

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Six: Now There is Night
by Havoc

“People sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

- George Orwell

The darkness outside was all-encompassing. The Lirnan sun had long ago sunk below the horizon, and it was not a clear night. Thick, dark clouds cloaked the moon and blotted out the stars, leaving the outdoors clad in an inky shroud. Ailians didn't use much in the way of exterior lighting; their eyes were good enough in the absence of light.

Slinking through the night, Aria Me'lia kept to the darkest of the shadows, trying not to make a sound. She crept through her family's estate, her eyes, ears, and nose keenly tuned to detect anything unusual. The scent of human was everywhere. Aria fully expected there to be the smell of human in her home, as Jack had been here for several weeks now. But she knew Jack's scent well, and this was definitely not Jack she was smelling. From what her nose was telling her, at least five unfamiliar humans were about.

Aria had discarded her silken bath robe, which was much too flowing and loose, in favor of her bare fur. She longed to be holding her trusted rifle in her arms right now, but of course all of her weapons had been taken from her when she'd been arrested. For now she would have to rely on only the weapons that her body afforded her.

Where to look first..., she thought to herself. The Ailian had no idea why humans would be invading her home, but whatever the reason was it was certain to be something bad. Aria tried not to let her fear for her family paralyze her. She needed to keep her wits about her right now, needed to be able to rationally think in order to investigate the situation.

As much as Aria was concerned for her family, she knew that the presence of humans while Jack was here was no coincidence. Before she did anything, she needed to make sure that he was safe. Still having no idea where the humans might be, she began making her way carefully through the gardens towards the second tier, where the guest quarters were located. As far as she knew, Jack would be there in his room, probably in bed already. Aria reached the right level in short order.

For a moment, she considered going straight to the door, but as she made for it the fur on the tips of her ears raised subtly. She paused. Aria had learned to trust her instincts, and something told her not to go that way. Hesitant, she crept around the edge of the building, listening and sniffing the air

carefully. The scent of strange human was growing stronger. Her claws unsheathed as her heart rate began to increase, and she rounded the corner of the building...

Aria nearly jumped out of her fur as she suddenly came face to face with a fearsome sight. An unfamiliar human was staring her right in the face. He had on black combat fatigues loaded up with grenades, both fragmentation and concussion types, and was carrying a suppressed rifle in his arms on a single-point sling. He had on light body armor and a heavy belt with a pistol, knife, and enough spare magazine for both firearms to equip a half squad. His head was covered by a black balaclava, and he was also wearing a set of night vision goggles.

For a few crucial seconds, the human stared at Aria, seeming to have been taken by surprise. Then his rifle came up, a red laser beam sweeping up to paint a dot on the Ailian's chest. Aria didn't give him a chance to fire. With a low, deep snarl she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his chest and tackling him to the ground. The human gave a muffled cry of distress as he lost his grip on his weapon. The rifle thumped against the grass, though it was still connected to him by the sling. Aria wrapped a hand around the man's throat, lifting his head and smashing it against the ground.

The human cried out, though his cries grew weaker as Aria bashed his head over and over again. Finally, she rolled him onto the ground, straddling his back and pinning him down with her weight. He was struggling feebly now, thoroughly addled by the repeated blows to his head. With no thoughts of showing mercy, Aria cupped both of her hands underneath his chin. She pulled his head slowly backwards, applying pressure steadily and firmly. His neck finally popped several times in quick succession as his vertebrae snapped, and he went limp underneath her.

After making sure the commando was dead, Aria listened carefully to try to tell if anyone had heard the brief fight. She couldn't hear anything that would suggest that. Swiftly, Aria relieved the dead man of his rifle and pistol belt. If all of the human intruders were armed similarly, she needed to work quickly.

Jack was just getting ready for bed, having had a quick bath and taken a few moments to decompress from the day. He'd had a long day, spent alone for most of it. He was getting the feeling that his welcome with Aria's family was growing worn out. He had spent a few hours with Sami, though, giving one of his rudimentary English lessons. She seemed to be a quick study, even though he had absolutely no experience as a teacher. And he was even picking up a little of the Ailian language as part of the bargain. He definitely didn't know enough to speak the language, but he was learning a few words here and there.

Sighing, Jack climbed into his bed. The hour was late, and he was starting to wonder if Aria was

going to join him tonight. She should have been here by now, if she was going to share the bed with him. He could have used the company, but she had been under a lot of stress lately. Maybe she needed a little time to herself.

Just as he was laying his head down on the pillow, Jack heard a muffled thump and several small clatters from the hallway outside his closed door. He raised his head again, but the sounds didn't repeat themselves. As he was contemplating getting up to poke his head out into the hall, he heard a sharp, insistent knock on the door. Before he had a chance to get up, the knock came again, louder and more urgent.

"Hang on a sec..., " Jack said. He got up from the bed, grabbing his pants from the floor and pulling them on quickly. "Who is it?"

"Me," came Aria's voice in answer. She sounded worked up. "Open. Quickly."

Grinning to himself, thinking that Aria was in a particularly frisky mood tonight, Jack crossed the room to the door and unlocked it. He opened it up, and for a moment thought that his initial thoughts had been correct. Aria was standing there, wearing not a stitch of clothing, looking down at him. The grin on Jack's face spread even wider.

"Getting bold, aren't we? Coming here without any-," Jack started to say, but then he noticed that she was holding a rifle in one hand and a pistol belt in the other. The smile evaporated instantly from his face as his body went cold. "Aria? What the hell-"

"Not much time to talk," she hissed. She pushed her way into the room, closing the door quickly. Jack felt only confusion as she pressed the pistol belt into his hands. "Take this. May need."

"Aria, what's going on? Where did you get the guns?" Unable to comprehend what was going on, Jack automatically put the pistol belt on, fastening it tightly. He examined the gun that was sitting in the holster. The weapon was chambered in ten millimeter, a slightly smaller round than he was used to shooting but more than adequate for the job a firearm was designed to do.

"Humans. Here." Aria was looking around the room, as if she was expecting something to come out from the corners. She was acting exactly as she had back when they'd been stranded together, when wild animals had been assailing them from every direction. Jack worried that she might lose control of herself again. "Killed two already. Not know how many left."

"You're not serious," Jack blurted out. His hand went immediately to the weapon now hanging at his hip, releasing the retention hood on the holster. Aria turned to look at him, and her expression was deadly sincere. He swallowed on his suddenly dry throat. "You're serious."

Aria nodded. "Need to look around. Wanted to make sure you safe first. I need to find rest. You stay here until clear."

"No way!" Jack insisted. "If there's going to be any trouble, I'm not letting you go on your own. I'm going with you."

"No!" Aria snapped at him, vehemently. She bared her teeth, growling. "These not animals in forest! They are soldiers. They not here for social visit!"

"Don't fight me on this, Aria." Jack stepped up to her, drawing himself up to his full height with a stern expression on his face. The sight might have appeared comical to an observer. The top of the human's head barely came up to the Ailian's breasts. "I'm not just going to sit here and wait while you take all the risks."

"*Po'krai nai le tok!*" Aria snarled, covering her face with one hand. She took a few deep, calming breaths as the fur on her tail bushed out. Then she lowered her hand, her grip tightening on the rifle. "Very well. But not coming with me. I leave Sami in bath house. You go there, keep her safe for me, yes?"

That really wasn't what Jack had in mind, but it was probably the best he was going to get. Aria could be so stubborn when it came to this sort of thing. He agreed, and she led him out of his room and into the hallway. Jack immediately saw the source of the noise he'd heard earlier. A black-clad, masked commando lay slumped on the floor, blood splattered against the wall behind him. Silver-colored brass casings littered the floor a short distance away from him.

"Here." Aria picked up the dead man's rifle, giving it to Jack. "Come." She led the way outside, pausing at the door to make sure the way was clear. Gesturing a hand back towards him, they both proceeded out to the gardens. Aria pointed up in the direction of the bath house. "Go now. Not know how much time we have. Need to hurry."

Jack hefted the rifle Aria had handed him, checking to make sure a round was in the chamber, and he flipped the safety on and off again. Other than the suppressor threaded onto the end of the barrel, it was the same model as the one he'd handled before. "And what are you going to do?"

"What you think?" Aria's hand tightened on her rifle's grip until a small crack formed in the composite material. "Going to call for help, then kill any human I find. They come to hurt my family, and none of them leave alive."

"Hey, try not to kill all of them," Jack cautioned her. "It might be a good idea to try to find out where they came from, and how they got here."

"Not promise. But try." The Ailian turned away, moving through the dark towards the main building of her family's estate. Jack got one last look at her appealing rear before she vanished into the night. He shook his head, banishing away the thoughts that sprung to his mind. Now was not the time to be thinking with his dick. He started making his way to the bath house, trying to keep down his fear

at the knowledge that trained commandos were prowling around nearby.

Aria reached the family living quarters with little difficulty. She saw signs here and there that the intruders had been walking around. A broken lower branch on an ornamental tree, a small flowering plant trampled...all signs that the commandos had been here. Aria supposed that when they'd arrived, they divided in half with two of them going for Jack and the rest going after her family. She was certain now that the full team had been five humans, meaning that she was still on the track of three. Every little bit of damage to her dead mother's prized gardens that she saw added to her rage at the intrusion into her home. She knew she had told Jack she would try to get one of the humans alive, but she was starting to doubt that she would seriously try.

Before entering, she took a quick walk around the perimeter, as she had done at the guest quarters. This time she encountered nobody outside. Aria hoped that meant all of the commandos were still in the building. If they weren't there, that would mean their presumably deadly job was completed, and Aria couldn't have that. She wanted to charge in, but she fought back her urges and relied on her training. Deliberation was the key here, not reckless speed. Moving methodically and carefully would lend her all the speed that she needed.

As Aria finished her walk around the building, she found a side door standing open. She looked around, her ears twitching back and forth as they reacted to the sounds of the outdoor air currents and the night life moving about. She heard no sounds that immediately called humans to mind, except for the faint sounds of Jack making his rather noisy way up to the bath house. She cursed herself for allowing him to sway her with his desire to help. He had no infantry training to speak of, though Aria would admit that he had proven himself a capable fighter. But that didn't mean he would do well against trained commandos.

The Ailian took a quick peek inside the open door. There was more light inside, making it far easier for her to see. The door led into a hallway outside of the kitchen, and the way appeared to be clear. Aria snugged the rifle stock tight to her shoulder, or as tight as she could at least. The human weapon felt like a toy in her hands.

Dim hallway lamps lit her way as Aria walked down the hall past the kitchen, hugging the wall as she moved. Her lack of clothing was a benefit rather than a hindrance. Her smooth fur made no sound as it slid along the sandy stone of the walls, and she had no zippers or buttons to clack or jingle with each step she took. Several of the doors along the hallway were open, and she checked each of them in turn. She was just about to the end of the hallway, which would lead to the front hall, when a soft red glow inside one of the rooms caught her attention.

“*Ka na a'la...*,” Aria muttered to herself, slipping inside to investigate. Following the glow, she went to the back of the room, pushing aside a chair. Her chest tightened when she found, sitting on the floor behind the chair, a small black cylinder with a flashing red light on it. Aria picked the device up carefully and examined it, then smelled it carefully. “*La'xe za pa're!*”

Aria had encountered devices like these before. They were a kind of incendiary explosive package, operated either by an internal timer or a remote. She sincerely hoped it was the latter rather than the former. Her rage grew even more. The humans didn't want to just invade her home, they wanted to destroy it as well. Luckily for her, military devices were designed to be as idiot-proof as possible, and were very simple to defuse. She pried one claw into a depression in the bottom of the cylinder and popped off a small panel, exposing a knob with rough edges. Grasping this between two fingers she began to twist it, unscrewing the knob until it came out from the rest of the package. The light on the device winked out and Aria tossed the fuse away. She set the bomb back on the floor where it could be safely recovered later.

With this unexpected task complete, Aria got up and left the room again. Certainly this hadn't been the only bomb planted inside, so now her search was even more urgent. The next thing she needed to do was get to the front hall, where she could use a communicator to call for help. Then she would find any human she could and dispose of them properly.

Jack reached the divide between the third garden tier and the fourth garden tier, on which sat the bath house. He'd made it there without much difficulty, staying to the shadows for the most part. He wished he had bothered to take the dead commando's night vision goggles; he'd nearly turned an ankle on the rocks more than once. The human had barely started to learn his way around the estate in the daylight, and now he was having to navigate it in the dark. He was starting to envy Ailians and their superior night vision.

He pushed his way carefully through a clump of low flowering bushes, wincing as some of the thorns pricked his bare chest. If Aria hadn't been rushing him so much, he would have thought to grab a shirt. Too late for that now. Slinging his pilfered rifle over his shoulder, he climbed up the rocks, rolling up onto the level ground of the top tier. He lay there motionless for several seconds, scanning the area. He couldn't see much, but his eyes were slowly adjusting to the darkness and he thought he could see well enough to be sure that he was safe. Jack stood up, starting to bring the rifle back into his hands.

A sudden crack and spray of dirt against his leg told Jack that he'd been wrong, and he threw himself back down to the ground. As more bullets thudded into the ground around him, he rolled to the left and fell into one of the streams flowing through the gardens. Though the stream was shallow,

barely six inches deep, it was lined on all sides by rocks, effectively protecting him from the rounds coming his way. Whoever was shooting must have realized this, because the fire stopped. After a second, Jack chanced a peek over the edge of the stream. He'd heard barely any sound from the gunfire, so he wasn't sure where they'd been firing from.

No bullets came his way this time, which gave Jack a chance to have a good look. He could barely see movement straight ahead of him, and it looked like a single person moving in a crouched posture near the outer walls of the bath house. Jack brought himself up to one knee and raised his rifle. Taking aim at the dark blob against the slightly less dark wall, he pressed the trigger and let fly a short burst. His aim was just a hair too high, but the impact of the rounds against the wall made the other person tuck and roll. Jack adjusted his aim, but before he could fire again the man ducked into the doorway, disappearing into the bath house.

"Shit...", Jack cursed, gritting his teeth. If Sami was still in there like Aria had said, she was definitely in trouble now. He stood up, stepping out of the water and back onto dry ground. Throwing caution to the wind, he moved towards the bath house at a flat out run. When he got to the door, he paused. "Okay...Okay okay okay..." Taking a breath, he ducked inside, crouching low as he entered.

In the enclosed space, the sounds of suppressed gunfire seemed as loud as gunshots without a suppressor. Jack kept moving, feeling tugs of air as bullets flew past him. He knew that his survival depended on his ability to stay mobile, and that he'd be dead if he didn't find some cover quickly. Luckily for him, the bath house was designed like a natural hot spring, with plenty of rocky outcroppings to hide behind. Jack found a large one to take shelter behind, his mind racing as he tried to think of what to do.

"Sami!" he called out. "Are you alright?" He didn't hear a response, and hoped that it just meant she was too frightened to answer him. The alternative wasn't something he wanted to think about.

What he did hear was an unfamiliar voice. "Listen to me!" the voice said. "Come out now, surrender, and I won't hurt the cat."

Bullshit, Jack thought to himself. He chanced a glance out from behind his rock. He saw a crouched figure near the other side of the bath house. He couldn't see Sami at all. *Maybe she left...or she's already dead...* Pulling his head back into cover, Jack crept to the other side of the rock. This was going to take some tricky maneuvering, but he had a plan. Making as little noise as he could, Jack slid one of the spare pistol magazines from the belt he was wearing. With a flick of his wrist, he slid it across the rocky floor and to the side of the rock he'd just peeked out of. The metal magazine made a loud scraping sound as it traveled.

Before the magazine halted its journey, Jack popped out from behind the rock, bringing the rifle

up to his shoulder. His gambit had worked. His opponent was focused on the spot where he'd seen Jack last, and he was already peppering that area with rifle fire. Jack never gave him a chance to recognize his mistake. He depressed the trigger on his weapon, and started walking his rounds up the man's body. Shots hit him in the thigh, hip, belly, and chest. As the commando grunted and fell backwards, Jack's final shot caught him underneath the chin, snapping his head back as a spray of blood and tissue erupted against the back wall of the bath house. The man crumpled to the floor and didn't get up again.

His rifle now empty, Jack laid it on the floor and drew the pistol, standing up. He walked towards the man, keeping his sights lined up on him just in case he showed any signs of life. When he reached the prone form, he kicked him once. No movement. The man was dead. Jack finally let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Sami?" he asked again, looking around. "Are you in here? It's alright, now."

"Ne...Ne ka'lera..." a shaky, quiet voice answered him.

Jack turned his head towards the direction the voice had come from, and moved that way. As he got closer, he saw a huddled form in one corner of the bath house. It was Sami, still wrapped up in a bath towel. Jack knelt down next to her. She looked absolutely terrified, curled up into so tight a ball that she looked as small as a house cat compared to how she normally was. He was a little surprised that an Ailian could be that scared of violence, but then he realized that most of humanity's experience with their species had been military encounters. It was stupid to think that their civilians would be any different from human civilians. Sami had probably never experienced anything like this in her life, and it was only natural that she would be this scared.

"Are you hurt?" Jack asked her, reaching out and putting a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. Her fur was still damp from the bath.

"Na cha'le me...ah..." Sami's voice was quavering, and she seemed too frightened to be able to draw on her limited English vocabulary. She had to take a few deep breaths before she could answer him. "No. Not hurt." She glanced towards the fallen commando. "Not see." Jack took that to mean that the man hadn't had a chance to find her, though he'd certainly known that she was in here somewhere.

"Good. Well...Aria sent me here to make sure you were okay. We're staying here until everything is safe, alright?"

Sami gave a shivery nod. Then she reached out with her arms and grabbed Jack, pulling the smaller human into a hug. He could feel her trembling against him. Jack felt awkward, but he let her hold him for a while. Gradually she started to calm down, though she still clutched him tightly. Her face was pressed into his neck, and he was sure that she didn't want to look at the dead man lying a short distance away from them.

“Ara le...ah...Thank you,” Sami whispered.

“Krai ta ka'la na ra'zel!” Aria snarled, firing her human rifle twice down the hall. The commando she'd been aiming at sidestepped out of her line of fire, raising his own weapon and shooting back at her. He ducked around a corner, disappearing out of sight.

After Aria had gotten to the front hall, she'd found that the estate's communication systems were still operating correctly and had placed a hurried call to the police in Hayikwiir informing them of what was going on. She hadn't waited for a response before leaving to continue her search. She'd cleared the western wing of the building and then had moved to the eastern wing, where the bedrooms were located. Along the way she'd found and disarmed three more of the incendiary explosive devices. Of her family members that she encountered, all of them were unharmed though they were highly confused by what was going on. Telling them to stay hidden until she called for them, she kept on the move. Finally she'd caught up to the invading humans, finding two of them in the hallway preparing to set another bomb.

Following the retreating soldiers quickly, Aria advanced down the hallway, keeping the corner they'd disappeared around covered with her rifle. The Ailian was absolutely thoroughly furious now, quickly slipping into her blood rage. She didn't just want to kill these humans, she wanted to tear their guts from their living bodies and devour them as they watched.

Abandoning stealth for speed and ferocity, Aria charged around the corner. She took the commandos completely by surprise, as they'd doubtless been expecting her to try to move more cautiously. They were waiting for her just around the corner. Aria bashed the one nearest to her in the face with the butt of her rifle, then quickly swung the rifle around to fire point-blank into the second man. The high-powered rounds tore through the man's light body armor like it was tissue paper, splattering the wall and floor with blood.

Turning her attention back to the first man, Aria threw the rifle to the floor and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him up. Her lips were drawn back in a fearsome expression, exposing her razor-sharp fangs to the man. She ripped the mask off of his face, revealing a human who looked to be younger than Jack. His eyes were wide, and he seemed aware of himself despite the punishing blow he'd just taken to the head. He looked absolutely terrified, like most humans were when they were this close to an angry Ailian. Aria lowered her head until her nose was almost touching his, her tail lashing that air behind her and her orange-and-black-striped fur standing on end.

“Should kill you,” she growled. The human's mouth opened slightly, partly in surprise at hearing her speak English. He tried to say something, but her fingers were too tight around his neck.

She squeezed even tighter. Reluctantly, as much as she wanted to kill the human in a very painful way, she forced herself back under control. "Should do. But need you."

Aria then hammered the man's head against the wall, knocking him unconscious. She let him drop to the floor. Shaking with barely contained anger, Aria spotted a hard case on the floor next to the dead commando. She grabbed it, unfastening the latches and opening the case up. Inside the case was divided into separate open compartments, nine of them. Four of the compartments were empty, while five of them contained more of the explosive charges. All of the remaining charges hadn't been activated yet. Aria sighed in relief. None of the other commandos she'd encountered had been carrying cases like this one, and she'd found four explosive devices, so that probably meant that the bombs posed no more danger.

It's alright! Aria called, standing up. She looked back towards the bedrooms, cupping one hand around her muzzle. *Everything is alright, you can come out now!*

After a few minutes, Aria's family slowly emerged from their rooms. They looked astonished at the scene that greeted them, with their eldest sister standing naked in the hallway among the blood and human bodies. Arn, Aria's father, looked particularly sickened by the sight. Aria counted the Ailians standing in the hallway.

Ana, Sana, Jin, Mari... Aria trailed off, puzzled by her counting. She was one off. Her blood went cold. *Where is Li'ara?* Her youngest sister was nowhere to be seen. She looked among her siblings, who all looked as surprised by her absence as she did. *No...No no no...* Aria forced her way through her family, running down the hall towards her sister's bedroom. Li'ara's room was right near where she'd caught up to the commandos, and she made for the door, rushing inside. She froze.

Lying on the bed, the covers tossed aside carelessly, was Li'ara. The sheets were stained with blood that had dripped and pooled down onto floor. The young girl's throat had been cut, and the fur on her neck and chest was matted with her own blood. Her eyes were open, staring blankly at the ceiling in death. Aria's legs felt weak, and she slumped against the door frame, unable to tear her eyes away from the gruesome sight.

She felt herself shoved out of the way as her father came into the room, and he cried out in anguish. The elder Ailian sank to his knees beside his youngest daughter's bed, reaching his arms out and cradling her body. His shoulders hunched and he buried his muzzle against the top of Li'ara's head, sobbing.

Why? he choked out, squeezing his daughter's body tightly. Her blood smeared against his own fur. *Li'ara was only thirteen! Why would anyone want to kill her?*

Aria came forward, kneeling next to her father, putting her hand against his back. *I don't know,

father...I...* She swallowed, fighting back her own grief. She tried to think of anything she could say to comfort him, but she was at a loss. A choked sob came from behind her, and she realized that all of her siblings were standing there in the hallway, looking through the open door. Aria turned around, keeping her grief from her face, bottling it up inside of her. She was the head of her family, and they would be looking to her for strength. She needed to have it for them.

Keep me away from that human that's still alive, Aria growled, showing them anger instead of sorrow. She gritted her teeth, standing up from her father's side and pushing past them. *If I look at him again, I'll rip his lungs out with my bare hands!* She stormed away from the grisly scene, heading for the front hall to see what was taking the police so long.

Several days passed before Jack was able to speak to Aria again. When the police from Hayikwiir finally arrived at the estate in the aftermath of the attack, they immediately placed her under arrest on suspicion of having been involved in it. Her status as a presumed traitor made her the logical suspect in their eyes, but after a day and a half of being in custody they were forced to acknowledge that she'd had no part in the attack, and in fact had performed admirably in saving the rest of her family. Aria was returned to the estate, and she sequestered herself in her father's study, refusing to see or speak with anyone except for when Sami brought her meals, all of which she didn't eat. Jack had heard the details of what had happened after he and Aria had parted, and he guessed that she was probably blaming herself for being unable to save Li'ara.

On the third day after the attack, Jack managed to arrange it with Sami so that he'd be the one to bring Aria her evening meal. The tray was heavy, and hard for him to carry, but he bore it as well as he could. Following Sami's directions back to the study, since that was the one place in the estate he hadn't been to yet, he went inside.

Aria was there, dressed now, of course, sitting in a low-backed chair facing the rear of the room. Jack felt really bad for her. He didn't know what it was like to lose a family member, but he knew there was nothing he could do to make it better. He approached her from behind, setting the tray down on a table nearby. The Ailian didn't react at all to his presence or to the smell of the food.

"Aria?" Jack said quietly. He moved around her chair, standing to her side and slightly in front of her. She stared blankly past him. Her feline face was dry, the fur unblemished by tears. She didn't look as though she had cried at all.

He was about to say something again when Aria spoke. "Li'ara...She only thirteen..." Her voice was labored, and Jack could hear the grief in her words. "They cut her throat, like she animal. Like she less than Ailian." She took a slow breath, letting it out gradually. "Not quick enough to save her...If I

quicker...”

“You saved the rest of your family,” Jack reminded her.

“Should have saved all of them,” Aria insisted. She closed her golden eyes, covering her face with one hand. “Is too much. Too much. All of this...Just too much.” Her tail hung limply off the chair, and she clenched her teeth, the muscles in her jaw quivering as she struggled with all the emotions and stress threatening to burst forth. For a few minutes she was silent, then she spoke again. “Should thank you. You save Sami's life. Grateful.”

“Oh, that...That was nothing.” Jack shrugged it off. He pulled a chair over, sitting near Aria. “You told me to keep her safe, so I just did what you told me to do. Kind of my job, isn't it?” He touched the slave collar around his neck. He tried a smile, but it felt wrong, so he wiped it off his face. “I wish you'd eat something. Sami says you haven't eaten anything in three days. That's not doing you any good.”

“Not hungry.”

“Please. Do it for me, will you? Do it for your family. They've lost one loved one, and they don't want to lose another.”

Aria opened her mouth, looking irritated, and turned her head towards Jack. When she saw the sincere look on his face, and his genuine concern for her, her expression softened. He was worried for her. As he'd said before, he loved her, and he wanted her to be well. She relented. “Yes...I eat.”

Smiling, genuinely this time, Jack pulled the table with the tray over. Aria sat forward, inhaling deeply. Sami, with her penchant for cooking, had prepared one of Aria's favorite meals, a combination of dishes that their mother had loved to cook for them in their childhood. Her stomach rumbled, and she finally felt hungry for the first time in days.

As she began to eat, there was a soft knock at the study door. Jack waved Aria down as she got up to see who it was, and he went instead. She kept her attention on the food, which was delicious. Comfort food, as humans would say. She was aware of a few whispered words behind her, and then Jack returned to his seat next to her.

“Who was it?” Aria asked around a mouthful of spiced meat.

“It was Sami,” Jack replied. “She had a letter addressed to you.”

Aria blinked. “Letter? For me?” Jack nodded and handed her a small envelope, gilded around the edges and made of very stiff paper, with her name on it in Ailian script. Real paper, not something synthetic, a great luxury in this day and age. “From who?”

“No idea, I didn't open it. Looks important, though.”

With a sense of foreboding, Aria used a claw to slice open the envelope, and she withdrew a

single sheet of stationary from inside which had been folded in half. She unfolded the sheet and began to read what was written on it. As Jack watched her read, curious, he saw her brow furrow and her ears twitch forward. The tip of her tail swished back and forth a few times.

“What does it say?” Jack asked.

Aria started to hand it to him for him to read, but then she remembered that he couldn't read Ailian. She began to read out loud to him, pausing several times as she concentrated on translating the language correctly. The full meaning, as Jack later found out, was:

“*To Aria Me'lia,*

First and foremost we wish to offer our sincere condolences for the loss that you and your family have suffered. You have been through much these past weeks, and it seems particularly cruel to now have the murder of a family member to contend with. We hope this letter finds you recovering from the grief that all of you must now surely feel.

To come to the point directly, it must be said that there are some of our people who feel that your current situation is not altogether one brought about by chance. Her Majesty, Empress Kri'a Solan the Fourth, feels that there may be something more at work here than simply a trial and an isolated attack. We desire your presence tomorrow at midday, for the purposes of discussing these matters. Someone will be sent to collect you. If this is inconvenient, please suggest another date and time, in the very near future, as soon as possible.

It should go without saying that Her Majesty also wishes for your human, Jack Squier, to attend as well. We look forward to seeing the both of you.

Cordially,

Lady Li'ren Amani

Royal Consort

Hasayam Palace, Hayikwiir”

To say that Jack was surprised would have been the understatement of the millennium. “So...So the Empress wants to speak with you...personally?”

“And you, yes?” Aria said quietly, looking the letter over again. “Not expect this. Is curious.”

“So what are you going to do?” Jack pressed her. He leaned forward. “Are you going to accept the invitation? Sounds like maybe there might be something to learn from meeting the Empress.”

Aria turned to him, looking astonished that he would even ask that question. "Accept? Of course. You not refuse invitation...No, is wrong word...Not refuse summons from the Empress. Would be bad, very bad."

"We're going, then?"

Aria nodded. "Yes. Though not know how much more I able to take." She looked suddenly very weary. "Is so much happening. Too much."

Jack put a hand out, laying it on her knee, squeezing gently. "You're not going to be there alone, remember. I'll be there with you." He squeezed her knee once more, then sat up straight. "Now, eat. Before Sami comes in here and force feeds you."

Weakly smiling, Aria nodded. "Not worry. I eat." She turned back to her food, her voice lowering. "Will need strength. Tomorrow very interesting, I think..."