

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Nine: Cold
by Havoc

“I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter.”

- Winston Churchill

She felt so cold.

-Clear the hall! Trauma patient coming in! We need to move quick.-

-We're going to need at least five liters, probably more.-

-Someone find out the right type, fast! How's her pulse?-

Who was talking? She heard so many unfamiliar voices. But the last time anyone had said anything to her, she had been at home. Were they having guests tonight? If they were, someone would need to turn the heat on. She felt very cold indeed.

-Okay, bring her over here. We're lifting her off the stretcher, one, two...-

-Her blood pressure is still dropping. Pulse decreasing.-

-Got her type, we're bringing it in now! Starting the...-

-Not yet, you idiot! If we don't have the wounds closed up, it will just come right back out again!-

She could feel hands on her body, hands wrapped in something cold, smooth, and rubbery. They seemed to be doing something with her arms. She wanted to push them away, but she felt sluggish and weak. Even if she'd been able to move her hands, she doubted she had the strength she would require.

-Where's that vascular surgeon? We need to get these lacerations sealed as quickly as possible.-

-We've got the basic sutures in place. Start the transfusions. It will have to do for now, she's deep into hypovolemic shock.-

Oh...They were talking about her. How silly, she should have realized. But didn't they realize that she was already dead? All of this trouble over nothing. Surely they could be helping someone else right now. And these damn lights right in her face were so bright...

-Oh gods, her eyes are opening. That shouldn't even be possible...-

-Get some anesthetic in here, right now. If she starts moving now, she's going to lose even more blood.-

The hands were gripping her tighter now. She could feel sharp stabbing pains in her arms, like something was probing around. Something was scraping her flesh underneath her fur, dragging along it

in long strokes. She wanted to yell for them to stop, but there was something down her throat preventing her from speaking. She tried to move her legs, but they seemed to be tied down.

-Sedative here. Starting it now.-

-Go easy with it, she's still in shock.-

She felt a pinch on the side of her neck. Before she could tilt her head to try to look at what was attacking her, her vision again went dark. The cold was penetrating...All she could feel was ice. Then something seized in her chest, and she suddenly went numb.

-Heart's stopping...Pulse is nearly at zero now.-

-We're losing her...-

Jack had always hated hospitals. Back when he had enlisted and had been going through pilot training, he had botched an atmospheric landing and ruptured one of the fuel cells in his fighter. He'd tried to go back up and reattempt the landing, but the fuel had ignited. Jack and his trainer had both had to eject from the fighter, and Jack hit the ground a little harder than he should have, breaking his leg in two places. Six weeks later he'd walked out of the base hospital, healed up nicely and motivated to never have to set foot in a hospital again.

Now he was back, for a very different reason. A hospital, especially an Ailian hospital, was still the very last place that he would have ever wanted to be, but this was where he needed to be. If he'd stayed back at the house, he might have gone insane while waiting. Now, he was still waiting, but at least he was waiting in the same place that Aria was. Sami had done some very artful convincing in order to get him here. When the emergency responders had arrived at the estate to get Aria, the rest of the family had followed them to the hospital shortly after, with Arn, Aria's father, coming there from his workplace. Several of Aria's siblings had very pointedly wanted to leave Jack, but Sami had insisted in letting him come along. She'd also managed to get him into the hospital itself. Sami was, as a rule, a very down-to-earth Ailian, but when she really needed to she could play the part of the wealthy businessman's daughter, and Jack was grateful for it.

He still couldn't believe what had happened. Jack had barely had time to change clothes before they'd rushed to the hospital. He knew he'd never be able to wear the clothes he'd had on before ever again. No matter how many times those clothes were washed, he'd always be able to see Aria's blood staining the fabric. Jack couldn't fathom why she had done it. Granted, he only knew part of what the Empress had discussed with her, and Aria had been especially out of it lately, but still...

Jack looked around the hospital waiting room. All of the walls were painted a bright, clean-looking white, with little in the way of decoration. Aria's family were all sitting around, not saying

much of anything, all looking very somber. Sami was seated next to her father, leaning against him as she cried. They'd been there for nearly nine hours already, and there hadn't been any news about Aria or what her condition would be. Jack was at the point where he was seriously considering getting up and making one of the doctors tell them something, anything.

Right as he was about to do just that, all of Aria's family stood up, looking towards one side of the waiting room, behind Jack. He stood as well, looking and expecting to see a doctor approaching, but he was surprised to see quite a different face.

“Hello, Jack. I came as soon as we heard what had happened.”

Li'ren was standing at the entrance to the waiting room, flanked by two guards. She was resplendent in her robes, the whiteness of which put the color of the walls to shame. As she came into the room, her guards remained behind, staying outside of the door. The Empress's Consort went first to Sami and her father, speaking to them in Ailian. Jack couldn't understand much of what she was saying, of course, but it sounded very kind and comforting. She sat down among the family for several minutes, listening to them and giving them each what comfort she could in turn.

It was hard for Jack to remember that Li'ren was only twenty-five, younger than Aria, her father, or Jack, and only a few years older than Sami. She had the maturity and the bearing of a woman twice her age. Doubtless part of that was due to the Empress's influence and guidance. When she'd spent some time with Aria's family, Li'ren came to where Jack was seated and sat next to him.

“Jack, I am very sorry for what has happened,” she said to him. “The family tells me there hasn't been any news yet?”

“Not yet,” Jack confirmed, looking down at the floor. He held his hands up, staring at them, expecting to still see blood on them. But of course it had been washed away hours ago. “I could feel her going cold when I held her.”

“She is strong,” Li'ren said firmly. “I believe this, and you should believe it as well. You already know how strong she is, just as she also knows your strength. You will both need that strength.”

Jack leaned back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling now. He was doing everything he could to hold himself together. “I just wish I knew why she...why she did it.”

Li'ren sighed. “That is never an easy question to answer. I believe I should leave the answer to her, when she is able to give it. But she has been through much more than should be expected of any one person.” She looked back towards the entrance, where her guards were, then she turned back to Jack. “The Empress wished for me to extend her sincerest wishes for Aria's recovery, and she only regrets that she was unable to come herself. She understands how deeply you care for Aria.”

“I guess you both would understand as well as anybody,” Jack allowed. He closed his eyes. “I

just—" He opened his eyes again as he heard a new set of footsteps entering the room. An Ailian wearing green doctor's garments was approaching. Jack watched him, feeling his heart pounding as the doctor went to Sami and her father. He started speaking to her, while Sami listened intently. Jack was again frustrated by his lack of understanding of the Ailian language. He needed to know what was going on with Aria.

Seeing his frustration, Li'ren began translating for Jack. "He says that they have finished with the operations and the follow-up work. He says that it was very lucky that she was found when she was. If she had gotten to the hospital perhaps five minutes later than she did, there would have been nothing they could have done." She listened to the doctor for a few more seconds, then she looked at Jack, sympathy evident on her face. "You are sure you want to hear all of it?"

Jack, whose face had gone white already, nodded. "Yeah, all of it."

"Very well." Li'ren put a comforting hand on his knee. "He is saying now that her heart stopped twice. Once when she arrived at the hospital and once during the surgery. They had to give her several transfusions and keep her on pure oxygen to keep her from suffering any brain damage, but they believe they were successful. When she cut herself, she did extensive damage to the muscles and tendons in her wrists. The cuts were too severe for them to use their wound sealers, so they had to stitch them together by hand so that they can heal traditionally. The doctor says that her arms will be very weak for several weeks, but that in time she should have full use."

Jack took a few deep breaths, feeling some of the color return to his face. "So...there's not going to be any permanent damage?"

"It does not sound like it," Li'ren said. She squeezed Jack's knee, her feline face stretching into a friendly smile. "You did a very good thing, acting so quickly when you found her."

"Would have been better if it hadn't happened at all," Jack said, rubbing his face with one hand and leaning forward in his seat. "I shouldn't have left her alone, Li'ren. I should have been with her, I..." His voice broke, and he covered his eyes with his hands.

Li'ren put her arm around his shoulder. "You couldn't have known what she was going to do, Jack. This is not your fault."

"I know, it's just..." He heaved a huge sigh, sitting up straight again. "It's hard."

"We have all suffered loss, yes? Be thankful that you still have her."

The doctor finished talking to Sami and her father and stepped away. Sami looked stricken, but relieved, and the rest of her family looked much the same. They all turned to each other, hugging one another. Jack watched their relief, thankful that they wouldn't have to lose a second family member in one week. Then Aria's father came over to Jack. Jack watched the older Ailian with apprehension,

knowing that as old as he was he still likely had the strength necessary to injure him seriously. He had never approved of Jack being in his home, or of his relationship with Aria, try as they might have to keep it hidden from him. Maybe Aria's father blamed him for the situation that led Aria to this, or for not doing more to prevent it. He stood up, ready for whatever Arn had for him.

He was not prepared for the man to take one of his hands in both of his, clutching it tightly. “*A'resh...me a'kla shi're ke la,*” the Ailian said to him, his face appearing earnest even as his tail and ears were drooping with grief. “*La me'lia te ri'a'la hale ke oria suresh. Mea'le re karan su'te.*”

Jack blinked, not having expected anything other than anger. He looked at Li'ren blankly, unsure of what Arn Me'lia was trying to say to him.

Li'ren tilted her head to whisper in his ear. “He says he is grateful to you for saving his daughter's life. He also wishes you to know that he was wrong about you, and that he now hopes to make you feel welcome in his family.”

Looking back at Arn, Jack felt oddly gratified. While it hadn't always exactly been his goal to gain the approval of Aria's family, it was nice to have even in these circumstances. “Well, tell him that I appreciate that, but that I just did what anyone should have done.”

Li'ren spoke to Arn, who bowed to her slightly in return. He squeezed Jack's hand once more and then stepped away, to be replaced by Sami a few moments later. She wrapped her arms around Jack. “Thank you,” she said. She looked him in the eye. “Doctor say...ah...Aria awake soon. Say we go see her. Four only.” She looked at Li'ren, then back at Jack. “You both come, yes? With me and father.”

“Of course!” Jack said quickly. Li'ren only nodded her assent.

Sami managed a small smile for both of them, and led them both over to the doctor, with her father. The doctor glanced at Jack quizzically for several long seconds, clearly confused as to why they would be bringing a slave with them. But he finally turned and took them out of the waiting room, leaving the rest of Aria's family behind as they all walked through the white halls of the hospital. Li'ren's guards followed soundlessly behind, all but forgotten by the rest of them as they had their minds on the more pressing matter.

Jack hadn't been sure what to expect when he saw Aria, but he knew it wasn't going to be good, and he wasn't wrong. Aria didn't look anything like the strong woman that he had come to know and love. Lying in the hospital bed, she looked small and frail. Several monitors were hooked up to her body, with small electronic screens with numbers on them that changed every so often, keeping track of her heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure. She had two intravenous lines hooked up to one arm. One of the pouches seemed to be full of blood, and the other had a clear fluid in it that must have been

some sort of nutrient drip. A clear mask was over her muzzle, leading to an oxygen line. Her lower arms, exposed above the blanket covering the rest of her body, were wrapped in tight, white bandages. Her yellow-gold eyes were closed, her body totally relaxed.

But she was breathing, her breasts rising and falling with slow, deep, regular breaths, and her nose and lips were back to their regular glossy black, rather than the pale, mottled gray they had been when she'd been deep in shock.

The doctor had explained, and Li'ren had translated, that for the surgery they'd had to sedate Aria. Apparently she had woken up partially halfway through and might have made things worse otherwise by moving around, so they'd injected her with a mild sedative to keep her out while they worked on her. The sedative had been a lot more potent due to her massive blood loss, so the medical team had kept her in the operating room for a few hours longer than they had planned. They'd monitored her until they were sure she was out of danger and then moved her to a recovery room.

Now the four of them, Jack, Sami, Arn, and Li'ren, sat around the bed, watching Aria, waiting for her to wake up. Jack and Sami both sat up near the head of the bed in chairs on either side, and Arn sat next to Sami. Li'ren sat furthest away, at the foot of the bed, while she had ordered her guards to remain outside the room. They all knew it could be a while. She'd been through a traumatic experience, an intense series of emergency surgeries, and her body was still incredibly strained as it fought to heal itself.

Almost an hour after they had entered the room, Aria finally began to stir. Jack was the first to notice, seeing the jerky twitch of her tail underneath the blankets. He raised a hand, wanting to touch her arm, but he held himself back. The last thing he wanted to do was to startle her and cause her to hurt herself again. Jack just waited, watching as she slowly started to come awake.

After ten minutes, the Ailian's eyes finally opened. Aria looked almost as though she were too weak even to do that. She blinked slowly, her vertical pupils dilating as her eyes adjusted to the light in the room. Then her eyes turned to the right, where Jack was sitting. Try as he might, he couldn't keep a smile off of his face as he saw her looking at him. She gazed at him for a moment, and then she turned her eyes the other way, to look at her sister and her father. Next she closed her eyes again, and Jack could see the muscles in her neck straining as she tried to lift her head. Sami reached down below bed level and manipulated something, and then the top of the bed tilted up slightly, raising Aria's head and torso so that she was in a half-sitting position.

Aria's lips parted underneath the mask, and there was a hoarse whisper as she tried to speak. She closed her mouth, and her throat bobbed as she swallowed, trying to work moisture into her mouth and throat again.

-Where...am I?- she murmured, speaking to Sami in Ailian. -What...What happened...-

-You're at the hospital, sister,- Sami responded. She looked across the bed at Jack, and then back at Aria. Placing a hand gently over one of Aria's, she went on. -Jack found you in the kitchen, with...with your arms all cut up. He called for help, and they brought you to the hospital. You're lucky to be alive, Aria.-

-Oh...- She offered no words of thanks. She felt absolutely drained, still chilled, and above all she felt absolute shame at what she had done. Aria scarcely remembered forming the intent to take her own life, but she knew that she had. She could barely look at her sister and her father. She couldn't bring herself to look at Jack again, and did not want to allow herself to think about the pain she must have caused him.

Sami's lower lip began to tremble, and her eyes started to tear up. -Aria, we were all so scared. We thought you were going to die. We couldn't...I mean...Mother, years ago, and then Li'ara, and now you...- Her voice caught in her throat. She looked down at her lap, covering her face with her hands, shaking her head slowly. -I just got my big sister back...- Her father reached over, putting an arm around Sami's shoulders. He didn't look as though he was able to speak.

-Sami..., -Aria whispered. She closed her eyes, taking as deep a breath as she could manage and letting it out slowly. She would not allow herself to cry, she could not. A long minute passed before she trusted her voice enough to speak again. -I did not do...what I did in order to hurt you.-

-But you did hurt me!- Sami wailed, looking up at Aria. Betrayal was clear in her expression. -How could you...- She choked on her words, and then she stood up from her chair, her tail trailing limply behind her as she rushed from the room. Arn glanced at his eldest daughter sadly, and then got up to follow his second-eldest. They closed the door when they left, leaving Aria and Jack alone apart from Li'ren, who remained quietly and unobtrusively in her chair.

The room was mostly silent for a while, with only the quiet pings and beeps from the various pieces of equipment keeping their electronic watch over Aria. Aria stared at the ceiling lights long enough to make them hurt, but her eyes stayed mercilessly dry. She felt absolutely miserable. All she wanted was to go to sleep, and she wouldn't have been upset if she didn't ever wake up again. Still the Ailian refused to look at the human sitting at her side.

"Aria..., " Jack finally started to say.

"Jack, please go," Aria said quietly. She just wanted to be alone, couldn't he tell?

Jack felt a flash of anger at her cold dismissal. "No."

"Need to be alone," Aria insisted, just as quietly. Her eyes were blank, still staring straight up at the ceiling. "Go."

"I'm not leaving this time, Aria," Jack growled. He sat up in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Not until we talk."

"No talk. Jack-"

"*Goddammit, Aria, I've had enough of this!*" The anger in his voice surprised him, and even caused Li'ren to jump in her chair. Aria looked over at him finally, surprise in her eyes. Jack's hands were balled into fists now. His jaw was clenched, and his nostrils flared as he fought to keep himself contained. "You keep pushing me away, just retreating further and further into yourself, and I'm not letting you do it anymore! I'm going to talk to you, and you're going to listen to me, alright?"

Li'ren slowly stood up from her chair. "I'll...ah...just be outside..." The noblewoman made a hasty exit from the room, opening and closing the door as she slipped out into the hallway, leaving the pair alone.

"Jack..."

"Just listen to me for once, Aria," Jack said earnestly. He wasn't going to let her dismiss him this time, especially not when she was bedridden like this. "I know you don't think a whole lot of my ability to cope with unusual situations, but I would have hoped you at least trusted me. You trust me, don't you?"

This was not the conversation that Aria had been expecting, and she didn't know exactly how she was supposed to respond. "Jack...Of course, I trust you."

"Well, you've got a funny fucking way of showing it!" Passing a hand over his face, Jack took a few deep breaths. He was angry right now, and he didn't really want to be, but he also needed to get this out. "Aria, I could have left you at any time back when we were stranded on that planet together. I could have slipped off during the night, or tried to kill you in your sleep, or left you to get killed by those creatures. But I didn't do it. You know why?" He didn't wait for a response before pressing on. "Because I knew I needed your help, and I wasn't too proud to admit it. You aren't too proud to admit it, either, or at least you didn't used to be. But ever since we got to Lirna, you've been taking more and more of the responsibility for yourself, and you've been cutting me out of your life. How do you think that makes me feel?"

Aria looked away from him. "You don't understand, Jack..."

"Oh, the *hell* I don't!" Jack shot back at her. "You think you're the only one who's going through a rough time right now? I'm on a planet right now where my life is worth approximately nothing! I'm just a slave, and the only redeeming feature to that arrangement is that I'm currently under the care of a 'mistress' who doesn't beat me or sell me off. I'm surrounded by a species who has been at war with mine for a decade, and I'm a matter of weeks away from a trial that could mean the difference between

life and death for me just as well as for you. And you don't see me cutting my wrists, do you?"

"Shut up!" Aria hissed, turning her eyes back to look at him. She had a spark of her old fire back. "You not have idea how I feel! I have no honor left! They call me traitor, put me on trial, all because I survive!" She closed her eyes, hot tears dripping down her face now. She couldn't stop them. "And then my empress tell me I must help her stop a war...Is too much, Jack, just too much..."

Jack blinked, leaning back from her in surprise. "Do what now?"

It all came out in a rush. Aria told him everything that the Empress had told her, about the unexpected invasion of Earth, the building tensions with the Ascendancy's Outer Colonies, and why the Empress had taken such an interest in Aria. She didn't leave anything out. Jack listened to her, going through stages of horror, shock, and amazement as the whole story came out. When Aria finally finished, he stared at her, his jaw slack. He had no idea what to make of it all.

"Aria...Why didn't you just tell me?"

"What I supposed to tell you? That your world doomed? That Empress thinks civil war is coming?" Aria shook her head weakly. "Not want to burden you...You go through enough already..."

"So your solution was to kill yourself?" Jack asked her.

"Not know..." Aria stared ahead at the wall, feeling numb. Her ears had flattened right to the top of her head. Everything was out now, and Jack knew it all. "Too much pressure, Jack. Not know what else to do...Wanted to make go away..."

Jack shook his head. "You shouldn't have pushed me away so much, Aria," he said. "I wanted to help you. I could have helped you."

"How?"

"I don't know, exactly. Maybe there wasn't anything I could *do*, you know, but I'd have been there for you. If you go it alone, there's nobody to share the burden with. Pile on too much stuff, and you'll collapse. Just like you did."

Aria sighed, her eyes drooping shut. "Wonderful...Called weak by human..."

"No, that's not what I..." Jack made a sound of exasperation. "Dammit, Aria, you're the strongest person I know. But nobody can take the kind of burden you have by themselves. You need to learn to trust others enough to lighten the load."

The Ailian just lay there for a long time, thinking about what Jack had said. She'd always been taught by her mother that the only person you could really, truly count on was yourself. She had kept that lesson close to her heart for most of her adult life, especially during her time in military service. Aria had tried to never get herself into a situation that she wouldn't be able to get herself out of. The only time she'd had to break that rule was when she met Jack, when she was absolutely at the end of

her rope. And that hadn't been so bad, despite where it had led her.

"I wanted to protect you...,” Aria whispered. “Not want you to go through what I go through...That why I keep you away...”

“Well, it would be hard to protect me when you're dead,” Jack pointed out. He slid his chair closer to the hospital bed, resting his elbow on it. “And this might surprise you, but I can take care of myself. You don't have to protect me nearly as much as you think.”

“I know.” Aria took a shuddering breath, letting it out slowly. “You stronger than me.” Jack put a hand on her shoulder, brushing it through her orange fur up to the side of her neck. She tilted her head to his hand, rubbing her cheek against it. “Should hit you for yelling at me...”

Jack smirked at her, then his face turned serious. “Don't ever do anything like this again. I thought I was going to lose you.” He leaned over her, giving her a kiss on each of her ears. “Promise me, okay, Aria?”

“Promise, Jack.”

He stroked the top of her head, eliciting a weak purr from her. “I should go now, before people start asking weird questions about what a human slave and a traitor are doing alone together, huh?” Jack stood up from his chair, about to head for the door, but then he heard a growl of pain from Aria. Looking back at her, he saw her straining to lift her bandaged arm. She managed to raise it enough to grab the sleeve of his shirt. She was looking at him with the same expression from before, back when she'd been overcome by the creatures on their lost planet.

“You coming back, yes?” Aria asked him. Her tail gave a twitch underneath the hospital blanket.

Jack smiled at her. “Soon as I can. Promise.”

“Good...” Aria let her hand fall back to the bed, sighing. “But not too soon. Need sleep...”

-So, are we ready for the next step?-

-I believe so, my lady. All of the pieces are in place. The fleets are standing by, and our allies are ready and willing to assist us. There is some risk involved, of course, but we have waited a long time for this. We have been careful. We will not fail.-

-And what about that other matter?-

-Ah...My lady, I'm not sure that's wise.-

-Why?-

-You want us to take her alive. I'm not certain that's going to be possible, at least not so soon. We need to wait for the right time.-

-No. The right time is now. You will do as I say, and you will *not* harm her. If she dies, I will hold you personally responsible. Is that understood?-

-...Very well. We'll take her alive. But the security will be very tight. Collateral damage may not be preventable, and we may have to use force on her.-

-Then you may do so. But you worry too much. You know we have had someone close to her for quite a long time. I do not foresee much trouble in this matter.-

-Then I believe we shall succeed. Glory to the New Ascendancy.-

-To the New Ascendancy.-