

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Two: Run Home
by Havoc

“That which is not just is not law. And that which is not law ought not to be obeyed.”
- Algernon Sydney

When the subtle hum and vibration of the ship's engines, detectable through the hard metal surface of his rudimentary bed, diminished and shifted in tempo, Jack knew that something had changed. He hadn't spent twelve years of his life flying starships without learning how to diagnose the various states of a ship's engines. And though their technology may have differed in many ways, Jack had decided that the engines of Ailian ships were close enough to human ships. So when he felt the change, he had a pretty good idea of what was going on. The ship was landing. Which meant that they must be at their destination.

Jack sat up on the hard metal prison bed, looking up at the ceiling of his cell. Several days had passed, he thought, since the Ailian representative, Li'ren, had visited him. It was hard to judge the passage of time when he didn't have a clock to look at. He remembered what she had said, that they were traveling to the Ailian homeworld: Lirna.

The human knew little about that planet. As far as he knew, no human being had ever been there. Or at least, none that had ever left to tell about it. However, from data gleaned from captured Ascendancy vessels, the United Nations had learned a few things about it. The planet was supposed to be very arid, desert in most areas with but with swaths of more temperate areas scattered here and there, where the majority of the habitation was. Covert probes sent to take images of the planet had viewed what appeared to be mountainous regions at the north and south poles, with snow-capped peaks. The small amount of habitable space on Lirna accounted for how the Ailians had spread so widely across the galaxy; they had been colonizing worlds to accommodate their expanding population long before humans had even mastered flight in Earth's own atmosphere. And that was the extent of Jack's knowledge on the subject of the planet.

The engines hum quieted to nothing as they were apparently shut down. As the lights came back up in his cell, he tried to prepare himself mentally for what might be coming next. It was an exercise in futility since he had no idea what to expect, but at least it made him feel like he had some amount of control.

Jack waited nearly an hour before anything happened. When the door to his cell slid open, he nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. Two Ailians stood in the doorway, looking in on him. He

recognized one of them, a male with tiger orange fur that had presided over most of his interrogations during the ship's journey. He had the same rank insignias on his uniform that Aria had, so that made him a lieutenant.

He gestured at Jack. "Get up and come over here," he said, the words heavily accented but still recognizable.

Jack stayed where he was. "Where are you doing with me?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "I want to see Aria before I go anywhere."

The lieutenant scowled, and motioned to the other with him. The second Ailian stepped into the room and grabbed Jack by the arm, hauling him to his feet and propelling him towards the door. He didn't struggle, since he knew it would be a useless gesture. There was no sense in getting himself hurt or killed. Much better to make use of a more opportune moment to try to escape. Inside of an Ailian military vessel was likely not the best position he could be in when it came to that. They secured his hands behind his back with a pair of handcuffs and then walked him out of the ship's prison.

He was led to the front of the ship, past numerous crew members who were conducting various duties. They watched him as he was escorted through, most of them with idle curiosity and a few with open hostility. Jack hoped that he might catch sight of Aria on the way out, but he did not. Either they were deliberately being kept apart, or Aria had already disembarked.

When the front hatchway opened, Jack was immediately assaulted by a wave of heat pouring into the ship. Bright sunlight flooded his eyes, and he blinked hard to try to banish the sting away even as he was forced down the exit ramp by the Ailians flanking him. As they reached the bottom of the ramp, his eyes still dazzled, he got his first look at the planet of Lirna.

When he'd been back on Earth, Jack had once visited Death Valley National Park in Nevada. He'd thought that place had been unbearable, and this planet seemed to be only slightly less hot. He'd been out of the ship for a few minutes before he started sweating.

Looking around, Jack saw a sprawling military installation. The buildings were short, only a few stories at the tallest, and spread apart widely. This was a strategic aspect that most military bases shared, no matter the culture that designed them. Spacing buildings further apart made it more complicated for enemy starships or aircraft to destroy an entire base in one go. The base seemed to be surrounded by white sand deserts, which reflected the already blinding sunlight. Sparse green vegetation was scattered here and there, and very little of the ground in the base seemed to be paved. Off in the distance, Jack could see what looked like a large city, with sunlight reflecting off of windows and metal.

"Where are we?" Jack asked, forgetting his fear for a moment. A screeching sound rattled

through the air, and he looked up to see a pair of atmospheric craft streak across the pale blue sky. They looked like some sort of attack aircraft.

The orange-furred Ailian next to him, sneered at him, but answered. "You on Lirna. This is Mat'aar Airbase."

"And that city, out in the distance?" Jack would have pointed if his hands had been free, so he merely inclined his head in that direction.

"Is Hayikwiir. Capital city. Now be silent. Your speech offends me."

Jack sighed, but he shut his mouth. The two Ailians forced him towards a wheeled vehicle which was waiting at the edge of the area the ship had landed at. Apparently they meant to take him somewhere. He wondered if Aria was having a better time than he was.

When the ship had landed at Mat'aar, Aria had been taken from her quarters and led off the ship to a ground transport. She knew the airbase well, as it had been where she'd spent the several months of her service in the Ascendancy military. Aria's patrol unit also was based out of Mat'aar, and it had been from this base that she'd departed on her previous mission. The one that had gone so wrong, and led her into this whole mess. As she was taken away from the ship that had recovered her, she realized she hadn't seen the noblewoman, Li'ren, since that meeting in her quarters. She was a little disappointed by that. Aria could have used a friendly presence right about now, and Li'ren had been the closest thing since her separation from Jack.

The transport took Aria and her guard escort through the airbase, away from the landing zones and toward the administration and barracks areas. The structures were a little more closely placed here than in the operations area, the logic being that living quarters and office areas were less crucial than the complicated and expensive equipment needed to maintain flight command. They drove to the center of this area, and stopped in front of a large administrative structure.

When she stepped out of the transport, Aria took a moment to enjoy the familiar, comforting heat of her home planet. At least it was warmer here than on that planet she and Jack had been stranded...Aria would never have admitted it in front of the human, but that place had been far too cool for her liking. She looked up at the sky, taking a deep breath of the stifling air. The familiar deserts of her childhood were much more pleasant, and the nice, bright light from her home system's sun almost made her forget what she was facing here.

<Lieutenant...It's good to see you well. Though I wish it were in better circumstances.>

Aria looked down from the sky, turning her attention back to the building in front of her. Walking towards her was someone she hadn't seen since she'd departed Lirna. A female Ailian, some

twenty years older than Aria, clad in a crisp, clean red flight suit similar to the worn, dirty one that she wore. Her black fur, patched here and there with white splotches, was graying around her muzzle and the tip of her tail. It was her unit commander, Major Misa Tal'in, who also happened to be the ranking officer in charge of Mat'aar Airbase.

<Major,> Aria said, snapping to attention. She made to salute, normally done by crossing her arms over her chest, but then she remembered that the guards had cuffed her arms behind her back. <I apologize, Major, for not giving you the respect you deserve.>

The major waved her tail behind her once, her expression neutral. <It happens.> She lifted a hand, gesturing at the guards. <Lieutenant, you may take your squad and return to your duties. I will take the prisoner from here.>

The soldier she was addressing stepped forward, coming to attention and saluting her. <Respectfully, Major, I can't obey that command. I'm under orders from the admiral to keep my squad with the prisoner at all times until the hearing. For security purposes, m'lady.>

Major Tal'in's expression soured. She advanced on the lieutenant until she was standing directly in front of him. The major was of greater-than-average height, and towered at least a foot over the sergeant. She glared at him with as much of an intimidating expression as she could muster, which was considerable. She stared until he wavered, averting his eyes.

<I am countermanding that order, Lieutenant,> Major Tal'in hissed. <I do not foresee any security breaches, not while *I* am in command of this airbase.>

The lieutenant shifted uncomfortably on his feet. <I still can't do that, Major. The admiral was quite clear on this matter.>

Major Tal'in growled in frustration. <Of course he was...> She tossed a look over her shoulder at the building behind her, seeming quite perturbed. <Very well, then, Lieutenant. We will compromise. Select one of your squad to accompany myself and the prisoner. I trust that shall satisfy the requirements of your orders in a satisfactory manner?>

For a few minutes, Aria thought the guard lieutenant was going to refuse again. If he did that, she might soon be witness to a physical fight. Refusing an officer's order was a great personal insult in the Ascendancy. Aria privately wished he would refuse, as her commander was one of the best unarmed fighters on the planet. However, it was not to be. The lieutenant backed down, nodding and waving a sergeant forward.

<Have it your way, Major,> he said. <Sergeant, do not let the prisoner out of your sight.> With that, the lieutenant and the rest of his squad re-entered their vehicle and left, heading back in the direction of the ship.

After watching them leave, Major Tal'in turned on her heels with a swish of her tail. <Come, Lieutenant.>

Aria waited for the sergeant to follow, but he gestured at her with his rifle. <After you, m'lad-...Lieutenant.> Aria started walking, hurrying to catch up with her commander. The building they were entering was the main command building, home to all of the offices for the command structure for Mat'aar Airbase. Aria herself had once had an office in this building, until she'd been given her patrol assignment.

<Males,> Major Tal'in huffed as they walked, heading through the hallways to the interior sections of the building. <Back when I enlisted, they wouldn't be permitted to rise to the rank of lieutenant, let alone an admiral. Disgustingly disrespectful man...>

They walked for a while, taking turns here and there. After a while, Aria began to wonder where they were going. The hearing rooms should have been reached by now, and they had been walking for a little bit too long. Aria's wrists were starting to feel a little uncomfortable in their restraints. The sergeant was the first to say something.

<Major, this is not the way to the conference chambers,> he said, studiously keeping his voice respectful.

<That's correct,> the major agreed. She halted, turning to face the sergeant. <We have some time before the hearing is scheduled to begin. Since I will be representing Lieutenant Me'lia in this first hearing, I wish to speak with her in my office. Do you have a problem with that?> Her tone was mild, but her meaning was clear: Object at your own risk.

The sergeant stared blankly at her, but he seemed less willing than his commander to buck authority. <Of course not, m'lady. Whatever you wish.>

<Marvelous.> With that, Major Tal'in led them down a side hall, finally coming to the door leading into her office. She opened the door and ushered Aria inside. The sergeant made to follow, but the major stopped him. <That won't be necessary, Sergeant. You will wait out here. We shall not be long. Oh, and your handcuff key, please.> Without waiting for a response, she snatched the flabbergasted sergeant's keys from his belt, going into her office and shutting the door.

Aria looked around her commander's office. It was much the same as she remembered it, with all the accoutrements of the major's many tours of duty. Trophies from all of her military campaigns lined the shelves: the chest plate from a Pteryd's armor suit, a human combat helmet from the first contact battles, even a battle-scarred, deactivated Ailian rifle from the Outer Colonies uprising that had occurred many years ago...And too many more mementos to count. A large window comprised most of the far wall, looking out upon the airbase, in front of which was placed the major's desk and a number

of chairs.

<Now, we finally have some peace,> Major Tal'in said with relief. She came up behind Aria and unfastened the handcuffs, releasing her wrists. The major tucked the cuffs into her uniform belt and then walked to her desk at the far end of the room. <Males, I swear. We give them just a little bit of authority and they forget their place.> She sat down behind the desk, and gestured to another chair. <Sit, Lieutenant.>

<Yes, ma'am...>

Still somewhat confused about what was going on, Aria took a seat in front of her commander. She folded her hands in her lap, trying to look as proper as she could with her uniform in the state that it was. Her major was such a stickler for proper dress and appearance. Aria tried to wait patiently, as Major Tal'in picked up a data reader, a hand-held tablet device. She seemed to be looking something over.

<Well, I'm very glad to see that you made it back in one piece, Lieutenant,> Major Tal'in finally said. She put the data reader down, clasping her hands on top of her desk and giving a slight smile. <I must say, I was quite worried when you failed to report in. We had no idea what had happened to you, and we'd just about given you up for lost when we received your distress call. Your family has been quite merciless in badgering me for updates, and I was glad to be able to finally give them one.>

<My family?> Aria asked. She felt her chest tightening, a lump rising in her throat. <Are they here now? Can I see them?>

Major Tal'in shook her head. <They are not here, and if they were you could not see them. Not until after the hearing, at least. Speaking of which, let's get down to it.>

Aria swallowed past the lump, doing her best to focus on the matter at hand. She desperately wanted to see her father, sisters, and brothers, but unless she could do something about her present situation she would never have that chance. <Yes, Major. Of course.>

Tal'in gestured to the data reader, lying on the desk. <I've been reading over the report you filed on the way back. You seem to have left nothing out. Very commendable.> She leaned back in her chair, stroking the back of one of her hands with the other. <Is everything I've read accurate? And I think you know to what I am referring.>

Looking away, Aria felt a rising sense of shame, her ears flattening to her head. She had known her commander would not approve. <It is all true, Major.>

The major abruptly rose from her chair, turning and stepping to the window, looking out. She clasped her hands tightly at the small of her back, remaining quiet for several long minutes. <I didn't want to believe it, you know. You have been such an exceptional officer, perhaps one of the best I've

ever had the pleasure of commanding.> She turned around, facing Aria once more. <Why would you throw away such a promising career? Especially considering your mother...>

<I...I just did what I had to...to survive...>

<Don't insult my intelligence!> Major Tal'in snapped at her, slamming a hand down on her desktop. <There is no conceivable reason why mating with a human would be necessary for your survival, by *any* stretch of the imagination!> She turned away again, obviously trying to calm herself down.

Aria hung her head. She felt more low than she ever had in her life, except for that night when she had told Jack she regretted their relationship. Aria hated disappointing her commander, hated feeling like a failure. Even if she'd felt right about her choices when she'd made them, obviously her people did not share those feelings.

The major turned back around, seeming to have gotten control of herself. <In my view, you have fucked up unbelievably, Lieutenant.> She let that pronouncement hang in the air for a while, staring at Aria. <However, you're also one of the best officers I've ever known. And your mother was a person of invaluable service to the Ascendancy.> Tal'in sat down in her chair again. <Apart from that, it's my duty as your commander to defend your honor in these proceedings. I'm not going to give you any illusions that I can save your career, Lieutenant. I doubt anyone could do that. But I'll do my best to save your life. I think you're owed at least that much.>

Aria looked up, suddenly feeling hopeful. <Major, I...> She swallowed, looking back down again. <Thank you...>

<Don't take this as approval for what you've done,> Major Tal'in cautioned her. <I think it's shameful, disgusting...But unlike certain people I don't allow my feelings to cloud my sense of duty. That's a lesson *some* people...> She looked pointedly at Aria. <...could stand to learn.>

Aria did not respond. She thought her commander was wrong, very wrong. But she was not going to ruin one of the most important advantages she had to tell her so. And on some level she also agreed with Major Tal'in. It was just that she didn't care.

<Now, I imagine the hearing is about ready to begin.> The major stood up, retrieving the handcuffs from her belt. <I'll have to put these back on. Are you ready for this?>

<...No,> Aria said. But she still stood up, turning so that Major Tal'in could secure her wrists behind her back. <However, I will have to face it anyway.>

The hearing chamber was the singular most intimidating thing that Aria had ever experienced. When Aria entered, she was faced with a nearly empty room, composed of several gradually elevating

rows of seats behind long, continuous tables. She was escorted in by a small company of armed guards, accompanied by Major Tal'in. Taken to a smaller table in the center of the room, she was made to sit and her hands were released from the handcuffs. The major took a seat next to her, and the guards retreated to cover the exits.

Sitting directly in front of her on the first level, were eight of her fellow Ailians, all of them senior military officers. Six generals, an admiral, and a staff officer of the rank of commander, the most senior rank below general and one rank above major. Behind them, on the next row up, were five civilians, all clad in the flowing white robes of nobility. Aria was slightly relieved to see that Li'ren, the representative of the Empress, was seated in the center of them. The regal blue Ailian met eyes with her, but made no other sign that she recognized Aria.

The officers were speaking amongst themselves, holding data readers and seeming to compare notes. The conversation continued for several minutes, and then Li'ren stood up, manipulating a control on the table in front of her. The lights in the room flashed three times in rapid succession, and the talking quieted.

<On behalf of Her Lady the Empress, I call this hearing in session,> Li'ren said. Her melodious voice echoed around the chamber, clearly audible to everyone. <This hearing is to determine cause for the charges of treason and fraternizing with the enemy against Lieutenant Aria Me'lia. Is the accused prepared to hear the charges of this court martial?>

Major Tal'in stood, her hands flat on the table. <She is, m'lady,> the major replied in a strong voice. <The report of Lieutenant Me'lia's ordeal has been distributed to all concerned parties, and we waive the right to the reading of the charges. We understand them and are prepared to offer our preliminary defense.>

<Then please, Major,> Li'ren said, waving a hand to her. <We will hear your statement.>

<Objection!> the admiral in the front row called out. He stood. The admiral was a formidable male, russet red fur contained in his crisp black uniform, decorated with rows of battle awards and medals. The male was Admiral Jin Te'rou, an Ailian who had been born on a distant colony world of the Ascendancy. He was the highest-ranked officer in the Ascendancy military, a post that just twenty years go would have been unattainable for a male soldier.

Li'ren inclined her head to the admiral. <Her Majesty will hear your objection.>

<Thank you, My Lady Amani.> The admiral smoothed the front of his uniform, and clasped his hands behind his back. <This hearing, and this court martial, is a useless endeavor. The regulations in this matter are clear. Any soldier accused of either of these charges in wartime is subject to summary execution. I submit that these proceedings be halted, with execution to be carried out immediately.>

A murmur of talk rustled through the chamber. Aria felt ice water flowing through her veins, knowing that the admiral was speaking the truth. In numerous similar circumstances throughout Ailian military history, such executions had been carried out. Aria saw two of the generals and one of the civilians nod in agreement, though the others did not seem quiet as certain. She opened her mouth, intending to protest, but Major Tal'in kicked her leg underneath the table, and she closed it again.

<Order, please,> Li'ren said calmly, and the room again quieted. She looked down her muzzle at Admiral Te'rou. <Your objection is entirely correct, Admiral. However, if you wished for Lieutenant Me'lia to be summarily executed, you should not have agreed to hold this hearing. Now that the proceedings have begun, Lieutenant Me'lia has the right to have her case heard. Your objection is overruled.>

Admiral Te'rou's eyes blazed in irritation, the fur on the back of his neck standing up, but he took his seat. <Objection withdrawn,> he muttered sulkily.

<Thank you, m'lady,> Major Tal'in said. She flashed a triumphant look at the admiral. Aria knew that she'd never approved of his gaining such rank, much the way she did not approve of most males in high-ranking positions. The major stepped around the table, and began pacing back and forth in front of the assembled court. <Lieutenant Me'lia cannot contest the details laid out in her report, for the obvious reason that she wrote it. By technicality, we must concede that she is guilty of the actions which are contained therein.> The major held up a hand. <However, Lieutenant Me'lia respectfully submits that she found herself in extreme circumstances. Her ship was engaged in combat with a highly armed civilian vessel, and she found herself stranded on an unknown planet containing hostile forms of life and a hazardous environment. Too, she was stranded on this planet with a human being the only other form of intelligent existence.

<The circumstances, as I have just said were extraordinary. One can hardly expect a single person to have expected to survive this event on their own. Lieutenant Me'lia did ally herself temporarily with a human whom, it must be noted, she did capture properly as a prisoner of war. By her own account, the lieutenant pressed this human into service and compelled him to assist her in traversing this planet in order to find a means to communicate a distress call back to her superiors. I submit that these actions were not merely for the purpose of fraternization, but were a means for survival.>

The major stopped her pacing, standing still in the center of the room at parade rest, her hands held behind her back while her tail hung straight behind her. One of the generals who had expressed agreement with Admiral Te'rou stood to speak.

<That is well-said, Major,> she stated. <However, you cannot extend the excuse of survival to

her other actions. As is clearly laid out in the report, she engaged in inappropriate behavior with this human. She mated with him.>

Aria winced at the tone in the general's voice, but Major Tal'in appeared unmoved. <That is so, General. But you must remember the extraordinary circumstance she found herself in. Think of her state of mind. Lieutenant Me'lia had no way of knowing for certain whether she would live to get off of that planet. She can perhaps be forgiven for engaging in certain behaviors in desperation.>

<Maybe, Lieutenant, but this is not a simple matter of an officer forgetting herself and engaging in an illicit relationship with an enlisted man,> Admiral Te'rou growled from his seat. <This was an unnatural act that she engaged in. It is conduct unbecoming.>

One of the civilians seated near Li'ren, a male, stood up as well. <Ridiculous,> he said. <I will admit, it is concerning behavior, but such a thing is not unprecedented. We have no such regulations against relationships with our allies, the Nuretans, for example. Indeed, one of our most prominent ambassadors is married to one of theirs. Is that any less unnatural?> A smattering of agreement sounded through the room, and Aria saw one of the generals who had previously sided with the admiral nod in grudging acceptance of that argument.

<That is entirely different!> Admiral Te'rou objected. <We are not in a state of war with the Nuretans and have not been for nearly three centuries!>

<Nevertheless, it is a compelling point,> Li'ren said. She plucked a small bit of lint from the sleeve of her robes. <I would say it is the central point to the lieutenant's defense. Would you agree, Lieutenant?>

Truth be told, Aria had not considered it in that way before now, but she was not about to argue with something that could be said in her defense. <Yes, m'lady,> she agreed, trying to keep the intense relief free from her voice and failing. Li'ren favored her with a very covert smile, likely not noticed by anyone else in the room.

<This is all well and good,> Admiral Te'rou said. <But even if we allow that her actions may be...understandable...> He looked disgusted even as the words came out of his mouth. <That still does not excuse them. They were still treasonous acts. If the aim of this hearing is to absolve the lieutenant of her responsibilities, I shall not allow that to occur!>

Major Tal'in, who had returned to her seat next to Aria, slapped a hand on the table. <Then put it to a vote. We have stated our defense, and you have the charges before you. We request a vote towards whether the court martial shall move ahead or the if the charges shall dismissed.>

Li'ren nodded. <Is there a second for this request?>

<Second,> the commander seated with the other officers said, raising his hand.

<Then the vote is called,> Li'ren pronounced. <Members casting votes stall stand to signify their votes. All in favor of dismissal?>

Li'ren remained standing. One of the civilians joined her, along with the commander and three of the generals. Aria held her breath, waiting to see if anyone else would stand. Six of the thirteen court members assembled were now standing, and all she needed was for one more to join them for the charges to be dismissed. However, none did.

<That is six votes in favor of dismissal,> Li'ren counted. <All in favor of indictment?>

Though it was largely a symbolic gesture now, the remaining three generals, Admiral Te'rou, and the remaining three civilian members stood. Li'ren eyed each on of them in turn, making sure that they were sincere in their votes. Then she nodded.

<And we have seven votes in favor of indictment,> she said. <The vote has been tallied. Lieutenant Me'lia, please stand.>

Her legs slightly weak, Aria stood up. Major Tal'in stood with her. Aria closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. After all, she had already been reasonably certain that this would be the outcome. She was just relieved not to have been executed straight off. Though she had, for just a moment, allowed herself to believe that she might be exonerated.

<Lieutenant Aria Me'lia, Ascendancy Navy, Fifth Fleet, One Hundred and Eighty-First Patrol Detachment, the vote of this court martial stands thus,> Li'ren said in a loud, clear voice. Aria noticed that her ears were slightly lowered, an involuntary sign of her own disapproval. <This court finds sufficient evidence to bring against you the charges of treason and fraternization with the enemy. Therefore you are formally charged, with trial to begin in no later than one month's time. The exact date shall be decided later. Until that time, Lieutenant Me'lia, you will be conditionally freed, though confined to the city of Hayikwiir on pain of immediate execution.> Li'ren manipulated a control in front of her, dimming the lights slightly. <On behalf of Her Majesty Empress Kri'a Solan the Fourth, I declare this hearing concluded.>

<Wait!> Aria said, unable to restrain herself any longer. The other occupants of the room, who had been moving as though to leave, stopped and looked at her. Major Tal'in grabbed her arm, shaking her head in warning, but Aria shrugged her commander's hand away.

<Have a care, Lieutenant,> Li'ren said, her voice containing the same warning tone. <You do not have leave to speak at this assembly.>

<But I must,> Aria said earnestly. <I request permission to speak, m'lady.>

Li'ren gazed at her for a moment, and then she returned the lights to their previous level of illumination. The court members resumed their seats. <Then you may do so. But be brief.>

Aria swallowed, her chest feeling very tight. She felt short of breath, but she found the strength to speak. <The human...What is to be done with him?>

<He has already been dealt with,> Admiral Te'rou said. He leaned forward in his chair. <The human was deemed worthless as a source of information or military intelligence. As such, he has been transferred to the custody of a slave dealer, as is the procedure for captured civilians.>

<No!> Aria growled, her voice suddenly heated. <You cannot do that! I am claiming him for my own!>

A surprised murmuring spread through the room. Major Tal'in covered her face with one hand, shaking her head slightly. The officers looked amongst each other, disapproving looks evident on their faces, and Admiral Te'rou had an odd look of satisfaction on his face. He clearly considered this statement of Aria's damning evidence against her. The civilians merely looked shocked.

<You have no authority to make that claim, Lieutenant,> Admiral Te'rou said, smirking at her. <You technically hold no rank. While facing charges, you are not an active member of the Ascendancy's navy. Your claim is denied.>

Aria slapped both of her hands on the table in front of her. <My claim predates those charges!> she insisted. <I took the human prisoner prior to any of the actions which you are indicting me for! I captured him fairly and properly in my capacity as a patrol ship officer, and if he holds no intelligence value then he is rightfully my property as spoils of war. I am claiming him as such!>

<That is a crude twisting of the spirit of military law->

<Admiral.>

The admiral stopped speaking, and he turned in his seat to look at Li'ren, who had spoken. She was looking at Aria with new found respect in her eyes, and was leaning forward in her seat with one hand cupping her chin thoughtfully. Her tail tip could be seen behind her, waving back and forth in slight amusement.

<Lieutenant Me'lia may be rather insolent in her speech, but she cites military law correctly,> Li'ren said. <She has laid a claim on the human, Jack Squier. On behalf of Her Majesty, I rule that her claim is valid. If the human has not already been sold, he is to be remanded to her as spoils of war to serve as her slave.>

Admiral Te'rou's mouth worked furiously for several moments, but he could think of no objection to make. He abruptly stood and left his spot at the table, walking towards an exit. <Very well, then,> he growled angrily. <Do as you wish. But he has likely been sold already. Gods know the demand for slaves is high.>

Li'ren nodded to his back serenely. <Then, *now* I declare this hearing adjourned. Take care,

Lieutenant Me'lia. Please do not do anything foolish before your trial. Her Majesty would be displeased.> With that, the members of the court left, leaving Aria alone with Major Tal'in and the guard force.

Letting her breath out in a long sigh, Major Tal'in looked at Aria. <That was a stupid thing to do, Lieutenant,> she said. She shook her head slowly, though, a slight smile crossing her face. <But if you live through this, you might think about a career in the court system. I have a feeling you'd make a hell of a lawyer...>

Aria was too relieved to respond to that, so she settled for a smile of her own.

<Alright, then, come on,> Major Tal'in said. She took Aria's arm, leading her away from the table. <I'll place a call to your family, so they can come to take you home. And we'll see about retrieving your slave. For his sake and yours, I hope he hasn't been sold already.>

Aria allowed herself to be taken from the hearing room. She felt a lot better than she had coming in, though of course she was not in the clear by any means. Still, her tail was waving peacefully behind her as she walked, and her pointed feline ears stood straight on her head. Maybe, if she had a few more strokes of luck like this, she could get out of this mess in one piece.