

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Eight: My Curse
by Havoc

“Life is like a movie. If you've sat through more than half of it and it's sucked every second so far, it probably isn't gonna get great right at the end and make it all worthwhile. No one should blame you for trying to walk out early.”

- Doug Stanhope

“Tell me, Jack, what do you think of this place so far?”

Jack looked up at Li'ren, who was walking next to him, slightly forward of him. They were walking down one of the many long hallways in the royal palace, as Li'ren showed him around the expansive residence. Jack frequently had to remind himself that that was really all this place was: the home of the Empress. Of course, that thought didn't detract at all from the magnificence of the palace, not one bit.

So far, Jack had seen far more richness than he'd ever expected to see in his lifetime. He'd never been a museum kind of person, but he knew enough to know that this place probably held more wealth than most any museum on Earth. Li'ren had showed him what she described as the most pleasant areas of the palace. There had been a large, lavish meeting hall with golden columns that ran from floor to ceiling, decorated with nearly wall-height portraits of rulers and nobles, past and present. Li'ren recounted to him the large gatherings and parties which would be held there, with formal dancing that sounded remarkably like what occurred during royal gatherings on old Earth, or on some of the planets in human space, such as Cerelis, which still had a formal royal structure. Jack had also seen the royal library, a room similar to the one in Aria's home only in that it was a room filled with bookshelves. The palace library was much larger, containing thousands upon thousands of volumes, both paper and electronic. Li'ren had showed him a theater, a living area that contained various sitting rooms and lounges, and finally had taken him outside to view one of the gardens. Now she was leading him on the long walk back to where they had come from.

Jack recalled his first time meeting Li'ren, back when he'd been a prisoner on the way to Lirna from the planet he and Aria had crashed on. Back then, the noblewoman had left a rather ambiguous impression on him. While she had been respectful and calm, she had still been every bit the cold and unsympathetic character that Jack had been taught all Ailians were. Now, though, she was acting very cordial and friendly. He found himself wondering how much of the Li'ren he had seen before was just the face she put on when she was conducting official business, because the Li'ren he was seeing now seemed genuine, more relaxed and natural.

“You mean of the palace?” Jack asked, finally responding to her question.

Li'ren stopped, turning to face Jack, with a smile on her face. Her tail twitched in silent amusement, and she clasped her hands in front of her. “Well, yes, but I meant in a more general sense. What do you think of our planet?”

Jack had to fight back a snort of sardonic laughter. “Oh, well, to be honest I haven't seen that much of it,” he said. “What I have seen hasn't been that welcoming. I've seen the military base at which I was brought on this planet in handcuffs, and got a beating from a soldier there. I've seen a slave market, where I was stripped down and felt up by a dealer, and then locked in a dungeon. And I've been at Aria's home for about the last month where, while I was more at ease there than anywhere else, a few of my own people somehow got in and tried to kill all of us.”

“A fair point you have. Not the impression Her Majesty would prefer our species to give to guests...”

“As for the palace itself...well...” Jack searched for the right way to say what he felt. “It is very luxurious, and what I've seen is really quite beautiful. But it doesn't seem very homelike.”

“Not homelike?” Li'ren repeated. She appeared thoughtful for a few moments, considering his words. “I suppose I can understand the opinion of one who is not used to such opulence. But I assure you, the more private areas of the palace are very 'homelike', indeed. As one who has lived here for nearly ten years, I must say I feel quite at home.”

Jack shrugged, looking around the hall that they were currently standing in. Like most of the rest of the palace, it was decorated in white stone and gold. He doubted that all of the money he'd ever made in his life would be enough to buy more than a few inches of the hallway. “I guess if I got used to being here, it wouldn't be so bad.” He felt his face warm as he realized what he'd just said. “Sorry, I...I didn't mean to say bad, I meant...”

“It's quite alright, Jack!” Li'ren said, laughing at his discomfort. The tips of her ears turned forward, in what Jack knew was an expression of good humor. “I realize this is a lot for you to take in. You probably did not expect to be given a grand tour of the Ailian royal palace by a noblewoman.”

“You're absolutely right about that,” Jack agreed. He shook his head ruefully, looking down at his feet. “Two months ago, if someone had told me I'd be here, in the situation that I'm in, in the way that I got here...I'd have given myself a concussion trying to smack myself awake from the crazy dream I'd be sure I was having.” That generated another laugh from Li'ren. “I guess what I meant to say was that I wouldn't personally feel at home. Honestly, I can't see how anyone would, really.”

Li'ren's smile softened a little, and she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “Well...It is what is inside the palace, and not the palace itself, that makes it feel like home.” She opened her eyes again,

and Jack thought he saw a little something there that hadn't been there before. But what it was, he couldn't exactly say. "We will continue, yes?"

"Fine." They started walking again, heading down the hallway back towards the center of the palace. "So, you've really lived here for ten years?"

"A little over ten years, but correct."

"And how long have you known the Empress?"

"For the same amount of time." Li'ren reached out to brush a tall flowering plant standing on the floor in an ornate pot. "My mother was a noblewoman, as am I. When I was younger, my mother received a diplomatic posting here on Lirna, and her duties demanded that she reside at the palace. I accompanied her, to serve as her assistant. I met Kri'a during my first week here. I was fifteen then, and she was thirty. She was not the Empress then, of course, her mother was."

Jack looked sidelong at her, studiously avoiding the gaze of another Ailian walking the opposite direction. "Does your mother still work here?"

"No, when Kri'a's mother died and she took the throne, my mother returned home."

"But you stayed." They paused for a minute as another Ailian emerged from a side door, spotting Li'ren and coming over. Jack waited patiently as the two of them exchanged a few hushed words, and Li'ren seemed to be giving instructions. It wasn't the first time he'd witnessed such an encounter during the tour. When the exchange was complete, the other person bowed to her and walked away, and they continued their journey through the hallway. "You seem kind of important around here, Li'ren."

"I am the Consort of the Empress," Li'ren replied simply.

Jack nodded. "Yes, you used that title before, in the letter that you sent to Aria. But I don't quite know what that means. I assumed you were an assistant of some kind, like an adviser."

"Not...precisely. It's so much more than that. I am both of those things, but I am also a confidant, a companion." Li'ren smiled, looking over at Jack. "We are much more than simple friends, she and I."

For a moment, Jack failed to put two and two together, but then his eyes widened and he felt a sudden sense of realization. "You mean you're the Empress's wife?"

Li'ren chuckled. "We do not have such an institution as marriage in our culture. We mate for life, but we do not marry, per se. But, yes, for all intents and purposes that is what I am. Kri'a and I have been together...well, as long as we have known each other, really."

"Sorry if I seem shocked, I just didn't...I mean, well...I didn't think that was something common here."

“Oh, forgive me if I gave that impression. I know something of human culture, and I assure you that same-sex relationships are nowhere near as common in the Ascendancy.” Her voice lowered to little more than a murmur. “Nor are they quite as well accepted.” Jack thought he could sense a hint of bitterness to her tone.

“Excuse me?”

“It is nothing. Forgive me. I speak far too freely, especially with a human.” Li'ren rearranged her face into a polite smile. “We should hurry along. I am sure Her Majesty is-...Oh!”

Li'ren stumbled slightly as someone emerged from a side hall, right into her path, and collided with her legs. As the smaller figure stumbled to the floor and dropped a bundle of flowers that she was carrying, Jack could see that it was a very young human female, wearing clothing that was rich in appearance though she did wear a slave collar around her neck. Li'ren knelt on the floor, putting a hand on the girl.

“I'm...I'm sorry, mistress...,” the slave mumbled, as she quickly began to gather up the spilled flowers. “I was hurrying to put these out, and...and I wasn't looking where I was going...” She seemed near to tears.

“It's quite all right, little one,” Li'ren said kindly. She waited patiently for the girl to finish cleaning up, and then she helped her to her feet. “You are still new here. You will get used to finding your way, yes?”

“Yes, mistress.” The girl looked up then, and as Jack saw her face he felt a sudden shock of recognition.

“Brooke?” Jack asked, looking carefully at her. He had only gotten a brief look at the girl before, when they were locked up together in the dungeon of the slave market, but it was unmistakably her.

“Jack?” Brooke said, her own eyes going as wide as saucers. “What are you doing here?”

Li'ren looked between the two of them. “You know each other?”

“Sort of,” Jack said. He looked down at Brooke, smiling a bit at the petite, dark-skinned lass. “We met at the slave market, right before Aria picked me up. You're looking a lot better now than you did before, Brooke.”

Brooke looked at Jack, and then at Li'ren, then back at Jack. “Th-Thanks.” She was clearly confused as to what Jack was doing walking around with the Ailian, but she seemed too afraid to ask any questions in front of Li'ren.

“Well...,” Li'ren said thoughtfully. “Would you like a few minutes to talk? I believe you were just saying something about the only humans you'd seen so far trying to kill you, yes?”

“Oh, but...mistress,” Brooke said anxiously, “the head maid said I needed to have these flowers set out right away, or she'd...”

Li'ren hushed Brooke with a raised hand. “I will see to that. We have plenty of flowers in this palace, little one. I don't think one bunch will be missed for very long.” She put a hand on Brooke's back, urging her towards Jack. “You may take a short break.” With that, Li'ren retreated a distance down the hall, leaving Jack and Brooke to themselves.

When they were alone, Jack leaned against the wall, looking down at Brooke. “It's nice to see you again, Brooke. How have you been?”

“About the same as always,” the younger girl replied. She looked down the hall at Li'ren, still seeming unsure of what was going on. “What are you doing here? I thought somebody bought you. I didn't know you were here in the palace, too.”

“I wasn't until this morning,” Jack said. “You remember that Ailian I told you about before? Aria? She was the one who...well, bought me, I guess you could say. I'm only here because she was invited to meet the Empress.”

“Oh.”

“But anyway, what are *you* doing here? I thought that dealer was going to keep you down in that hole.”

Brooke finally managed a small smile. “She did. I mean, she was. But I started acting like I was behaving, and she brought me back up to the regular market.” The young teen shrugged. “I was going to try to look for a chance to escape, but before I could try someone bought me. I wound up here.”

Jack looked back at Li'ren, then lowered his voice. “Too bad. I had a feeling you would have got away this time.”

“It's actually not so bad,” Brooke admitted, shrugging again. “Nobody beats me here. Nobody is really nice, but they don't go out of their way to make me miserable. Some of my owners have been really unpleasant.”

“I wish there was something I could do for you.”

“Me too.” Brooke clutched the flowers tightly, looking at the floor. Then she looked back up. “I need to go. I know mistress said she would make sure I didn't get in trouble, but the faster I get done with my duties, the faster I get to eat. But I'm glad I saw you.” She turned away with a whirl of her long black hair, hurrying down the hall.

Jack watched her go. He felt distinctly sorry for the young girl, though he was at least happy that she had found a mistress who would treat her a good deal better than her past owners had. He silently wished Brooke all the best, and hoped that maybe he'd get the chance to see her again one day.

A hand on his shoulder roused him from his pity. "Finished?" Li'ren asked him.

He nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I almost forgot what it was like to talk to a friendly human."

Li'ren gave him an understanding look. "Friends are always a precious thing to have. Come. Her Majesty will be waiting for us."

The Empress and Aria were already seated when Li'ren and Jack entered the palace's private dining room. In contrast with most of what Jack had seen in the royal residence so far, this room was quite small and intimate. A rectangular table made of a rich, mahogany-colored wood sat in the room, with four high-backed chairs arranged around it, two on each of the long sides of the table so that they were facing each other. A brilliant bouquet of red, yellow, and purple flowers sat in a vase in the center of the table. As had been done at Aria's home, someone had set up cushions in one of the chairs so that Jack wouldn't be inconvenienced by his height. Again, he felt rather like the child sitting at the grown-ups table for the first time.

Jack was alarmed by the expression he saw on Aria's face when he sat down at the dining table, taking the seat across the table from Aria and next to the remaining empty chair as directed by Li'ren. Before they had come to the royal palace, Aria had been feeling a mixture of the stress from her upcoming trial as well as grief from the killing of her youngest sister. Now what he could see etched into her face was raw fear, mostly hidden but with enough showing that one could tell by looking at her that something wasn't right. Jack had never expected to see outright fear in Aria. He sent her a questioning look, and she shook her head slightly, quickly getting control of herself and smoothing away the fright.

Li'ren went to a door at one end of the room, which presumably would lead to the kitchen, and poked her head inside. Then she came back to the table. Pausing next to the Empress's chair, she bent down to whisper something in her ear. The Empress smiled, nodding her head and whispering back to Li'ren. The noblewoman gave her a brief kiss on the cheek, then went around the table and took her own seat.

"Well, Jack," Kri'a said, looking across the table at him. "Did you enjoy your tour of the palace? Li'ren is a good tour guide, is she not?"

"It was enjoyable, my lady," Jack said, truthfully. "And yes, she is. Though I'm surprised anyone is able to find their way around this place. It's big enough to pilot a cargo ship through without bumping the walls."

The Empress and Li'ren both laughed. "It is very large, indeed," Kri'a agreed. "Though not *quite* that large. But I see your point. You know, I have lived here my entire life, but I believe Li'ren

knows it far better than I already.” She looked across the table fondly at the younger female. “She has always been a remarkable young woman.”

“Thank you, mistress,” Li'ren said, smiling at the Empress. Jack thought that he could see her tail wagging behind her, underneath table level.

“Now, I imagine you're all very hungry,” the Empress said. “So we'll have lunch, and then there are a few matters that I wish to speak with all of you about.” Jack got the impression that she was including Li'ren in that 'all of you'. Kri'a picked up a small silver bell that was sitting on the table next to her and rang it. The door to the kitchen opened and a line of servants came out, carrying platters and dishes which they placed on the table. The food was served and the meal began.

Jack found that the food was excellent, as might have been expected at the Royal Palace of the Ailian Ascendancy, though he thought that he still preferred Sami's cooking. For some reason, the food at Aria's home had more...feeling in it. Maybe that came from the personal touch that Sami gave to the food she cooked for her own family, as opposed to the servants who cooked food for people that they probably only saw for a few minutes a day.

The Empress and Li'ren paid little mind to Jack and Aria during the meal. While they ate, they conversed with each other in the Ailian language. From the Ailian that he had picked up from Sami and Aria, Jack could understand a few words and short sentences here and there, but not enough to comprehend what they were talking about. But they were smiling at each other, and the conversation seemed to be unrelated to anything that was going on as far as the reason they were here. The love between the two of them was very obvious now that they were in this unguarded, casual setting. Jack thought it was remarkable considering the age difference between them; fifteen years, according to what Li'ren had told him about their past.

“Are you okay?” Jack asked Aria quietly at one point. She had been completely silent throughout the meal, paying attention to her plate more than anything else.

She looked up at him. “Fine,” she replied, though she was clearly anything but. Her yellow-gold eyes were filled with worry. “I fine.”

“You sure you're fine? You seem really tense, even for you.” Aria didn't respond, and they were both quiet for a few minutes. “What did you talk about with the Empress?”

“Not want talk about it now,” Aria hissed back at him.

“Aria...”

“Not talk right now,” Aria insisted. She gazed at him with a pained look on her face, a combination of extreme anxiety and something else that he couldn't quite place. “Not now, Jack. Please.”

He stared at her for a few moments, very hurt by her apparent dismissiveness of him, but he just nodded and returned his attention to the meal.

When lunch was concluded, servants cleared up the table and then brought out drinks for everyone. Li'ren got up when they had finished and locked all of the doors to the dining room from the inside, so that they would not be disturbed. Jack felt the mood in the room instantly take a turn from the relaxed and friendly atmosphere that had been present before. Just from the doors being locked, everything seemed much more serious.

“Now, then,” the Empress said. “I trust the meal was to your liking, Aria?”

“Yes, my lady,” Aria managed to say. “Very good.”

“Wonderful.” The Empress folded her hands in her lap. “I wish we could exchange pleasantries all day, but I would like to discuss your upcoming trial, Lieutenant. Tell me, how are your preparations coming along?”

Aria took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Not good. Major Tal'in...She very good officer, not so good lawyer. Not know military law well beyond basics.”

“You have been looking for your own council, have you not?”

“Yes,” Aria said, nodding emphatically. “But not find one. Some willing to take case, but only for reputation. Say no hope for it. Others not want to come anywhere near me.” She looked down at her lap. “Is not good. Trial in three weeks.”

“I thought that might be the case,” Kri'a said, somewhat sympathetically.

“Ah, sorry for interrupting,” Jack said. He had been thinking about what he was about to say for a while now, and he couldn't hold it back any longer. The Empress, Li'ren, and Aria all looked at him, and he felt his face redden, but he pressed on. “Your majesty, it seems to me like you're kinda on Aria's side in all this. I mean, that's just the impression I'm getting. Am I right?”

The Empress did not acknowledge what he was saying, but she gestured with one hand for him to continue. Her tail twitched once behind her, and the tips of her ears were turned forward, her feline lips drawn back slightly in a faint smile. She seemed rather amused at the forwardness of this human wearing a slave collar. Aria just gave him an embarrassed look, as though she wished for him to be quiet.

“Well, if that's the case, why can't you just order the charges against Aria dismissed?” Jack asked. He looked amongst all of the Ailians. “I mean, you're the Empress. It doesn't seem like it should be this hard.”

“Jack...,” Aria began to say, a tone of angry warning in her voice. She cut herself off at a raised

hand from the Empress.

“It's quite alright, Aria,” Kri'a said. “The human makes a valid point.” She looked at Jack. “Jack, believe me when I say that I would like nothing more than to just have the charges against Aria dismissed. I know all too well the hardship that both she and you are going through.” Li'ren reached across the table then, laying a hand on hers. “As I told Aria earlier today, I faced scandal and the threat of having my title stripped from me when I became mated to Li'ren. We still experience mutters and insults to this day, although of course now that I am Empress the insults are behind our backs instead of to our faces.

“The fact of the matter is that, ridiculous as you and I may see it, what you and Aria did was against our laws. I offer that not as an excuse but as a simple truth.” Kri'a's eyes flicked down and then back up again. “Perhaps five centuries ago, I could have done this thing that you ask. But the power of the Empress is much less than it was even in the time of my grandmother. The consequences of 'progress'. Civilians and the military gain in power while the throne loses it. I still retain authority over the military, yes, but in matters of law...” She shook her head. “I am sorry.”

Jack felt his heart sink. “I didn't realize. I guess I thought that...well, I thought that you had absolute power.”

“In many respects, she does,” Li'ren piped up. She squeezed her mate's hand. “But not in all aspects of our society. There are certain limits on the power of the Empress, and in any case it would not be prudent for her to exercise absolute power in every situation. It keeps the peace to show restraint at times.”

“Li'ren says it better than I could have,” Kri'a said with a smile. “But that doesn't mean I am completely powerless to help you, Aria. I have an idea that I think will be beneficial to you.” She looked at Li'ren, then at Aria. “Since you have been unable to find a councilor to represent you, I believe I have just the person to suggest to you.”

“You do?” Aria and Li'ren said, both nearly at the same time.

The Empress suppressed a noise of amusement. “Yes, I do. Li'ren, I think you would be perfectly suited to this task. If the lieutenant will agree to it, I would like for you to be her council for this trial.”

There was silence in the room for a good long minute. Nobody was really sure that they had correctly heard what the Empress had said, least of all Li'ren.

“Kri'a,” Li'ren finally said. “Are you...certain that's the best course of action? Imagine the stir it will cause when the Empress's Consort is representing the lieutenant charged with treason.”

“I have thought about this, Li'ren,” the Empress insisted, “and I believe it is the right thing to

do.” She leaned forward in her chair. “You and Aria both know what we think is at stake here, yes? I can think of no one I would trust this task to more than you. You have represented my interests with uncommon skill in many matters before, my dear. I know that this task is not beyond you.”

Li'ren bit her lip, the tip of her tail twitching anxiously. She looked into the Empress's eyes for a long moment, then she took a deep breath and nodded slowly. “Very well. If Aria is in agreement, that is.”

Aria seemed more taken aback than anyone, but she nodded as well. “I...not know what to say. Thank you, my lady.”

“Then it's settled.” Li'ren leaned back in her chair, thoughtful. “I am not going to mince words, Lieutenant. This is not going to be an easy trial to win. It is already common knowledge that you are quite responsible for the actions outlined in the charges, so arguing otherwise in court would be foolish.”

“Yes...,” Aria conceded. Jack could see that the fear and anxiety was back, stronger than ever. This trial really was wearing her down, even more so now that the day was drawing near.

“Therefore,” Li'ren continued, “your defense will need to convince the court martial that your actions were excusable, and not treasonous.” She looked at Jack. “The fact that you, Jack, were once a member of the human military, and that you were transporting military supplies at the time you and Aria met, will complicate matters. But not so much as if you had been an active soldier.” She traced a finger along one side of her muzzle, considering. “I will need to give this some thought.”

“In the meantime, try not to worry too much,” the Empress said. She immediately shook her head disapprovingly at what she had just said. “You have probably heard that too many times. But I mean it all the same, Aria.”

Aria nodded, though she looked as though her heart wasn't really in it. “Yes, my lady. Thank you.” She stared blankly at a spot on the table for a second, then looked back up at the Empress. Fire was back in her eyes. “My lady...The man from my home. Learn anything from him? How he get there, why?”

Li'ren and the Empress looked at each other. Li'ren was the one to answer. “Regretfully, Lieutenant, the man is now dead. He killed himself in his cell two days after he was taken into custody. He refused to talk at all before then. I know you wanted answers in the death of your sister. I am sorry.”

“I see...” Aria clenched her fists underneath the table, the muscles in her jaw trembling as she grit her teeth.

“We will still try to find out how they managed to get here, of course,” Kri'a promised. “But I do not think much will come of the investigation. There's not much evidence to go on.” She reached

over, taking Aria's hand. "But we will try all the same."

"Thank you..."

Soon after, Li'ren escorted Aria and Jack from the dining room and took them back to the front entrance of the palace, where a vehicle was waiting to take the pair back to Aria's family estate. When they were on their way, Li'ren went back into her home and walked up the stairs to the second floor. After checking on a few things, she went to the back of the palace, to a secluded sitting room near the Empress's bedchambers. Kri'a was waiting there for her, lounging on a small couch. Li'ren walked past her to stand at a window, looking out on the rear garden.

-Are you alright, love?- the Empress asked, looking over her shoulder at the noblewoman.

-I don't know,- Li'ren said. She was wringing her hands in front of her, staring through the glass of the window without really seeing what was beyond. -I don't have a good feeling, Kri'a. I just don't feel good about all this.-

-Come here,- Kri'a said, extending a hand over the back of the couch.

Li'ren turned, coming to her. She took the Empress's hand in hers as she came around, settling down on her mate's lap. Kri'a put an arm about her back, drawing her close. She allowed herself to be pulled into a deep kiss. As always, being together with her mate calmed her, and made her feel better. When the kiss ended, Li'ren exhaled slowly, leaning against Kri'a and resting her head on her shoulder. She nuzzled the Empress's neck.

-I'm sorry,- Li'ren whispered. -I don't mean to worry.-

Kri'a rubbed her younger lover's back, twisting her own tail affectionately around hers. -It's quite alright.- She kissed the top of Li'ren's head, stroking her fingers lightly between her ears. -But remember how important this is, all the same. We will be much better off with Lieutenant Me'lia than without her.-

Li'ren closed her eyes. -I know. I will do my very best.-

The Empress smiled, hugging her tightly. -You always do, my dear. You always do.-

Aria could feel Jack looking at her the entire way back home, but she avoided his eyes, saying nothing to him. Her head was spinning as though she was drunk, but she was as sober as she had ever been in her entire life. Too much was going on right now, and Aria was beyond the end of her rope. She was so far beyond it that she was falling into the valley below. So the Empress believed that the Ascendancy was heading for another civil war? It sounded insane even as Aria said it to herself, but she knew that it could be true. If everything that the Empress had told her was true, then it was almost a

certainty.

And she thinks I can help her stop it? Pur'e a te me tuk...

Aria did not need that kind of responsibility right now. She was under enough stress already. Her trial was dangerously close, and the case was not looking good. When even the legal representative of the Empress herself said that the case looked nearly hopeless, well...that was not very encouraging at all. Aria ground her teeth together as their vehicle stopped in front of her home. She opened the door and stepped out, not even waiting for Jack before she began walking up the path to the front entrance.

“Aria?”

What if Li'ren couldn't formulate a good defense in time? The trial would be a complete formality, and then Aria would face certain execution. Then Jack would be sold, unless her family could pull some real crazy maneuvers to keep that from happening.

“Aria?”

Beyond that, if the Empress was correct and Aria was crucial to helping prevent a civil war, then her absence might throw her people into chaos once more. Aria had seen pictures in the history books of Lirna burning during the last war. She did not want the planet she loved to go through that again, but right now she saw no reason that she would be able to do anything to prevent it.

“Aria, stop!”

Aria spun around as Jack's hand grabbed her arm. They were just a few feet away from the front door now, and she had no memory of the walk up from where the vehicle had dropped them off.

“What?” she hissed harshly at Jack.

“Aria, can we talk, please?” he said, his eyes wide with fright at the expression on her face. She looked every bit as fearsome right now as she had the first time he'd ever seen her. Her predator's fangs were bared, and the fur on the back of her neck and the top of her head was raised.

Aria stared at Jack, seeing him shrink back from her as she growled. She saw that he was terrified of her now, and something broke inside of her. Immediately her expression softened. She turned away from Jack slightly, and covered her eyes with one hand.

“I sorry,” she said, taking a slow, shuddering breath after she said it. “Jack, I...need be alone.” Aria looked back at him. “Please, just...go to you room. I come later. We talk later, yes?”

Jack opened his mouth, meaning to protest, but then he closed it. He nodded. “Alright, Aria. But don't be too long.”

“Will not. I just go make some tea. Will be there soon.”

Nodding again, Jack turned away from her and continued up the walkway, heading away from the main building of the estate towards the guest quarters. Aria watched him go, and then she walked

inside. The home was quiet. None of her siblings were in the halls, and her father was either in his study or still at work. It was the middle of the day, the time when most of her family would have been away anyway. She made her way to the kitchen.

Aria busied herself with preparing tea, her mind still buzzing with questions, worries, fears, and anxieties. There was just too much for her to think about, so much that could go wrong. She felt, irrationally, like the whole world was depending on her. She didn't want that at all. She had never wanted anything more than to serve her people faithfully, to follow the example that her mother had set for her. All of this was way more than she could handle.

As she reached for the tea kettle, Aria looked to her right. Pans, dishes, pots, and kitchen knives hung from pegs on the wall, all in neat little rows. Orderly. Perfect.

It would be so easy.

Jack frowned, staring at the door as he sat on his bed in his room. Aria should have been here by now. He didn't have a watch or a clock with him, but he was certain that it had been at least fifteen or twenty minutes since he'd left Aria at the front door to her family's estate. Did it really take that long to make tea?

After about five more minutes, Jack decided that he'd had enough waiting. He got up and left his room, walking down from the guest quarters back to the main building. Maybe there was something in the kitchen that he could help Aria with. Perhaps she had decided to make some food, or something.

He knew the path to the dining room and the kitchen well by now. He reached the door leading to the kitchen three minutes after he'd left his room. As soon as he opened the door, Jack knew something was wrong. He couldn't hear the hiss of the tea kettle. Jack opened the door all the way and stepped inside.

"Oh, fuck, Aria, what did you do!?"

She was lying on the floor, a pool of blood spread around her body, still expanding ever so slowly. A small knife lay on the floor next to her, blood coating the blade. Jack fell to his knees next to her and heaved with all his might, getting her onto her back. He put a hand to her neck, feeling her pulse. It was weak and thready. She was still breathing, but only slightly.

"Hey, somebody!" Jack shouted as loudly as he could, over his shoulder through the open door. "I need some help! Someone come quick!" He turned his attention back to Aria. She had deep slashes along both wrists, and blood was still seeping from the wounds. Looking around, Jack found a few towels and wrapped them around her wrists as tightly as he could. He felt sick to his stomach. "Come on, Aria, don't die..."

He heard the sound of someone running in his direction. A moment later, Sami came rushing into the kitchen, out of breath. She took one look at the sight before her and clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes going wide and her ears flattening to the top of her head.

“What happen?” she managed to gasp out.

“I don't know,” Jack said. “I found her like this. I think she cut her own wrists. She needs help, now!”

“I go,” Sami said. “Call. Be quick.” She ran back out of the kitchen, heading for the front hall where a communicator was located. Jack stayed on the floor next to Aria, cradling her head in his lap. He kept checking to make sure she was still breathing.

“Hold on, Aria. Just hold on...”