

-Transmission Lost-
-Prayers of the Refugee-
Chapter Ten: Traitor
by Havoc

“Mine honor is my life; both grow in one; Take honor from me, and my life is done.”
- William Shakespeare

Though Aria felt ready to leave the hospital the morning after her surgery, the doctors forced her to stay there for over a week and a half to give her time to recover her strength. She didn't like being kept a virtual prisoner, but she had little choice in the matter. Her body was weakened from the trauma she'd put herself through, after all, so she just had to deal with it for now. Her arms were far too damaged for her to be able to do much for herself in any case.

In a way, the hospital let her be far more free than she had been in weeks. While she was recovering from her suicide attempt, Li'ren made sure that her military superiors left her alone. For once, she didn't have to deal with going to the base every day for briefings on her case. Having a real lawyer working on her treason trial turned out to have its benefits. Now that she was out from under the constraints placed upon her by the regulations governing military council, the opportunities for her enemies to harass her were a lot less frequent than before. And the benefit of her lawyer being the mate of the Empress wasn't totally lost on her, either.

On the other hand, now that Aria was having regular meetings with Li'ren, she found that her case was even more complicated and worrisome than she'd previously thought. Li'ren, with all of her experience in dealing with law matters of various kinds, could make better sense of things than Major Tal'in had. This let Aria see just how well the law was arrayed against her. Even so, she felt better having someone as experienced as Lady Amani helping her out. The major was a great commanding officer but only a mediocre legal advocate. Li'ren was able to pick out loopholes and exceptions in the laws that Aria hadn't thought of, though none of them was particularly revolutionary in aiding her cause.

While visits to Aria were restricted by her status, her family still was allowed to come to see her. On these occasions, either Sami or her father was able to find some plausible excuse to bring Jack along. Since he was still technically her slave, he did ostensibly have the duty to serve her. For the first few days, Aria's arms were too weak for her to even feed herself, so Jack took this duty upon himself as often as he could to save her the embarrassment of having the hospital staff do it. He also found himself acting as a sort of legal aid for Li'ren, bringing Aria communication from her whenever her official duties kept her away. Still deep in the throes of depression, Aria nevertheless felt better each time she

got to see him, though she couldn't show it in such a public place as the hospital.

Her family was finally starting to forgive her for what she had done as well. Sami was the longest to come around. She still felt incredibly betrayed by her sister for what Aria had done, and a lot of the care that she was showing Aria during family visits still seemed forced. But, little by little, the damage was being undone just as surely as her body was healing itself.

The day that Aria returned home was a day of celebration for the family, even though her trial was less than ten days off. Sami helped the family's servants prepare a sumptuous feast with all of her eldest sister's favorite dishes, including many that had also become favorites of Jack since he'd come to live with them. The meal did a lot to lift Aria's spirits, owing to the fact that she'd had nothing but hospital food to eat for the last week and a half. Jack remarked to her that that was one thing humans and Ailians had in common, which earned him the first real laugh from her that he could remember hearing in quite a long time. The sound was worth more to him than anything else he'd ever considered valuable in his entire life.

With most of her family much more comfortable with their relationship now, Aria was less reticent about spending time with him during the day. A transformation had seemed to come over the feline during her ordeal. Though she was far from healed, mentally, she seemed to be at her best when she and Jack were together. Whenever she felt herself slipping into depression, the human was there to pull her back up. Any time that Aria had free when she wasn't meeting with Li'ren was usually spent in the estate's library, sitting in the sunlight streaming through the window with Jack seated in her lap. They talked, or Aria would read from Ailian books to him, or they would just remain in silence and enjoy each others' company. Both of them were aware that their remaining time together might be very short, but they did not bring it up in conversation. Aria had resolved to try to put the trial out of her mind as much as possible. While not very successful in this, just the effort was enough to distract her whenever the subject occupied her thoughts.

Once more they began spending their nights together, in Aria's bedroom this time instead of in Jack's guest quarters. The nights seemed long and lonely to Aria now, with the quiet and stillness offering the most opportunities for her traumatized mind to dwell on the gloomy thoughts of her possible execution. It was when she relaxed in her bed that the lack of distractions allowed all of her fears to blossom to the front of her consciousness with full force. More than once Aria would come awake during the night in a state of panic, gasping for breath and shaking. At these times Jack would awaken as well and take her furred hands in his own, holding them tightly until she calmed down and was able to sleep again.

The best measure of progress in Aria's healing process was that she was allowing Jack to accompany her whenever she met with Li'ren in regards to her case. Aria seemed to have taken to heart Jack's advice to her that she couldn't go it alone when it came to this sort of thing. Even if he couldn't do much of anything to make the case any stronger, having him there made Jack feel as though he was involved, and made Aria feel as though she had a partner to share her struggle. Though Aria still did not wish to burden Jack with her troubles, she recognized that the burden was there regardless of what she desired. Letting him sit in on her meetings with Li'ren demonstrated to him that she was ready to trust him again, just as she had trusted him with helping her survive on their lost planet.

Li'ren seemed to be developing some optimism about the case, despite all the worries she'd had when she'd first taken over the case. Because Aria had been acting in her capacity as an officer of the Ascendancy when she had crash-landed on the planet, she explained to both Aria and Jack, then she was bound by the codes and legal structure that governed military operations. However, those same codes and legal structure assumed that the regular channels of service were open and reasonably functioning. Encased in military law was the caveat that officers had, in the absence of formal military structure, the rights and capabilities to make decisions on their own, and looser interpretations of military law were acceptable in these situations. Aria had been completely cut off from all communication channels during her time on the uncharted world, with no certain knowledge that she would ever regain those channels again. It could be argued, Li'ren reasoned, that Aria had no reasonable way of knowing whether or not the war was even still going on. Any treasonous intent on Aria's part would have been unlikely when she couldn't know whether or not Jack was definitively still a member of an enemy species. Without intent, there was no crime. The reasoning was rather flimsy, the noblewoman agreed, but it was a good sight better than anything they'd had before.

"I have negotiated many treaties and agreements on behalf of my mistress before, yes?" Li'ren said with a smile during one of their meetings. She had a cocky way of waving her tail that gave Aria the impression that she had met with little defeat before. "All of them carried much higher stakes than the issue before us now. I will take advantage of every loophole, legal precedent, and backdoor that is presented to us. I do not promise that this trial will be elegant or attractive. But I do promise that I will not give up on it. Her Majesty would be most displeased with me were I to promise otherwise."

Aria told Li'ren that she believed her. However, deep down, she was more fearful than she was willing to show to anyone. The prospects looked better now than they ever had before. But that was far from them looking good.

The night before the trial was to begin was finally at hand. Jack was undressed, lying in bed in

Aria's room, staring at the ceiling with his hands behind his head. A single lamp was illuminating the room, casting shadows about the walls. Jack's mind was abuzz with thoughts, most of them worrisome. He was nearly sick with the anticipation of what was to come the next day. He wanted Aria to return so that he could finally go to sleep and have a rest from his thoughts, but at the same time he did not want to sleep, because that would make the morning come all the sooner.

Aria had spent nearly the whole day, from sunrise to sundown, in conference with Li'ren. On this day, Jack had been requested not to be present. All of the trial preparations as far as case building had been completed the day before. Today had been about running Aria through various scenarios. Jack had been made to understand that Li'ren wanted to make sure Aria could handle herself in the courtroom, and so the noblewoman was coaching Aria in how to behave. Li'ren wanted to be able to control the testimony as much as possible. To do this, she had insisted in having as few distractions as possible for Aria, so Jack was shut out of the day's meeting. Normally, Jack would have been upset at being excluded from the proceedings, but in this case he could see that Li'ren knew what she was doing. He didn't want to interfere in any way that would be detrimental to Aria's case. It was enough that he would be allowed to be in the courtroom tomorrow, a right that Li'ren had managed to win for him only a few days ago.

I hope Aria can keep it together tomorrow..., he thought to himself, chewing on his lower lip. Jack crossed his legs, then uncrossed them again. He sat up, leaning against the headboard of the bed, and then he slumped back down again. *God, nevermind Aria...I hope I can keep myself together tomorrow!*

The door to the bedroom opened, and Aria came inside. Jack sat back up once more, watching her as she closed and locked the door, then crossed the room towards him. She sat down in a chair near the bed, her back to him, looking into a mirror that hung from a wall. The Ailian's tail was hanging to the floor, looped loosely about her ankles, and her ears were standing normally. Her body language suggested unconcern, but Jack could see that her posture was stiff, as though her mood was a put on.

After a few minutes of waiting, Jack broke the silence. "So...How did it go?"

Aria's shoulders jerked a little, giving Jack the impression that she hadn't really been paying attention to her surroundings. Unusual for her, though less so these days. "Fine, I think," she replied finally. "Well...I not know..." She stood up and moved closer to the mirror, clasping her hands in front of her.

"You don't know how well it went?"

"No...Yes...I..." Aria turned around, shaking her head slightly as she finally looked at Jack.

"Worried..."

"Well, that's understandable," Jack said. "If you weren't worried about tomorrow, I'd be worried about you. You're facing something pretty damned heavy. It's natural to be nervous about it. To say the least." He turned halfway, rolling onto his side.

"Yes." Aria turned back around. She loosened the wrap of her skirt, starting to unravel it from around her lower body. Her movements were slow and gradual, owing to residual weakness in her arms. When her legs were bare, she unwrapped her top as well, baring the rest of her body. Aria folded the long bolts of fabric carefully in her hands, placing them gently on her chair. The Ailian walked to her dresser and retrieved a brush from it, returning to the mirror and beginning to run the brush through her fur, smoothing the ruffles that had formed underneath her clothing. "Nervous...Is good word for it." She managed a laugh that struck Jack as rather unconvincing.

When she finished with her grooming, Aria went and replaced the brush where she had gotten it. Then she moved to the bed, sitting on the edge near Jack. He rolled onto his back, looking back up at the ceiling. "How did it come to this?" he sighed, closing his eyes.

Aria glanced to the side. "Is strange question," she murmured. "You know how this happen, yes? You there."

"I don't mean your trial, or us, or anything like that," Jack said. "I'm talking about...all of this. This war, this conflict...The whole thing. Why did our two species have to go to war? Why do some of your people want to start a new civil war? It's all so useless, isn't it?"

Aria looked away from Jack. "Useless..." She hadn't ever allowed herself to think in terms of the usefulness or uselessness of the war. To her it hadn't ever been a question of utility. Her people had been attacked, invaded without provocation, or so she had been taught. War had been the only answer to a situation such as that. But that had all been before she had met Jack, before she had ever been face to face with a human in anything other than battle. "I suppose is useless...Yes."

Jack sighed again. "Anyway, I guess those questions don't really matter right now." He smiled a little at Aria. "The only thing that matters is getting through tomorrow, right?"

"Right." Aria turned her head to look back at him. "Lady Amani think good chance tomorrow. She give me...what you humans call it...'pep talk'?"

"That's good," Jack said, chuckling. "It's always nice to have someone in your corner." He reached over and placed a hand on her bare thigh, rubbing his palm back and forth along her soft, silky orange fur. "I believe in you, *se le ch'aa ara*."

Aria made a small growl of amusement. "You accent need work," she told him. "But...mine, too," she allowed a moment later. The Ailian looked down at the floor, her tail tip twitching slightly. She was quiet for a long time, and Jack watched her carefully. Her face was half hidden from him,

turned at an angle away from his view. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter than normal. “I almost not want come to bed tonight...”

“Why not?” Jack asked her, his eyebrows raising slightly.

“Because...Because I...Oh, Jack...” Without warning she covered her face with her hands, and in seconds she was sobbing uncontrollably. Her shoulders shook as she cried, tears streaking down her face into her palms.

Jack was taken aback completely, not having expected this at all. He got up from where he was on the bed and moved to Aria's side, placing a hand on her shoulder. He rocked back as she lashed out, shoving him away from her.

“Not look at me...,” she pleaded through her tears. “Not look at me...Not want you to see this...”

“Don't push me away, Aria,” Jack said, gently but firmly. He put his arm around her shoulders, gripping her as tightly as he could. She relented, turning and melting against him, her soft, furry body pressing against him. Jack needed all of his strength to hold her much larger form up, but he managed. Aria buried her muzzle in his neck, her tears wetting his skin as her body trembled.

“Not want to die, Jack,” she sobbed, her voice muffled against him. “I...I so scared...Not know what to do...Please...Please hold me...”

Jack felt his heart wrench as the woman he loved cried so pitifully in his arms. Though he had seen Aria shed tears before, he had never seen her cry like this. And he was certain that she had never, ever admitted to being scared of death. Aria had faced death bravely many times, and had even gone running headlong towards it. Now she was baring her soul to him, confessing that she was afraid to leave this world.

So he just did what she wanted of him, and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her close. His hands rubbed up and down along her back, letting her get everything out. Jack wanted to cry himself, but right now Aria needed him to be strong for her.

“I sorry...,” she said, once she managed to get herself under control. Aria pushed herself away from him, not harshly, with one hand on his chest. “Is shameful.”

“You've got nothing to be ashamed about,” Jack told her. He put a hand on her cheek, wiping away the moisture there. “Aria, you put too much emphasis on your personal honor and pride. It's not shameful to cry when you're facing a death sentence, or after what you put yourself through recently. You have every right to cry.”

Aria sniffed, wiping her face with her both hands. She took several deep, shuddering breaths, closing her eyes for a few moments. “You right.” With another deep breath, she forced a small smile. “You stronger than me, Jack. Always have been.”

“No, I'm not stronger,” Jack said. He reached around, placing a hand at the back of her neck. “I just took the strength you gave me, and now I'm trying to pay it back.” Jack kissed her then, pressing his lips to her muzzle as he drew her head towards him.

Aria made a small whimper in the back of her throat, and she leaned into him. Jack allowed himself to be pushed over, and he fell back against the bed with the Ailian coming down atop him. She came down on her elbows, and he heard and felt a muffled growl of pain as she put pressure on her weakened forearms. Her feline tongue slipped between his lips, the roughness tickling the inside of his mouth as she tangled it with his own. Her breath was warm against his face, the dampness from her tears smearing onto his skin. Jack felt her tail curling its way around his legs as her fur rubbed against him. Their closeness banished away some of the heartache they had built up over the preceding weeks. When Aria broke their kiss, she looked down at him, her yellow-gold eyes gazing deeply into his dark blue ones.

“I love you,” Aria whispered. She bent her head down, rubbing her cheek tenderly against his. “No matter what, I love you.”

“I know.” Jack stroked his hands down her sides, moving them underneath to her belly and back up to her breasts, feeling the feathery cream fur there. “I love you, too.”

Aria's face broke into a wide smile, the first real, genuine smile he had seen since she had woken up in the hospital. Then she winced, her body dropping slightly as her injured arms began to give out. “*Ala ra'sh te'la...*,” she hissed quietly. “My arms...”

“Poor girl,” Jack said, teasing her a little. He was rewarded with a flash of the old fire in her eyes. Jack wrapped an arm around her body, and rolled her over, coming down on top of her. She gazed up at him, her eyes half-lidded as desire was evident on her face. Jack looked down at her with the same desire, his gaze traveling up and down her form. Aria was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his entire life. “You just let me take care of everything this time.”

For an answer, Aria brought her hands behind her head, underneath the pillow. She flicked her tongue out between her lips, watching him carefully. Jack grinned at her, holding her gaze. She seemed to have an air of defiance about her face, as though challenging him.

Well, Aria, we'll see about that...

Jack slid down her body, placing his hands on top of her knees and pushing them apart, wide enough for him to settle down on the bed between her thighs. As always, he found himself feeling overwhelmed by how much taller she was than him. And he loved her luxurious coat of orange-and-black-striped fur. He found it an incredibly alluring feature. Especially when they slept, and she curled around him, enveloping his body in her soft, furred arms and legs. She had soft fur all over, but the

softest was...

"*Ka're...*," Aria hissed softly, her eyes closing to bare slits as she felt his fingers brushing her sex. He traced one fingertip along the slick gash of her pussy, eliciting a shiver up and down her spine as an electric tingle of pleasure washed over her. She spread her legs wider for him, giving him unquestioned access to her treasure. Her hiss turned quickly to a sharp moan as his finger slid inside, his fingertip curling up to tease her sensitive inner passage.

"Wet already, hm?" Jack asked her. He snickered as he saw the insides of her ears turn pink. She'd never heard him talk dirty before, though she had done so towards him many a time. It seemed that she wasn't used to the shoe being on the other foot. "You must really want it."

"Not tease me," she growled at him, her voice taking on a dangerous tone.

"Oh, and what are you going to do about it?" Jack inquired. He pushed his fingers particularly deep inside her alien pussy, making her back arch up and a sharp mewl issue from her mouth. She glared at the human, her breasts heaving as she fought to catch her breath. "You couldn't hurt a flea with your arms the way they are right now. I'm perfectly safe."

Aria whined softly. "Not make me beg..."

"Beg? Mm, now there's an interesting idea." Jack dipped his head to her pussy, kissing her soft petals. He slipped his tongue between her nether lips, savoring the taste of her alien flavor. She was just as sweet, spicy, and delicious as she ever had been. He listened to the purr starting to rumble in her core, the vibrations traveling through her body and to his tongue. Jack swirled around her clit for long minutes, one hand up on her furry belly, rubbing in a soft slow circle as he tongued her. Aria was whimpering now, lifting her hips to meet his kisses. He lifted his head up, licking his lips. "I could definitely make you beg, I think."

"Jack, please..."

Jack came up to his knees, letting her see just how aroused he was. He saw her eyes latch onto his cock, standing proudly out from his body. The hunger in the Ailian's eyes was blatantly predatory, like a starving cheetah staring down an antelope. "Lucky for you, Aria, that I need you right now just as badly as you need me." He moved forward, lowering himself on top of her, his belly coming into contact with hers as he nestled his face in between her breasts.

"Yesssss...", Aria hissed, her legs wrapping around his back. She let out a pleased sigh, all of her breath escaping her lungs as his member speared her slick cunt. Her human lover filled her so nicely, so perfectly, as though he were made for her, different species though they were. As Jack started thrusting inside of her, her arms came from behind her head. She crossed them over his shoulders, hugging him to her breasts as tightly as she could manage. Jack moaned deeply, his voice muffled by

her thick, fluffy belly fur.

They rocked against each other, making love slowly at first as they reacquainted each other with the feel of their bodies. Jack's cock was bathed in the searing heat of her tight, slick passage, gripping at every inch of him as he pushed in and pulled out of her. Aria kept her legs wrapped about him, preventing him from going very far for long. As they grew more comfortable, their lovemaking sped up, building and building. It began to feel like the first time again, that wonderful, strange mating in the tent, so soon after they had first met.

Aria leaned her head down, licking the top of Jack's head lovingly. He looked up at her, a slightly sloppy grin on his face. She managed to laugh weakly at him, her mirth overcome by a moan of pleasure as his cock brushed a particularly nice spot inside of her. Her sensitive feline nose twitched, her senses flooded with the scent of sex that was filling her bedroom. The mixture of his human musk and her pheromones was like an intoxicant, making her head spin and her vision go fuzzy. This was the proper order of the world. This was what was truly right, her duty be damned. And she knew that Jack felt exactly the same way.

"Jack!" Aria gasped. She squeezed her legs around him tightly, clamping her jaws down on the scream that threatened to escape her and wake the whole household. The Ailian squeezed her eyes tightly, her body shaking and shivering as she came. Faintly, she heard Jack's own groan of bliss as he joined her, warmth spilling deep into her body as his alien seed flooded her womb. She held him within her, feverishly murmuring nearly unintelligible phrases in Ailian as they climaxed together.

When Jack awoke some hours later, he was curled up next to Aria, having moved sometime in his sleep. His upper body was resting on her chest, her tail curled up around his shoulders as she stroked his sandy blonde hair lightly with one hand. The Ailian was purring deeply, the sound resonating through both of their forms as they rested together. Her tail tip was waving back and forth. The fuzzy tail was tickling his chin, but he wasn't interested in the least in moving away from her.

"So nice..." Aria sighed. She tilted her head down to kiss his forehead. Jack looked up into her eyes, and he saw tears shining there again. "If this the last night...Was a good night."

"Don't talk like that, Aria," Jack said. He reached up a hand and thumbbed the tears from her eyes. "It's going to be alright, it's..." He felt his own throat close up, his voice failing him.

"Shhh." Aria kissed him on the lips tenderly. "Just sleep. Is late. You need you sleep." She placed her hand on top of his head, hugging him to her breast. Jack eventually fell asleep with her words whispering in his ear. "*Se le ch'aa ara.*"

The next morning seemed almost unreal. Aria and Jack both woke up, still tangled in each others' arms, with sunlight streaming in through Aria's bedroom window playing along their bodies. Reluctantly, her heart heavy, Aria extracted herself from Jack and went to her bathroom to wash up. After all, it wouldn't do to show up to her treason trial smelling of human sex. While she prepared herself, Jack returned to his guest quarters and did much the same thing, dressing himself in the nicest clothes that he could manage to gather from what Aria's family had provided him. When he felt reasonably presentable, he walked down from the guest house to the main building, to the dining room for breakfast.

The mood around the table was all gloom and doom. None of Aria's family members seemed to feel much like eating. Sami had prepared a wonderful breakfast, but most of it sat untouched. A few feeble attempts at conversation were made, but they all trailed off quickly. Jack managed to eat a little bit, but he felt sick. He didn't want to think about what was coming later that morning.

Aria joined the family when breakfast was already almost over, resplendent in a dress uniform of black with red trim. Her rank insignia and battle decorations were absent, as she wasn't permitted to wear them while she was facing charges. She sat next to Jack, staring at the tabletop. Jack reached over and clasped her hand underneath the table. She looked over at him, tried to smile, and failed.

All too soon, it was time for them all to depart. A small military convoy came to the estate. From the moment she left home now, until the end of her trial, Aria would be a prisoner in custody. She took time to say goodbye to her family members, with more than a few tears shed by all. Sami was the worst of all. She wrapped her sister in a hug and didn't want to let her go, and Aria finally had to forcefully pull herself from the younger Ailian's grasp. Then two soldiers came up to her, clasped her hands in cuffs, and led her down to the waiting vehicles. As they drove away, Jack watched after them, if he'd ever be able to hold her again.

The courtroom turned out to be a little different from what Jack had been expecting when he'd pictured an Ailian court. He thought it would be much like a courtroom on Earth or a human colony world, but this was not the case. The room was set up like a large amphitheater. On the lowest level were ten rows of seats, level with each other, arranged in a semicircle. In front of the lower level of seats, in the center of the room on a raised platform, was a table with two seats. Opposite this table, forming the other half of the semicircle, were two shorter rows of seats, raised up higher than all the rest.

Jack was seated with Aria's family, in the first row of the seats on the lower level. He looked up at the top of the courtroom, into the double row of seats. He saw a number of important-looking Ailians

seated there, dressed in both military and civilian clothing. Looking around his own seat, Jack saw more civilians than military personnel. He supposed that they were seated in the spectator seats, while the upper level must be for the presiding court.

A door opened at one end of the room, and Jack looked over to see Li'ren entering the courtroom. She was dressed much differently than she normally did. Instead of her white, flowing robes, she was wearing a black suit of a cut much more like a military uniform, though her clothes were not as severe as those worn by the officers. The consort walked through the middle of the room, coming to the table on the raised platform. She was carrying a large stack of papers and data readers, and these she placed on the table. Then, seeing Aria's family, she came over to speak with them.

"Good morning, Jack," she greeted him, once she had spoken with the family.

"Good morning," Jack replied. He swallowed, looking around the room. "This all seems way too real all of a sudden. Does this sort of thing always feel so...I dunno...Bleak?"

Li'ren offered a sympathetic smile. "It does. Courtrooms are not usually for happy occasions, yes?" She smoothed down a wrinkle in her outfit. "Just try not to think about it. The trial will not start for a bit, yet."

"Where's Aria?"

"She is waiting in a holding room. The trial cannot begin until Her Majesty arrives, and Aria will not be brought into the courtroom until then." Li'ren reached over and touched his hand briefly.

"Take heart, Jack. I am here to do my very best, and my very best has never failed before."

Jack took a deep breath. "Alright, Li'ren. I'll try."

Aria sat in the holding room, down a hall adjacent to the courtroom. She was seated in a chair in the small room, more of a cell than anything else. At least this room had a small window, though it did little other than allow a bit of outside light to filter. Most of the light in the room was provided by a single lamp hanging from the ceiling.

I feel sick..., Aria thought to herself. Her stomach was churning, making her feel as though she was going to throw up. It didn't help matters much that she hadn't had any breakfast. Maybe if she had forced herself to choke down a little something, she wouldn't feel quite so ill.

She knew that, within the next fifteen minutes, the door to the room would open and the guards outside would bring her out. They would walk her down the hall, and then she would emerge into the courtroom. Her trial was news all across the Ascendancy by now, so her face would be transmitted live to nearly every planet in Ailian space. And then she would sit down at the table next to Li'ren, and she'd have to look up into the tiered seats, where the Empress, and Admiral Te'rou, and all the senior officers

who composed the court martial would be looking down at her.

-I can do this,- Aria said quietly to herself. -I *can* do this. I have to do this. For Jack, and Sami, and father. And for the Empress.- She squeezed her hands into tight fists, closing her eyes and keeping up the encouragement to herself.

She was jerked back to reality when she heard the sound of the door opening. Expecting to see the guards coming in, she was surprised to instead see her commanding officer, Major Tal'in. The elder female Ailian stepped inside, leaving the door open behind her as she face Aria.

-I came to wish you luck, Lieutenant,- the major said. She looked Aria over, appraising her uniform with her customary hard stare. -You're looking well. I'm pleased to see that you've recovered from your...injury.-

-Yes, ma'am!- Aria said, standing up from her seat and saluting. -And thank you.- She glanced at the floor, her ears flattening to her head. -I wish I could be anywhere but here. But I guess this is where I have to be.-

-Yes, well...,- Major Tal'in said. She walked past Aria, standing behind her and gazing out of the window, her tail waving serenely behind her. -It would have been better if this had never happened. But we can't change the past. All we can change is our future.-

-I suppose you are correct about that,- Aria agreed. She pondered that statement for a few seconds. Maybe that was the real lesson that she needed to take away from all of this. Aria had been so focused on dwelling on mistakes she'd made in the past, that she couldn't see what she could do to make sure she had a future. -Thank you, Major,- she said, starting to turn. -Do you know when...-

Then there was a brutal blow to the back of her neck, and Aria's vision went black as she crumpled to the floor.

Li'ren knew from the atmosphere in the courtroom that something was wrong. The Empress had entered the courtroom nearly thirty minutes ago, and yet the signal to begin the trial had not yet been given. She looked towards the door through which Aria should be coming, and made a small hand gesture to one of the guards there. He shrugged at her, shaking his head as though to say that he was unsure of what was going on. She looked up at Kri'a, sitting right in the middle of the top tier of seats. The Empress met her gaze, and Li'ren saw that she seemed unsure of the situation as well. Admiral Te'rou, the ranking officer in the court, was tapping his claws impatiently on his desktop, looking distinctly upset that his time was being wasted. Li'ren was very worried now. If the admiral didn't know what was going on, what could that mean...

All of a sudden, the door leading into the courtroom was thrown open, and a junior male officer

rushed in. He looked about for a few moments, then spotted Admiral Te'rou and the Empress in their seats. He fairly ran across the courtroom and up to where they were. The lieutenant leaned down to whisper in the admiral's ear. Te'rou seemed perturbed, then angry, and then very alarmed. He leaned to speak to the Empress, who reacted to what he was saying with shock. Murmurs were starting to spread through the courtroom now, as the audience noticed the commotion.

-Lady Amani!- Admiral Te'rou called. His voice was slightly shaky, and the fur on the back of his neck was standing on end. -Come at once. Something has developed that we need to discuss.-

Shocked, Li'ren stood from her seat. Admiral Te'rou, the Empress, and several of the senior officers were walking out of the courtroom. With a glance over her shoulder at Aria's family and Jack, Li'ren followed after them. They went down a short hallway and came to a smaller conference room. They all went inside, and the Empress and admirals took seats. Li'ren, still quite confused but feeling an increasing sense of foreboding, sat next to Kri'a.

-What is this all about, Kri'a?- Li'ren asked her mate, looking to the Empress in surprise. -Has the trial been postponed?-

-I'm afraid not, Li'ren,- the Empress answered. Her voice and expression were both grave, and she looked to Admiral Te'rou. -Admiral, please inform my consort what we have just been informed.-

Admiral Te'rou cleared his throat, smoothing down the fur on the back of his neck. -I just received word, Lady Amani. Your client, Lieutenant Me'lia, is no longer present in the building.-

Li'ren blinked, total shock evident on her face to all in the room. -What? How...How is that possible?-

-That's not all,- the admiral continued. His voice sounded heavy. -We just received word from our intelligence assets throughout the Outer Colonies. The thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth fleets have mobilized, moving inbound. None of them are responding to our inquiries. And several of our Inner Colony worlds have gone off the communication network.-

Li'ren covered her mouth, her eyes going wide, and her hand went to grab the Empress' leg under the table. Her mate clenched her own hands into tight fists on top of the table. Her jaw clenched, and a look of sorrow came across the Empress' face.

-So...It has begun.-

When Aria finally came around, her head was throbbing. She sat up, feeling that she was on some sort of low, flat surface, most likely a cot or rudimentary bed. The room she was in was dark and silent. She had no idea where she was. Putting a hand to her head, Aria winced, then opened her eyes and tried to see her surroundings, swinging her legs off of the cot so that she was sitting on the edge.

-It's nice to see you awake.-

Aria turned her head towards the source of the noise. The room was so dark that even she couldn't see very well, but her eyes were slowly adjusting to the dimness. Someone seemed to be standing at the other end of the room, looking at her. She squinted, trying to make out the figure.

-Who's there?-

-You don't recognize me? Well, it has been a long time.-

The voice sounded eerily familiar. The figure began walking towards Aria, coming closer to her. Aria tensed up, apprehension growing as the unknown person began to resolve itself in her vision. Ailian...Female from stature, with white fur, wearing a black outfit in a very formal military cut. Finally, Aria's eyes adjusted enough to the light, and she felt herself grow faint. Her legs became weak, and she slid off of the cot, collapsing on the floor.

-Mother...-