

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Seven: My Liege
by Havoc

“The strongest have their moments of fatigue.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Nearly four days had passed since the attack on Aria's family home, and she was managing to cope with the loss of her youngest sister, but only barely. She still found herself increasingly withdrawn from her family, and from Jack as well, though she was starting to return to herself. On the evening of the third day, she had moved herself out of her secluded nest in her father's study and tried to make herself sociable, but it hadn't lasted very long and she had gone to her own room quickly.

Late in the night, when the home was quiet, Aria sat up in her room, not ready for sleep but not feeling motivated for much else. Instead she sat in a small, comfortable chair in her room and read and re-read the letter that had been sent to her by the empress. Aria had never expected to be summoned personally by Empress Solan. She was the ruler of the entire Ailian Ascendancy. Why would she take such an interest in her, even if Aria's trial was a fairly high profile one? Aria couldn't make sense of it.

Still, of course she had accepted the empress's invitation at once. Even if she didn't fully understand the meaning behind the invitation, one did not refuse such a summons from royalty. And so, the next day, she'd be taken to the palace to meet the empress. At any other time in her life, Aria might have felt honored and excited, but in this situation she was apprehensive, confused, and...well, she didn't want to admit it even to herself but she was also frightened. Aria unfolded the letter again, though the contents of it certainly hadn't changed since the seventy-eighth time she'd read it.

As she scanned over the written words yet again, she heard a soft knock at her door. Aria thought that she might just ignore whoever it was, and pretend to be asleep, but then she decided that company right now might not be such a bad idea. Aria stood and walked to the door, smoothing down the fur on her tail and the top of her head before opening up. Sami was standing out in the hallway, carrying a small tray with a pair of steaming cups on it.

-I brought tea,- Sami said. She held up the tray, smiling a little. -I couldn't sleep. I thought maybe you couldn't either. Looks like I was right. Would you like to talk?-

Aria stood aside from the door, gesturing her sister inside. -I'm afraid I won't be very pleasant company right now,- she said. -But a cup of tea sounds nice.-

Sami came into the room and set the tray down on a night stand. As Aria returned to her seat, Sami brought her a cup of tea, taking one for herself. Aria raised the cup in her hands, inhaling the

scent of the hot liquid. The tea was a very familiar drink, a favorite of her mother's. Unlike many Ailian teas, it contained none of the psychoactive or intoxicating compounds that most of the leafy plants on Lirna possessed. This tea was made from the flower of a plant native to the outer colony world that Aria's mother was born on, and it was a sweet, tart concoction that held little of the appeal that Lirnan teas offered. But Aria loved it all the same. She took a small sip of the hot beverage, savoring the taste of it.

-This is wonderful, Sami,- Aria said, lowering the cup and holding it in her lap. -Thank you.-

-You're welcome,- Sami said. She sipped at her own cup, feeling warmth spread through her body as the tea's heat sat in her belly. -We're all worried about you, you know. You've barely said ten words at a time to anyone since...since that night.-

Aria looked away from her sister, staring at a nondescript spot on the wall. -I know, it's just...it's hard. Everything is. Coming home, and this trial, and now Li'ara...It's a lot to deal with.- She lifted her cup to her lips, no longer interested in the tea but needing something to do.

-I imagine.- Sami watched her elder sister, seeing the stress in her posture and her expression.

-Have you talked to Jack much about how you're feeling? I'm sure he could help you feel better.-

Managing a hint of a smile, Aria turned back to Sami. -He usually does. But he's human. He wouldn't understand all this.-

-I think he understands more than you give him credit for, sister,- Sami said gently. She set her cup down, folding her hands in her lap. -He's not some simple slave or a child. He's learning our ways every day, and he's learned much.- She paused for a moment. -And he cares for you. You should lean on him more. You are too concerned with fending for yourself. You wouldn't have made it off that planet alive without his help, would you?-

-I don't want to worry him,- Aria said firmly. -He's suffered enough because of me. I'm not going to add to it by burdening him with my problems.- Her tone made it clear to her sister that it was the end of that particular line of discussion.

Sami took the hint, though she was not pleased by her sister's attitude. -Very well...- She picked her cup of tea back up, though it was quickly growing cold and losing much of its flavor. -A message came through an hour ago. The empress received your acceptance of her invitation, and she'll send someone to fetch you before midday tomorrow.-

-Good,- Aria said, though her voice suggested that it was anything but good.

-Do you have any idea why the empress herself is summoning you?-

-I don't,- Aria lied. There was no reason to make Sami more concerned than she already was. She recalled the contents of the first letter once more. *Her majesty feels that there may be something*

more at work here... As though Aria needed the empress to tell her that. That much was already clear, which made Aria all the more wary of tomorrow's meeting.

Sami didn't believe her sister, and could sense that she was keeping something back, but she let it go at that. -Well...You're probably tired,- she finally said. She stood up, collecting the cups and putting them back on the tray. -I'll see you in the morning. Try to get some sleep, alright?- Sami left her sister, not before brushing her tail fondly across her own, and closed the door behind her.

Aria stared at the floor for a long time after that, perhaps an hour or more. Her mind was abuzz with a plethora of thoughts about what was coming the next day, and she couldn't hold down all of her anxiety. Finally, when she'd worried so much that she exhausted herself, she allowed her body to stretch out on her bed and fall asleep.

Jack shifted in his seat uncomfortably, and not just because the seat in the Ailian vehicle he was riding in was made for a being much larger than himself. He'd gotten up that morning knowing that this was going to be the day that he would meet the Empress of the Ailian Ascendancy, something that he wouldn't have thought possible even twenty-four hours prior. And yet, just as the letter that Aria had received had promised, a very luxurious-looking wheeled vehicle had arrived at the end of the walkway leading through the Me'lia family's estate to pick them up.

He looked to the side, where Aria was sitting next to him. She was very stiff in her seat, and was staring out of the window as they traveled down the streets of Hayikwiir City. She didn't seem much inclined to speech, though he sensed that it was more out of anxiety than any real desire to be silent. Aria was dressed in clothes as fine as Jack had ever seen her wear. She was dressed all in black, a long, flowing dress composed of a silky black material that captured the shimmer of the harsh Lirnan sun perfectly, and had on some sleek shoes that fastened with a lattice of straps that extended halfway up her calves. Jack had nothing quite so fine to wear, but the black fatigues that he'd worn from the uncharted planet had been cleaned and mended until they were almost brand new, and those would have to do. He certainly couldn't wear any of his borrowed Ailian clothes unless he wanted to look like a ferret wallowing in a bed sheet.

Jack reached a hand over, placing it on Aria's thigh and feeling the slick sensation of the fabric on her dress. She jerked ever so slightly, looking at him finally. The Ailian's feline face was a study in how a female could look like she was feeling as sick as ever, but she managed to favor him with a smile that was convincing. She curled her tail around his waist, placing her hand on his.

"Will be all right," Aria said. "Just nerves. Is nothing." She leaned over, nuzzling the top of his head.

“If you say so,” Jack replied, holding her hand. He looked out the window as well. The tall buildings of the city seemed to be giving way to shorter structures, rich in design, not the simple elegance of Aria's home. “Are we almost there?”

“Not sure. Should be, I think. Never been to palace before.”

In fact, the trip lasted only a few minutes longer before the vehicle stopped. Jack felt Aria's fingers tighten around his as the door opened and an Ailian footman gestured them out. Aria went first, and then Jack followed her. The footman glanced at him with obvious disdain, clearly loathe at having to cater to a human slave, but Jack didn't notice at all. He was too busy gazing open-mouthed at the spectacle before him.

If Aria's family estate had seemed luxurious to Jack when he'd first seen it, then the palace that now stood before him was nothing short of wildly extravagant. Hasayam Palace, the seat of the Empress of the Ailian Ascendancy, was massive in size. Unlike many of the buildings in Hayikwiir, which were for the most part modern metallic structures or traditional sandstone constructions, the palace seemed to be constructed of a substance very like white marble stone. The front entrance was framed by tall columns, with flagstone steps leading up to large, heavy-looking polished wood doors. Flanked by large gardens of verdant greens and brilliant reds, the royal residence would not have been out of place in a fairy tale of old.

“Here we go...,” Aria whispered, taking a deep breath. She put a hand on the small of Jack's back, urging him forward and jolting him out of his awed reverie. With palace servants on either side of them, the pair was escorted up the steps to the doors. They opened as they approached, revealing an interior which was finished in polished white stone which had been buffed until it was smooth and shiny as glass. Gold sculptures and trickling water features decorated the reception hall just inside the doors, and a scarlet-carpeted staircase led up to a second floor at the top of which was a wide landing and another set of double doors.

Just as Jack was coming to terms with the sight, and was starting to realize that he was standing in the very last place that any human should have wanted to be standing in, the front doors closed and the doors at the top of the stairs opened up. From within, a single slenderly built Ailian female emerged and descended the stairs towards Jack and Aria. She had royal blue fur with golden stripes, and wore flowing white robes. Golden jewelry, simple but elegant, adorned her ears, neck, and wrists. With a start, Jack realized it was the Ailian who had questioned him on the ship on his trip back from the uncharted planet, Li'ren.

“Good day, Lieutenant Me'lia,” Li'ren said pleasantly in exotically accented English, approaching her. She took one of Aria's hands, grasping it lightly in her own. “How nice to see you

again.”

“Ah...,” Aria said, apparently taken aback at being spoken to in that language by one of her own people. She made a hasty bow to the Ailian noblewoman, bending at the waist until her head was low. “Yes, my lady. Is nice see you, too.”

Li'ren smiled at her, and then turned her attention to Jack. “And Jack Squier. You're looking much more...polished than the last time we met.” She took one of his hands as well, and Jack clumsily imitated Aria's bow. “I am pleased to be able to introduce myself properly to you, now. I am Lady Li'ren Amani, Consort to Her Majesty, Empress Kri'a Solan the Fourth. We are so very glad that you and Lieutenant Me'lia could accept the invitation to meet with us today.”

“Of...Of course, Lady Amani,” Jack said. He, too, was taken aback by Li'ren's use of English in speaking with Aria.

Li'ren could tell that they were feeling uneasy and a little confused. “Please, be at ease,” she urged them, smiling as serenely as she could. “Jack, everyone in this palace can speak at least some of the human language. They have been instructed to use it whenever possible so long as you are our guest, in order to make you more comfortable.” She looked to Aria. “And Lieutenant Me'lia, you are among friends here. Take heart, and do not worry. This is an informal meeting, not an affair of state. There will be no nobles, no officers, no lofty representatives of business. Just us, and Her Majesty, of course.”

“Yes...Alright,” Aria said. She still sounded stiff, but Jack could see her relax noticeably.

“And you, Jack,” Li'ren said, returning her attention to him, “may call me Li'ren as you did before. You are not used to royalty, I imagine.”

Jack grinned just a little. “You're right about that, I guess.”

“Well, then.” Li'ren waved to the footmen who had accompanied them, and they went back outside, leaving the three of them alone. “If you will follow me, I will take you to see Her Majesty. She has been most interested to meet you both.”

Following Li'ren's lead, Jack and Aria both walked up the scarlet-carpeted stairs to the landing. Servants inside of the double doors at the top opened the way for them, and they entered a long hallway carpeted in the same scarlet color as the stairs. The walls in this hallway were gilded and lined with large framed portraits. Jack guessed that the pictures depicted Emperors and Empresses from centuries past. He looked up at the ceiling occasionally, amazed at how high it was. Even with how much taller Ailians were than humans, the ceiling towered above them, and colorful murals were painted on it. The noblewoman showed them down the hall to a doorway that was relatively simple when compared to the rest of the palace. She opened this door herself, showing them inside with a smile and casual wave of

her tail. They both entered, looking around the room, as Li'ren came in behind them.

“Mistress, I wish to present to you Lady Lieutenant Aria Me'lia and Jack Squier, appearing as you requested.”

Towards the center of the room, rising from where she had been sitting on a low, plushly cushioned couch, was an Ailian female robed in blue and gold. Jack's eyes widened as he saw her. She was not what he had been expecting to see in the Empress of the Ailian Ascendancy. Jack had been expecting a slightly built woman rather like Li'ren, but the Empress was built much more like Aria, athletic and strong from what he could tell through the flowing robes that she was wearing. She had dark blue fur, with no discernible striping, and sparkling ruby red eyes. The Empress seemed older than Aria and Li'ren, though only by perhaps ten years.

Aria's eyes widened and she immediately bowed lower than she had bowed to Li'ren, and Jack did the same. As the door closed behind them, a musical sound of laughter hit their ears. They both looked up to find the Empress covering her mouth with one hand, her eyes turned up in mirth.

“Please, both of you,” the Empress said, getting control of herself and smoothing her face into a neutral expression. “You may rise. I am Empress Kri'a Solan. It is quite a pleasure to meet the both of you. Please be at ease. I intended for this to be the most informal of affairs. Do not stand on ceremony, I entreat you.”

Jack found himself entranced by the Empress. Though he, of course, considered Aria to be the most beautiful woman he had ever met, Kri'a Solan was a very lovely female as well. She spoke English with a very light, vaguely Gaelic accent, with her words having a slight upward lilt at the ends.

“Sit, please,” the Empress said to them. She gestured to cushioned chairs arranged in a semicircle in the center of the room, in front of the couch. Jack and Aria both sat down, and the Empress smiled again. “Li'ren, something to drink would be most appropriate, I think.”

Li'ren inclined her head slightly. “Of course.” She walked towards the Empress, pausing as she passed her on the way to a door on the far side of the room. “I'll be right back, my dear.” She placed her hand briefly on the ruler's shoulder, her tail brushing along hers as she walked past. She disappeared through the far doorway.

The Empress watched after her a moment, and then sat back down on her couch in front of Jack and Aria. “Well, now...” She looked at Aria, and her expression turned to one of pity. “Lieutenant Me'lia, I do wish to extend my most sincere condolences to your family. Your mother was a favored acquaintance of my mother, and I was very saddened to hear of the death of your sister.”

Aria looked down at the floor, unable to meet the Empress' gaze. “Thank you, my lady. Is good to hear you say. And thank you for invite us here.”

“Of course,” the Empress said, nodding to her. “We have much to discuss, after all. And you, Jack Squier.” The Empress turned her attention to him, favoring him with a smile and a light wave of her tail. “Li’ren has told me about you. I must say, you are taller than I expected.”

That, at least, finally earned a small laugh from Aria, and from Jack as well. “Thanks, I guess,” Jack said. “Though it’s a little hard for me to think of myself as tall around Ailians. Ah...Your highness.”

“Well-mannered,” the Empress said, half-approvingly and half-jokingly. She looked Jack up and down in an appraising manner. “A shame you’re forced to wear that bothersome slave collar. It does mar your appearance, somewhat.”

Jack brought a hand to his throat, touching the collar that he had all but forgotten about by now. “Right...Um...I was curious about something, if I can ask you, your highness.”

“Ask.”

“Well...This might seem like an odd question, but I noticed you don’t seem to have any human slaves here in the palace, at least none that I’ve seen.” Jack cleared his throat slightly as Aria shot him a look that suggested she wished he hadn’t opened his mouth. “But human slaves seem to be common elsewhere on Lirna. Why haven’t I seen any here?”

“Ah...,” the Empress said, looking surprised that he would ask that particular question. Perhaps she had been expecting him to ask about something else. “Well, considering that you would be visiting us, I felt it would be...unpleasant for you to see human slaves. Normally, we do have them here in the palace. I requested that they be placed on other duties today, so that you might be more comfortable.”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck, looking a bit awkward. “If it’s all the same to you, your highness, I actually wouldn’t mind if they were around while I was here. I’ve only seen a few other humans since I left Earth, and most of them have been trying to kill me...It wouldn’t offend me to see more of my own kind, as long as they aren’t trying to do the same.”

The Empress studied him carefully for a few moments, and then nodded slowly in understanding. “Well, then, I shall ask Li’ren to make that known to the rest of the palace. Your ease in this matter is most welcome, Jack Squier.”

About that time, Li’ren returned with a silver tray containing a steaming pot of some fragrant liquid and cups for all of them. She set it down on a low table in the center of their gathering, and stood at the Empress’s side.

“Now, Lieutenant Me’lia,” the Empress said, taking her attention away from Jack for the moment. “There are certain things I wish to discuss with you alone for the moment. Li’ren?” She looked at the noblewoman, reaching a hand out and touching her side. “We have time before lunch.

Perhaps you might show Jack Squier around the palace?” Her hand lingered on the noblewoman's waist for a moment.

Li'ren nodded. “Of course, mistress. I would be happy to. If you'll follow me, Jack?”

“Oh...” Jack looked at Aria, and she gazed back, nodding fractionally to show that he should do as Li'ren had instructed. Curious about what the Empress had to say to Aria, but not wishing to make an issue of it, he stood and allowed himself to be led out of the room.

Empress Solan waited for the other two to leave the room, and then she looked to the tea tray. She lifted the pot, starting to pour the steaming liquid into two cups. -Allow me, won't you, Aria?- she said pleasantly, smiling at her. Now that they were alone together, she'd switched back to her native Ailian tongue.

Aria was a little confused by the entire situation, but she nodded a bit. -Of course, my lady,- she agreed. What else could she say to the Empress but to agree with her. -You're most kind.-

-Not at all,- Kri'a said, waving off her thanks. She offered a cup to Aria, and then picked up her own. -Li'ren does make the most wonderful tea. A little strong, perhaps, but just the thing to improve your mood. And we could always use that sort of improvement in these times.-

-Yes...Yes we could...,- Aria agreed quietly. She tasted the tea in her cup. The drink was very strong, indeed, but just as delicious as the Empress had claimed. She sipped again, letting the tingle of the drink spread across the her lips and tongue. -Excuse me for trying to get to the point, my lady, but why did you ask me here today?-

The Empress set her cup down on the table between them and folded her hands in her lap. Her fur fluffed up a little in a manner that suggested she was mildly annoyed, but she smoothed it down quickly and hid her emotion well. Aria felt her face warm. She knew she shouldn't speak in such a way to the Empress, but her already frayed nerves were nearly at their breaking point. She was letting her stress get the better of her.

-Well...I suppose that's fair,- Kri'a said. She reclined on her couch, watching Aria carefully. -Of course this is not merely a social call. I will be getting to the point shortly, but I beg your indulgence because there are some other matters that I must speak of to you before I do so. I will try to be as brief as possible, of course.

-I wish to speak of the war with you, Lieutenant. You know we have been at war with the humans now for over ten years. This war was begun by my mother and has continued under my rule. I assume that I don't have to tell you that, by all public accounts, the war has been going uncommonly well for us. We have not even had to call on our friends in the Nuretan Empire for their allegiance, so

swimmingly things have gone.-

-That's true, my lady.-

-I must tell you something that has so far not been reported by our news agencies.- The Empress picked up her cup of tea, taking a long sip. -I am telling you this because of your...friendship with the human. One week ago our seventh and twelfth fleets mobilized and moved to the Sol system. The invasion of Earth has begun.-

Aria nearly dropped her tea cup in her shock, and her jaw hung open for long seconds before she managed to close it again. -It...What?- The fur on the back of her neck was stiff as needles, and her ears nearly flattened to her head. The words out of her mouth next were even more uninhibited than her earlier outburst. -My lady, how could you do that? We've only ever acted defensively, to push humans out of and away from our territory. Escalating the war like this...-

-Lieutenant, I gave no such order.-

-No such...,- Aria began, but her voice faltered. She closed her mouth again, staring at her ruler. Then she spoke again. -I don't understand, my lady.-

-As you are no doubt aware, our various fleets are drawn and centered in the areas of the Ascendancy from which they draw their personnel, though they are still centrally commanded from Lirna. The first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth fleets come from the Central Worlds, the third, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh fleets from the Inner Colonies, and the seventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth fleets from the Outer Colonies.- The Empress set down her cup again, looking at Aria with a very serious expression on her face. -I never ordered the seventh and twelfth fleets away from their assignments. As a matter of fact, I have been unable to contact any of the Outer Colony fleets, and that is worrisome. All the more worrisome are the reports I hear from Fleet Intelligence that the Pteryd are massing their forces near our borders. My orders to the Outer Colony fleets were to maintain their posts for just that eventuality. Those worlds are vital to the strength of the Ascendancy and they need to be protected.-

Aria was still recovering from her shock, but she had enough wits to think things through. -Then...Admiral Te'rou must have disobeyed your commands and given those orders. Is Admiral Te'rou capable of that kind of treason?- Aria had good reason to dislike the admiral. He was the supreme commander, under the Empress, of all of the Ascendancy's military forces. It had been Admiral Jin Te'rou who had instated the treason charges against Aria, and he had been the presiding officer over her initial court martial appearance. He came from an Outer Colony world, and was the first male officer to ever rise to so high a rank in the Ascendancy, which was overwhelmingly matriarchal.

-Te'rou?- The Empress laughed loudly, covering her mouth with one hand. She took a while to

overcome her mirth. -Certainly not. As a matter of fact, it was Admiral Te'rou who alerted me to the disruption in communications.- Kri'a shook her head. -No...However much of a fool the admiral is, he is a capable commander and his loyalty to me is genuine. Whatever orders the seventh and twelfth fleets are operating on, they were not given by him. Admiral Te'rou has been tireless in trying to get to the bottom of this matter for me.-

-I see...,- Aria said, though she would be the first to admit that all of this was way above her head. -Then if it wasn't the admiral, who was it?-

-Truthfully, it could have been anyone with the authority to make those kinds of decisions on their own. That could be any number of suspects throughout all of the fleets. Besides that, our people are growing increasingly divided on the war. While many, including myself, wish for it to come to an end, others want to ramp up the offensive and overwhelm the humans. The loudest of these voices come from the Outer Colonies.- The Empress sighed, and she drained her tea cup, pouring a second fresh cup. -I have not been as skillful as past rulers in holding down the dissent of our outer worlds, mainly because I don't see the benefit in using military force against my own people. The Outer Colonies have grown more vocal during the five years of my rule. I find myself wondering if this may have something to do with the actions of our quiet fleets.-

Aria leaned forward in her seat, speaking cautiously now. -My lady...You speak as though you feel like another rebellion may be developing.-

-I fear that very much, Aria,- the Empress said, her voice barely a whisper. -Indeed, that is what I believe may be happening, though I have little to prove that. But I fear it all the same.-

Aria leaned back again, more than a little scared by what the Empress was saying. Many centuries ago, the Outer Colony worlds had rebelled against the rule of the Ascendancy. The resulting war had enveloped much of the known galaxy, causing an unprecedented number of casualties and throwing the Ailian Ascendancy into chaos for generations. The war had lasted for almost a hundred years, until the Inner Colonies and Central Worlds had brokered a treaty with the nearby Nuretan Empire, adding the strength of their fleets to their own and pushing back the rebel forces. The conflict had finally ended, though sacrifices and compromises had been made to keep the peace. For one, laws which had for many years served to keep the ranks of the nobility closed to citizens of the Outer Colonies had been lifted. Aria knew that Empress Solan's mother had been born on an Outer Colony world, as had Aria's own mother. The Outer Colonies were now more fully integrated into Ailian society than they had ever been, though they were still much poorer and weaker in political power than the rest of the Ascendancy. And in the last two centuries, the divide had again begun to widen.

-Why are you telling me these things, my lady?,- Aria asked. -I mean...me of all people...I'm a

criminal in our peoples' eyes. I'm not the sort of person who should have your confidence.-

Kri'a stood, turning away from Aria and walking across the room, to a small table set against the wall. Several small items sat on this table, one of which was a framed picture. The Empress reached out to this picture, touching her fingers to it. Aria couldn't see what was in the picture from where she was. -Because if we are heading for another civil war, then this war with the humans *must* end, Aria. We cannot fight both at the same time.-

-But how can I help with that?- Aria hissed. -I don't see what any of this has to do with me.-

The Empress picked up the picture, turning back to face Aria. -But it has everything to do with you, Aria.- She paused for a moment, considering. -Well, more specifically, with you and Jack Squier. You see, Aria, much of the reason this war began has to do with misunderstanding. We are almost fundamentally unable as a people to understand the humans. They are the same way with us. This more than anything is the reason that the war has gone on for as long as it has.- The Empress walked back to her seat, still holding the picture, clasping it against her breast. -But that's not so for you. You're one of the few among us who has been able to see humans as more than enemies, and Jack is one of the few humans who has seen the same quality in us. I need people like you if this war is going to end. I'm telling you all of this to give you encouragement. To give you the strength that you're going to need to overcome the charges against you. I need people who can be an example for how humans and Ailians can live in peace.-

Blinking, Aria had the sudden urge to cry. This was a most unexpected development, to have the Empress speaking so earnestly to her. Other than her sister, nobody had ever voiced this kind of support for her. She was feeling elation, but at the same time she felt a crushing and overwhelming pressure. The Empress was quite literally telling Aria that the fate of the Ascendancy, as they knew it, might depend in part on her. -My lady...I...I don't know what to say. You don't know what it means to hear you say that to me.-

Kri'a smiled warmly at Aria, and for once it was not the practiced smile of an aristocrat but the genuine smile of a friendly face. -I understand a lot more than you realize, Aria.- She placed the picture she had carried over on the table between them. -You're not the only person who has loved one they should not. I, also, suffered much when I took a mate.-

Looking down, Aria could now see the picture that the Empress had carried over. When she saw what the picture showed, she was taken aback. The picture was a portrait of two Ailians, standing side by side and holding hands while looking towards the viewer. The one on the left of the portrait was the Empress herself. And the Ailian on the right, clasping her hand and resting her head affectionately on the Empress's shoulder...was Li'ren.

Aria looked up from the picture at the Empress's face, understanding suddenly flooding into her. Kri'a gazed back at her, with that same friendly smile.

-We understand one another a bit better now, I think, Lieutenant,- the Empress said softly. She looked at the picture of herself and Li'ren for a moment, brushing a finger over Li'ren's face in the portrait fondly. Then she stood up, smoothing down the folds of her robes before walking to the door. -Lunch should be served soon, Aria. If you'll follow me to the dining room, we'll wait for Li'ren and Jack Squier to join us.-

-Certainly, my lady...- Aria stood, glancing down at the portrait one more time before following the Empress.