, but both of them had known it was to keep him safe. As long as the rebellion was going on, she would be a target for retribution because she killed the rebel leader, her own mother. As long as Jack was with her, that would make him a target as well, and an easier one to get to. Jack would have been in constant danger, and Aria would have been in constant danger from trying to protect him. Returning as deep into human space as Cerelis put him far enough away from the rebellion that his safety was as good as guaranteed, and one less thing for Aria to fret over. But that didn't make the pain and worry of being separated from her any better. He hoped that she had made it through the war alright and was still alive, but...the fact that he hadn't heard even a whisper from her made him fearful, and angry, and about a million other emotions that all collided to make him feel absolutely miserable.

“Why are you so quiet, daddy?”

Jack gave a start and opened his eyes again, turning his head to the side to see Brooke watching him. His daughter looked concerned, something that he had seen in her face many times over the last five years. He often went into quiet moods like that. Never anything sour or brooding, just melancholic,

but it was certainly understandable that she'd be worried about him.

"Just...thinking," Jack said. "I'm okay, it's just..."

"You're thinking about her again." This was a statement, not a question. Brooke knew very well how close he and Aria had been, and had known for some time, now. When she and Jack had first met, he had described Aria just as a good friend, but of course when the deceased Empress, Kri'a Solan IV, had used his and Aria's relationship as a tool to help rally support for an alliance with humanity, very few people on Lirna and in many other places in the Ascendancy had not heard of them. Brooke, as a general rule, was not very fond of Ailians owing to her life as a slave, but she had liked both Empress Solan and her successor, Li'ren Amani, so she was sympathetic on some level to how her father felt.

"Yeah...", Jack admitted. He sat up on the couch, leaning forward with his hands clasped over his knees. "I probably seem like a moron for dwelling on it so much. Five years have gone by. I haven't heard from her at all."

Brooke scooted over a little and put a hand on her father's knee. "You're not a moron," she assured him. "I think about my parents every day. I only have fuzzy memories, but it's still there. And I haven't seen them in fifteen years or more." She squeezed his knee. "I'm sure you'll...get to see her again, someday."

"Sometimes I'm not so sure," Jack muttered. "I feel like I would have heard from her by now. I get dark thoughts, sometimes. Maybe she just forgot about me. We didn't know each other that long, after all...She could have moved on, found someone else...Or hell, maybe she's dead, like the reporter said."

"You don't really believe that," Brooke said immediately. She put an arm around his shoulders. "You don't believe it for a minute."

Jack was quiet again for a few seconds, then finally he gave a weak smile. "No...Not really...But still." He chuckled a little. "But it's easier for me to think that. How fucked up is that? That it's easier for me to believe she's dead than to believe anything else?"

"Pretty fucked up," Brooke said, smiling as well. The smile went away quickly as she hugged him. "It just means you still love her a lot, that's all. It's just your head trying to get some closure for you. It doesn't make you a moron, or a bad person, or anything bad at all. It just makes you a regular person who doesn't know anything for sure."

He hugged his daughter. "You're a pretty smart lady, kiddo," he said. "Guess I got at least one thing in my life going right for me. I couldn't have found a better daughter if I'd made one myself."

Brooke let go of him and sat back. "What are you going to do next? After you go to that ceremony, anyway. What's the next step?"

Jack leaned back again, stroking his chin as he stared up at the ceiling once more. "I think I want to go back to Lirna," he decided. "I want to know for sure. There was no way I could go back while the war was still going on. Now that it's coming to an end, travel will probably start back up again. We'll be allies, so it shouldn't be too hard for a human to go to the Ascendancy. Especially since some of the former slaves never came back, stayed citizens there. I want to go back to Aria's family home. Find her, or find what happened to her. Maybe things won't be like they were before, but at least I'll know." He smiled. "It would be nice to at least see some of them again."

His daughter nodded. "I think you should do that. I...I don't know if I'd want to go with you, but...maybe." She looked at the floor. Jack didn't blame her. He knew that the vast majority of her memories of life in the Ascendancy were terrible ones. It had only been during the last few months of her life as a slave that she had found some measure of good treatment in the service of the royal family. She had already said, when Jack had first gotten the invitation to the ceremony on Earth, that she had no intention of going. Earth was no home to her anyway.

Jack got up from the couch. "How about some dinner?" he asked her. "My cooking is getting better. I thought I'd try my hand at spaghetti tonight. Sound good to you?"

Brooke brightened up. "As long as you don't set the noodles on fire like you did last time. The kitchen still smells like smoke..."

"I'll do my best," Jack promised, laughing as he walked towards the kitchen.

Looking out of the window of the shuttle was enough to make Jack feel some kind of happiness again. The journey from Cerelis to Earth had taken nearly two days, and that whole time he had been poring over updated records of what Earth looked like now. He had seen pictures from the war, sent back by human and Ailian intelligence sources, and none of it had looked very good. Cities in flames, buildings ruined, and countryside burned by the ravages of battle. To his surprise, when he arrived, he found that it was not all desolation and destruction as he had been expecting. Some of the major civilian areas still looked the same as they had when he'd left. Not all of them, though. Large swathes of Europe, Africa, and North America, where the majority of military centers had been located, had been virtually wiped off the map. But other parts still remained. Asia had been largely untouched, since those countries had been mostly civilian and industrial, and the rebels had taken care to preserve those valuable resources as much as they could. South America was in the same situation, and Australia was fine as well. Melbourne was his destination, and was the location of the ceremony that was to be held.

His shuttle was packed with dignitaries and other prominent civilians from Cerelis and several other important human worlds. Jack was recognized by most of them. A lot of them had seen his

interview several days prior. Most of them had kind words for him, polite expressions of support for him and words of encouragement. He was starting to feel glad that he had come. He felt like he was returning home, even though he had no plans of restarting his life on Earth. Even so, coming here felt like a victory. He felt like he had made some contribution, however small, towards making this happen.

Upon landing at the spaceport on the outskirts of Melbourne, he was met by a small contingent of UN troops acting as an honor guard. Most of the people on his shuttle were not actually going to be part of the ceremony, but were just going to be simple attendants for the symbolic handing-over. He, of course, was different. He was escorted from the landing site to a waiting vehicle, inside of which was Earth's newly-reappointed ambassador to the United Nations Assembly, Jonas Fisher. Fisher had been on Cerelis when Earth had fallen and so had escaped death at the hands of the invading rebels, but he had resigned his position and joined the Navy with a vow to not return to his old job until Earth was back in human hands.

Once Jack was seated in the vehicle and they were underway, the ambassador extended a hand to him. "Welcome back to Earth, Mr. Squier," he greeted him warmly. "It's an honor to shake your hand. I've seen you on the news broadcasts a few times, and of course I've read your book."

"Already?" Jack inquired, slightly amazed. He took the ambassador's hand. "Heh...You must be a quick reader. It's only been out for a few days. And please...just Jack is fine. I've heard 'Mr. Squier' enough to make me sick of the words."

"Jack, then." Ambassador Fisher shook his hand firmly. "I managed to acquire an advance copy. I couldn't put it down. A fascinating tale. I'm sure it'll be an inspiration to generations of our people to come. You'd make quite an ambassador yourself, I'm sure."

"I don't know about all that," Jack said, reddening slightly. "I just survived. Nothing really special about it."

"Now you're just being modest." Fisher pulled a cigar from his pocket and lit it, rolling down the window on his side of the vehicle in deference to his companion. "You know, it might seem petty, but of all the things that Earth has been through these past five years, I'm glad that Cuba made it through alright. Nothing as good as a Cuban cigar in the afternoon. This is the first I've had since the planet fell." He took a puff and blew the smoke out of the window with great relish, then looked at Jack. "You ready for the ceremony?"

Jack shrugged. "I guess," he said. "I'm not really sure what to expect."

"Ah, the usual for this sort of thing," Fisher told him, waving a hand dismissively. "Some Ailian dignitaries will be there, some Nuretan representatives, and of course a lot of UN people. They haven't even told me who will be there. Security stuff. I guess they're still a little worried about it, but I'm not."

The planet has been swept time and time again since it was retaken.” He smirked. “A little paranoia can be forgiven, though, I suppose.”

“Even paranoid people have enemies,” Jack said with a smirk of his own. “I forget who said that.”

“Kissinger, I think,” Fisher said. “Another wise saying from another turbulent point in Earth history. Eh, who cares? This is supposed to be a happy occasion. We’ll leave the paranoia to the people who make paranoia their profession.” He slapped Jack on the shoulder. “So anyway, you don’t need to do too much. There’s a big reception hall type of building near the center of the city that we’re using for the ceremony. You’ll be in the receiving line for when the foreign dignitaries come in, sort of near the front with me. Shake hands, say a few greetings, then the ceremony will begin. Like I said, nothing major.”

Jack nodded. “Fine.” He looked out of the window as the rest of the ride passed in silence, gazing at the buildings of Melbourne as the vehicle traveled through the streets. Just from looking at this city, he wouldn’t have been able to tell that a major battle had been fought on the planet. Probably why they picked it to be the sight of the ceremony. Much easier to have a joyful occasion if the setting was placid.

Jack tugged at his collar as he stood in the receiving line at the reception hall. As much as the ambassador had talked down the formality of the event, things were looking very formal, indeed. Jack had brought his best suit with him, and he still looked underdressed compared with the rest of the attendants. Of course, there were military officers there, clad in their best dress uniforms, and most of the politicians and ambassadorial officials were wearing suits of a much more expensive cut than his. He wasn’t used to wearing fancy stuff anyway, not since he’d retired from the military. He had made one concession to formality, however. Pinned to his lapel were a miniature version of his “wings of gold”, the badge that all fighter pilots wore on their uniforms. Even though he had never seen combat in the cockpit of a fighter, he had worked hard to earn them, and wearing them made him feel just a little bit like he belonged in the room with all of these people.

They had been standing in line for nearly half an hour. Apparently there had been some delay with the arrival of the Ailian and Nuretan delegations, so they’d had to wait while it was prepared. He hoped it wouldn’t be too much longer. He was starting to sweat despite the air conditioning in the room, and he didn’t want it to soak through his shirt and suit jacket. That wouldn’t look good for the television cameras that were present in the building. Visions of cold drinks were starting to dance through his head, and he hoped that the first part of the reception wouldn’t take too long, so that he could visit the

bar and relieve the cottony feeling in his mouth.

Finally, the doors near the front of the line opened and the UN Marines stationed there snapped to attention as the first wave of dignitaries came in. The first to come in were the Nuretans. In the front of the line were a bunch of people in civilian dress that he, of course, didn't recognize. He shook their hands politely. For some of the people in the receiving line, it was their first time meeting any of the aquatic aliens in person. Most of them were slightly taller than the humans, and their green skin glistened in the lights of the reception hall. When one of them came to Jack, however, he had a flash of recognition.

"You are Jack Squier," a female voice, bubbly in accent, said as the person came before him. Jack looked up to see that he was face to face with a Nuretan in a dark blue military uniform. She was slightly taller than him, had long, feathery white hair, and brilliantly neon eyes.

Jack had to search his brain for several moments before he recognized her. "I remember you!" he said suddenly. "General...General Soumaren...right? We met on Arbaros."

General Kalma Soumaren nodded. "Correct," she said. She took his hand, her slick-looking skin feeling smooth and slightly chilled against his own. "I am pleased to see that you made it home safely. You have been well?"

"Uh, yeah," Jack said. "Pretty well, I guess. Good to see you made it through the war alright." He remembered that General Soumaren was the leader of the Nuretan Imperial Marines, the elite fighting force of the Nuretan Empire. She had been the commander of the mission to liberate Lirna from the rebel forces, and had been at the palace when Jack had made his escape during the battle.

"I did," she confirmed. "Not without close calls, of course. How nice to see you again." She nodded to him, and then continued down the line. Jack would have liked a few more minutes to talk with her, but of course it couldn't be helped. It looked like there were still a few more people to go through the line.

He hadn't been expecting to see someone he knew in the receiving line. From what the ambassador had told him, the dignitaries arriving were supposed to have been relatively minor in prominence. To have seen someone of General Soumaren's stature made it seem just that much more formal. Jack felt even more out of place, now.

The rest of the Nuretan delegation came through the receiving line, and Jack was introduced to quite a few of them. He tried to pay attention to their names, but there were so many of them that he knew he'd never be able to remember them all. Once the Nuretan delegation was all inside the reception hall, there was a brief pause while they prepared to receive the Ailian representatives. When the doors opened again, there was somewhat of a surprised hush that fell over the humans in the line.

As the first person in line arrived at Jack, he saw why. "Jack, what a delightful surprise!"

The hair on the back of Jack's neck stood on end as he saw who was talking to him. "L-Li'ren...!" he blurted out.

Empress Li'ren Amani, the ruler of the Ailian Ascendancy, was standing before him, resplendent in rich robes of blue and gold. The Ailian leader beamed down at him, her ruby red eyes shining as she beheld him. Jack couldn't believe that she would be here. If General Soumaren had been a surprise to see, this was an absolute shock. The rest of the receiving line seemed just as surprised as he was. The blue-furred Ailian waved her tail, seeming to find some sort of amusement in the astonished expression on his face.

The sound of someone's throat clearing was heard next to Jack, and he felt a little nudge as Ambassador Fisher kicked his foot. "Uh, I mean..." he stammered. Jack gave a polite bow. "It's...very nice to see you again, Empress Amani. I wasn't expecting that you'd be here."

"Likewise," Li'ren said. Her eyes were twinkling with something that Jack couldn't figure out. "I felt that I should attend. Humans contributed so much to aiding our people in retaking Lirna. I would have regretted not being present for this historic ceremony." She looked to her left, where the next person in line was approaching. "I think you will remember my consort?"

Jack turned his head to see who was stepping over, and he was nearly floored by what he saw. Another Ailian, taller than Li'ren and appearing to be several years younger, had just finished greeting the person to Jack's right and was turning her attention to him now. She had fur of pale orange, black-striped, and her robin's egg-blue eyes were beginning to widen as she perceived the human. Her pointy ears were pricked forward in amazement.

"Brother?" the young woman said, seeming to scarcely believe her eyes. Then her face broke into a smile and she grabbed his hands, clasping them warmly in her own. "Brother!"

"Sami?" Jack could feel emotion starting to well up inside of him. He smiled back at her, unhesitatingly stepping forward and hugging one of the Ailians he remembered most fondly of all. "Oh my god, it's so good to see you! It's been too long..." Words failed him further, as he was choked up by the happiness at seeing her.

Sami placed a hand on his head, which of course barely came up to her chest. Realizing that people were staring, Jack stepped back and looked her over. She looked different, and not just because she was five years older than when he'd seen her last. Though she was dressed in a midriff-length shirt and ankle-reaching wrap skirt, as typical of Ailian women, the garments were much richer than he recalled ever seeing her wear. They were of a deep blue color trimmed with gold, matching Li'ren's robes, and she also wore several thin strands of gold around her neck. What Jack found most intriguing

of all was the adornment she bore on her navel: a simple but elegant piercing of gold and sapphire that he recognized as an Ailian bonding gem.

“Well,” Li’reu said, “I can see that you remember each other very well, indeed.” She sounded as though she was barely restraining laughter. Seeing that Ambassador Fisher was looking very confused, Li’reu nodded to him. “You are Earth’s Ambassador, Jonas Fisher, correct? I am very pleased to meet you, Ambassador. I would also like to introduce my Royal Consort, Lady Sami Me’lia. As you can see, Jack and Sami are old friends.”

“In-Indeed...,” Ambassador Fisher stammered. He remembered a few seconds late who he was talking to, and he bowed to the both of them.

“So, you two?” Jack asked, looking between Li’reu and Sami. “I’m happy for both of you. You were such good friends back then. I knew that you would be good together.”

Li’reu’s cheeks fluffed out a little, though she quickly smoothed them down again. “Quite,” she said. She gazed at Sami fondly, and her voice grew a little quiet. “Sami has been here for me when I needed someone most. I do still grieve for Kri’a...almost every day...but I would not give up Sami for the whole universe.” Sami took her hand. “I think Kri’a would want me to be happy, and I am very happy.”

Jack had about a million questions that he wanted to ask, but for the moment it appeared he would have to wait to ask them. Just then, an Ailian male clad in the formal uniform of the Royal Guards bypassed the line, stepping up to Li’reu’s side. “M’lady...,” he said, in heavily accented but recognizable English. “Forgive me...Commander say line must keep going...”

“Ah, of course,” Li’reu said. She looked down the line, seeing that it was starting to back up while she was standing in front of Jack and the ambassador. “I am forgetting myself, Sergeant. Please inform your commander that we shall be moving along shortly.” She turned back to Jack, while the Royal Guard sergeant looked nervously over his shoulder. “I am certain that we will have time to speak again later, Jack. I am sure there is much you would like to talk about. It has been marvelous to see you again.”

Before Jack could respond, another Royal Guard, female and walking with a purpose, came up the line. She was walking imperiously, with great authority, and she came to a halt next to the sergeant. “Is problem, m’lady?”

The voice was enough to make Jack freeze completely still in place. His heart began hammering the inside of his chest like a snare drum, and he stared at the woman who was now standing near to him. He was strangely almost afraid to look at her, but he forced himself to turn his eyes towards the Ailian. She was focused on the Empress, but for Jack everything else in the room seemed to go silent

and vanish.

She was tall, taller than anyone else in the room, and her black uniform was immaculate, unadorned apart from the silver, circular insignia near her collar that denoted the rank of commander. The left side of her face was lined with a few thin, faint scars, visible underneath her black-dyed fur, and over her left eye was affixed some sort of patch made of a reflective, black metallic material. The right eye was piercingly yellow, flecked with gold, and glinting from the bright lights in the room. As Jack looked at her, he saw her glance at him, then at the ambassador, before her eye snapped back to him barely a second later.

He swallowed, a huge lump in his throat making him feel like he was suffocating. The Ailian woman's muzzle opened a fraction. He could feel tears starting in his eyes. He saw her remaining eye begin to glisten as well, and her tail dropped to hang loosely behind her long legs.

“Aria...”

In a flash she was down on her knees, and Jack felt those strong, familiar, comforting arms wrapping around him and tugging him into her embrace. He could hear murmurs from those in the receiving line, but he didn't have a care in the world for them. His arms went around her as well and he clutched at her like she was a precious jewel. Their lips met and he felt the rumble of a low growl as they kissed each other for the first time, once again. Their time apart seemed hardly to have made a difference in that instant. They both trembled as a combination of relief, sadness, joy, and passion washed over them all at once. Tears were flowing freely from both of them, and he could hear Aria purring through her quiet sobs. Her tail wrapped around his body, holding him possessively, blanketing him with its soft warmth. Jack lost track of how long they held each other before breaking the kiss, leaning back slightly from each other as they gazed into each others' eyes.

“I didn't know if I'd ever see you again...,” Jack said hoarsely. He was holding her hands in his, now, unable to reach up and wipe the moisture from his cheeks for fear of losing her if he let go. “I hadn't heard...I didn't know...I was afraid...” He became aware, out of the corners of his eyes, that some of the news cameras in the room were focused on them, but all he cared about right now was the face of the woman he had never stopped loving for five years.

Aria leaned forward to him, and her cheek brushed against his, her nose nuzzling at his neck as her purr grew louder. “Jack...,” she whispered. She kissed his cheek and then lifted her head. She was smiling wider than he had ever seen, her feline face split wide into an expression of utmost happiness. Then her smile faltered, and she hung her head, her shoulders shaking as she cried. “I so sorry...Want to send word so many times...but could not...I make you so worried...”

“Commander Me'lia has spoken of little else beyond wanting to visit Cerelis for the past week,”

Li'ren said, breaking the veil of silence surrounding Jack and Aria. "I very nearly had to have Admiral Te'rou threaten her with the brig to keep her at her post." The Empress chuckled.

"She would have broken out," Jack said. He put a hand underneath Aria's chin and lifted her head back up. "I'll forgive the worry. As long as you promise I never have to leave you again."

Sniffing, Aria began to beam again, her tail waving behind her. She pulled him in close against her. "Never," she vowed, just before their lips met once more.

Nearly a week had passed since the ceremony on Earth when Jack and Aria walked down the ramp of the small Ailian vessel. The last seven days had been a lesson in patience for the both of them. Aria had wanted to take military leave immediately, but unfortunately she'd had some duties to attend to before that was possible. Luckily, those duties had involved accompanying Empress Amani to Cerelis, where talks were to be held to formalize a permanent alliance between the Ascendancy and the United Nations. Jack and Aria had spent as much time as possible together when she was not carrying out her assignments as the leader of the Royal Guards.

During their time together, Aria had a lot of stories to tell him about how the final days of the war had played out. He learned what he had suspected for a while already: that the rebellion had mostly been driven by the Pteryd, who had recognized the growing divisions between the Ascendancy and the Outer Colonies decades before they became apparent and had approached numerous prominent figures in the Outer Colonies, including Aria's mother. They had made promises of autonomous rule for the Ascendancy in exchange for letting them use their territory to stage attacks against the Nuretans and humanity, with the ultimate goal of expanding the Pteryd Combine to encompass the entire known universe.

The rebellion had been almost completely suppressed, though several key figures had yet to be captured. Admiral Selina Kris, who had taken over as the rebellion's leader after the death of Ara'lana Me'lia, had been captured in the last days of the war and was awaiting trial on treason charges on Lirna, along with a number of other senior officials from the Outer Colonies. Several human generals and numerous other officers who had supported the rebellion in human space were missing, and they were presumed to have taken refuge somewhere in the remote areas of human space or even in the Pteryd Combine. The same was true of Tara Shi'ala, the Ailian advisor who had served Ara'lana. She was almost certainly among the Pteryd, beyond the reach of justice for now.

Once Aria was free from her responsibilities, she had borrowed a small ship from the Ascendancy Navy and gone off with Jack to spend some much-needed time together. The voyage had taken them off into the border areas between the Ascendancy and human space. When they exited

hyperspace, they landed on a planet that was familiar to both of them, though it looked somewhat different now. Both of them were hit with a wave of nostalgia as they emerged from their ship onto the grassy plains of the planet where they'd first met. The forested skyline had changed slightly. Signs of civilization could be seen among the trees beyond the plains, with low buildings dotting the landscape and the faint hum of flying craft sounding off in the distance.

"So you colonized it," Jack said, walking a little ways from Aria as he breathed the oxygen-rich air. He looked up at the sky, where the sun had set and the stars were beginning to show themselves in the orange-and-pink tinged sky.

"Yes," Aria said. She was dressed more casually than she normally did, wearing a green top with a short black skirt, appropriate for a vacation. The top stopped just above her lower belly, and revealed the freshly acquired red gem she wore. Finding somewhere to acquire an Ailian bonding gem on Cerelis had been a chore, but the proper application of funds to a skilled jeweler had produced the desired results. "One year ago. Was going to be base, but then war end before they finish. Colony, now." She came over to where Jack was, and they sat down on the grass together.

"It feels weird to be back here," Jack said. "Weird, but...nice. I like it when we're not trying to dodge predators and climb mountains."

Aria laughed. "Is nice, yes." She took a deep breath and let it out peacefully. "So quiet. Will not want return to Lirna." Jack had decided that he would be going back to the Ailian homeworld with Aria. She had her responsibilities with the Royal Guards, and he had no such responsibilities where he lived. Brooke was independent enough that she could take care of herself quite well on Cerelis, and she was eager to graduate and begin life on her own. He didn't have any reservations about leaving his adopted daughter, knowing that she was ready for it.

They spent a while sitting on the grass with each other, listening to the sounds of the alien environment. Jack slid over so that he was up against Aria, and she reached over and pulled him into her lap. She nestled her furry muzzle against the top of his head, her tail curling around both of them as they enjoyed being close to each other. She purred softly, and he let the subtle vibration spread through his body, her warmth keeping away the slight chill from the cool breeze blowing by.

"So what did the Ascendancy decide to name this planet?" Jack finally asked, as he realized that he had never bother to inquire before.

"Ah, yes!" Aria said. She stroked a finger along his cheek. "Ailian tradition to name planet after first ship which land there." She hugged him, a little laugh passing through her body. "You ship crash a little before mine. This planet name in Ailian is *Sha'lai-ran*."

"*'Sha'lai-ran'...*," Jack repeated. His old ship had been the *Star's Eye*. His Ailian had improved

since leaving Lirna, and he knew that the planet's name translated literally to “gaze of the sun”. Not exact, but fitting for a species that came from the desert, and close enough. He liked the way it sounded. “Good name. I bet my old boss would be honored that one of his ships founded a colony.”

“Mm...,” Aria murmured. She kissed the top of his head. “Glad to be here with you. Glad to be anywhere with you.”

Jack leaned back against her breast, closing his eyes and smiling. He felt like he was home again. So long as they were together, he could feel that way anywhere.