

-Transmission Lost-
-Sounds of Madness-
Chapter Seven: Broken
by Havoc

“My grief lies all within
And these external manners of lament
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortured soul.”
- William Shakespeare

When Miri returned to the greeting room some hours later, the mood was deeply in contrast to the cheery, colorful decorations that were present. Li'ren was gone, carried out by one of the governess' guards after she had fainted, and the slave girl, Brooke, had been dismissed as well. Jack and Aria remained, both of them still reeling from the news that had just been received, and Sami was also there, looking lost and out of place. Tea had been brought for everyone, but the cups still sat on their silvery serving tray on the table, untouched and by now cold. Few words had been exchanged; they were all still too stricken to talk much. For Aria and Sami, it felt much like they had lost a family member. The Empress, for all of her controversy, was a beloved figure to all Ailians and a symbol of their people. If she were really dead, that would be a severe blow to the morale of anyone loyal to the Ascendancy. For Jack the mood was different. He had no particular love for the Ascendancy, quite the opposite in fact, but his feelings had shifted somewhat in his time with Aria. He knew that the decade-long war was not as black-and-white as he'd been taught to believe, and it seemed that Ailians were not so different from humans. There were jerks and saints among them just the same as with humans. And Jack had met the Empress, and if she wasn't exactly saint-like she had at least tried to lead her people as best she could, and she had been trying to end the war. If the news of her death was the truth, he was sorry to hear it.

Miri took a seat opposite Jack and Aria, near the table where the tea was, sweeping her tail to the side to keep from sitting on it wrong. Blankly she picked up a cup and sipped at it, and her ears laid back as she grimaced at the cold drink. Then she set the cup down again, growling and rubbing her eyes with one hand.

“*Pa'ka le mar'eshka*,” the governess cursed under her breath, baring her teeth as her red eyes blazed. Jack could see that the fur on her cheeks was slightly matted. With Li'ren being her daughter and being mated to the Empress, it really *was* losing a family member for Miri.

They were all quiet after that for a while, until Jack was the first to speak. “Any more news?” he asked tentatively, a little afraid of breaking the silence but wildly curious about what was going on. Miri's head jerked up as she looked at the human, and for a minute he was afraid that she was going to

explode at him for daring to ask a question. Then she seemed to calm down, recognizing that she was letting her emotions get the better of her.

“None yet,” Miri replied. She sat up straighter, smoothing her emerald robes and attempting to look dignified again. “We were very lucky to get as much news as we did. Communications from Lirna have been severely disrupted, and our interspace military relays appear to have been tampered with. We're having difficulty in communicating with the fleets, and I suspect we'll have to wait until the fleets are in closer range before we can get more information. Arbaros is the designated fallback port, so survivors from the battle on Lirna will be coming here.” Looking at the tea again, she stood up abruptly and went to the door. Opening it a crack, she exchanged hushed words with someone just outside, then closed the door and returned to her seat. “I am afraid we will just have to be patient.”

Aria growled softly. “Hate waiting,” she said. Jack reached over and put a hand on her thigh, squeezing it a little. She hadn't cried yet, but he could tell she was at the point where she might. The fur visible outside of the boundaries of her clothing was sticking up, and her ears were limp and flat, not perky and pointed as they should be. He had only seen her in this sort of mood a few times before: on the planet they'd crashed on, when she told him she'd likely be facing treason charges on her return home; on Lirna, when her youngest sister had been murdered; and again on Lirna, the night before her trial was to begin.

“Is true?” Sami timidly asked. She was only in the room by accident, after all. The rest of her family had been shown to the quarters provided for them, and she had stayed behind to accept Li'ren's offer of a tour of the governess' residence.

The grief passed over Governess Amani's face again, briefly, before she answered. “I am afraid it does appear to be true,” Miri said. “What little communication we have been able to receive confirms the initial reports on all counts. A combined fleet of Ara'lana's ships, Pteryd war cruisers, and human troop carriers attacked Lirna about eight hours ago. They were able to break the defensive lines and land troops on the planet's surface, and their first targets were Mat'aar Airbase and the royal palace. The Royal Guards put up a hard fight, but the palace was breached. From what we can tell, they did not even attempt to take Kri'a alive. This attack was an assassination, pure and simple, and now they control the planet as well.”

Jack looked down at the floor. From what he had learned about Aria's mother, that kind of blitz attack seemed like her style for sure. He realized that they had been lucky to get off the planet when they did; if they'd been on Lirna when the attack had hit, surely they'd all be dead or captured by now. Ara'lana didn't seem to be the sort of person who liked leaving loose ends.

“Um...Lady Amani?” Sami asked next. She looked between the governess and her sister. “How

is she?"

"How do you think?" Miri replied. The door opened, and Brooke came in, carrying another tray with fresh tea on it. She came over and placed the new tray on the table next to the old one. "Thank you, child. That will be all." Brooke nodded silently, glanced at Jack for a brief moment, and then picked up the old tray and carried it out of the room. Miri passed cups around to everyone before she continued. "Li'ren and Kri'a were together for ten years. They loved each other very much, and they stuck together even when the gossip and ridicule was at its worst. Li'ren was devoted to the Empress." She lifted her cup. "She's in her room. She came to before I left her. I still don't think it has sunk in for her, yet."

Jack cleared his throat. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but...um...Should she be alone right now?" He gave Aria a sidelong look. "I mean, she's had an awful shock. Sadness and stress can do funny things to a person. You don't want her to do anything she's going to regret."

Though she was furious that Jack would bring that up, Aria nodded. "Is true what he say."

The governess looked as though she hadn't considered that until now, and she grew worried when Jack mentioned it. "Do you think so?" Miri looked towards the door, touching a hand to her chin. "Perhaps I should send someone to check on her. I could call one of the servants."

Sami stood up at once. "I...I go," she volunteered. Everyone turned to look at her, and an embarrassed expression came to her face. "Is better than servant. Someone...someone she know." The Ailian clasped her hands in front of her, waving her tail somewhat awkwardly.

Miri eyed Aria's sister, and then she smiled just a little. "Alright. Thank you, I think you may be right." The governess waved a hand towards the door. "The guard outside can show you the way. It will give me the chance to discuss some things with Captain Me'lia." Bowing, Sami went to the door and walked out to the hall. The three left in the room could hear her footsteps on the carpeted floor, growing more distant as she was led away by one of the guards. Miri turned back to Jack and Aria when she was gone. "Captain, perhaps Jack should go as well. I can have someone conduct him to your family's quarters."

"No," Aria said at once. She slid one arm around behind Jack's back, resting her hand on his other hip. "Jack stay." While the governess gave her an odd look, her face stayed resolute. "I trust Jack. He help me many times. He deserve to stay."

Though she looked for a while as though she was going to disagree, Miri changed her mind. "Very well. If you believe he can be trusted, I will take your word for it. I wish to discuss with you the plans for security, Captain." Her eyes flicked between Aria and Jack. "With Lirna lost, the seat of government will default to this planet. Outside of the homeworld, we have the largest military and

diplomatic presence in the Ascendancy. That means that Arbaros is the next likely target for attack by the rebels. As governess of the planet, my job will be to keep the government together until the question of leadership can be sorted out.”

“Yes,” Aria agreed. She leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms. “With Empress gone, will be trouble.”

“Indeed, but you needn't worry about that,” Miri assured her. “That's not what I want to talk about. What I *am* worried about is keeping my daughter safe. Kri'a appointed you to the Royal Guards for a reason, and that reason has not changed. Li'ren is still one of the highest-ranking diplomats in the Ascendancy. As consort to the Empress, she knows a great deal about defense and diplomatic matters. Ara'lana will want to deny us that expertise, and I believe she will do her best to make an attempt on my daughter's life.”

Jack leaned forward. “You don't think she'd try to kidnap her? If Li'ren knows that much, wouldn't Aria's mother just take her alive so she can learn what she knows?”

Miri shook her head, raising her tea cup and taking a sip. “No. Ara'lana already knows much of what Li'ren does. It would be much easier and just as effective for her to just kill her.” She put her cup down and stared at Aria. “That is why you are here, Captain. You are one of the last of the Royal Guards. Your orders from the Empress still stand. The best soldiers to be found on Arbaros have been selected, and we also have the few Guards that Kri'a sent here. Allow the fleets to worry about the security of the planet, Aria, I want you to be concerned with the security of Li'ren.”

“I do that,” Aria promised solemnly. “I give Empress my oath. She safe with me here.”

“Good. I want you to start your preparations tomorrow. Let me tell you what resources we have...”

The guard led Sami from the greeting room, taking her through a series of halls which led deeper into the governess' residence. The Ailian found herself overwhelmed by the size of the place, which was much larger than her family's mansion back on Lirna, and Sami had considered that quite a large home. Yet she was also impressed by how simply yet elegantly it was adorned. Like many Ailian government buildings, the walls were lined with detailed paintings, but apart from that the home was very plain. The same as the entrance hall through which they had been brought, the walls were of white stone and the carpets were a deep, dark royal blue. Sami wasn't quite astounded enough to totally forget everything that had happened today, but the distraction was enough to help her calm down.

Finally, they arrived at a door at the end of one hall. The guard gave Sami a perfunctory bow, then took his leave and returned back the way he came. Sami watched him go, her ears pricking

forward in minor annoyance at the guard's attitude. Then she turned back to the door, taking a preparatory breath before raising a hand and knocking gently. She waited for several minutes, but there was no answer from within.

Sami placed her ear against the door, listening. -Lady Amani?- she called. Sami knocked again, but she still didn't receive an answer. Reaching for the door handle, she turned it, finding the door unlocked. She wasn't sure if she should really intrude like this, but she pushed the door open anyway and looked inside.

The room inside was as simple as the rest of the governess' home. From the doorway, Sami could see a large, round bed, and a low table set in the middle of the room surrounded by several plush chairs of the same color as the carpets. On the far side of the room from the door was a large window which looked out onto the trees upon which the building was constructed. There was another table sitting in front of the window, and in a chair next to the table sat Li'ren. The noblewoman had something in her hand that she seemed to be staring at, but what it was Sami couldn't tell from where she was standing.

Stepping fully into the room, Sami closed the door quietly behind her and walked up behind Li'ren. -Lady Amani?- she repeated, when she was a meter or so away from the other woman. She saw Li'ren's shoulders jerk in shock, and her tail gave a twitch of alarm as she looked behind her. When she saw who was speaking, she seemed to relax just a bit.

-Oh...,- Li'ren said, blankly. -Sami. I did not hear the door.- She turned her eyes back to the object she was holding. Now that Sami was closer, it looked like a photograph.

-Forgive me, m'lady,- Sami apologized. -I didn't mean to intrude. The governess thought someone should come check on you.-

Li'ren gave a quiet sigh, sinking a little lower in the chair. Her tail was hanging limp down to the floor, and her fur was laying flat and expressionless. -Thank you,- she said, not taking her eyes off of the photograph in her hands. -I am fine.-

Sami peeked over her shoulder, curious about the picture. The photograph was of two Ailians, sitting on a low garden wall near a fountain. Their tails met between them, twisted around each other. One of them, dressed in white robes and shorter than the other, was Li'ren herself. The other was dressed in a sharply tailored admiral's uniform, looking right at the photographer with a smile that mirrored Li'ren's. For a few seconds she couldn't tell who it was, but then she recognized the face.

-That's you and the Empress, isn't it?- she asked, pointing at the picture. -And is that the palace?-

Looking up for a moment, Li'ren blinked at Sami, then she looked back at the picture. -Yes.-

Her voice was hoarse. -This was one of the first pictures we ever took together, after our relationship became known. She was still just the princess when this picture was taken. I was...eighteen, I think, just starting as a formal diplomat.- Li'ren gave just the faintest hint of a smile, which quickly disappeared. -This spot in the gardens was always our favorite. We'd go there whenever we wanted to be alone for some fresh air. I still remember the first time we sat there together, the first time she ever called me 'my little one'...-

Sami took a while in responding. She didn't quite know what to say. Sami had lost loved ones before, but from what her father had gone through she knew that losing a mate was a much different sort of grief. -She is very beautiful,- Sami finally said.

-She is,- Li'ren agreed. She touched one finger to the Empress' image in the photograph, smiling for a second. Her hand began to shake, and she dropped the photograph on the table. Her shoulders trembling, she began to cry, tears pouring down her cheeks as she cupped her face in her hands. -Oh, Kri'a...-

For a while Sami was frozen with uncertainty, not sure if anything she said would be comforting or just make things worse. Li'ren seemed inconsolable, sobbing loudly as she sat in front of the window. Instead of talking, she decided to stay quiet. She knelt next to the noblewoman's chair and placed a hand on one of her knees, putting her other arm around her waist. While Li'ren cried, she just stayed there, letting her lean on her shoulder. That was all that she knew to do, but it seemed to be enough. She felt one of Li'ren's hands on hers, squeezing tightly. Eventually, her crying grew quieter, trailing off into soft gasps and sniffing.

-I'm so sorry,- Li'ren said, straightening up in her chair. She wiped her muzzle with her hands, swiping away the tears that were soaking her fur. -I didn't mean to break down like that. I'm sorry.-

-Don't apologize, m'lady,- Sami gently rebuked her. -You have every right to cry. You loved her.- She gripped the other female's hand. -I'm sorry for your loss. May she find peace under the watch of the goddess.-

Li'ren managed to smile at her. -Thank you. That means so much for me to hear.- She took a few deep breaths. -I will be alright, but I would like some time away from...from all of that.- She waved a hand vaguely at the door.

Sami got to her feet. -Could I call someone to bring something for you? Tea, maybe? Perhaps you would allow me to stay here with you.- She smiled. -I would love to know more about the Empress. Would you be willing to tell me about her?-

After thinking about it briefly, Li'ren gave a little nod. -I think I would like that.- She brightened a touch more. -There is a comm unit on the wall by the door. Ask for the kitchen, and they can send

something up. Something hot to drink, I think, would be very nice indeed.-

Several days had passed since the attack on Lirna, and finally the fleets had begun arriving at Arbaros en masse. In that time span, Jack found that the governess' residence seemed to fill with military officers at times, bustling here and there attending meetings with diplomats and their own colleagues. He tried to stay out of their way. Whenever he encountered them, he was met with either hostility or blunt dismissal, neither of which he found very appealing. So mostly he kept to the wing of living quarters that had been set aside for the Me'lia family, either staying in his room or spending time with Aria when she was off duty.

Aria's off duty times seemed to be few and far between these days. The day after they'd arrived on Arbaros, she'd woken up early and left to begin her work as the leader of the Royal Guard. Their name seemed to be a misnomer now, since there was no Empress left to protect. But Aria seemed determined to fulfill her promise to the Empress and keep Li'ren safe from anyone who would wish her harm. To that end, she was taking her duties very seriously. The governess' residence was placed on lockdown, with the black-clad, black-furred Guards placed at every entrance. Aria kept the original Guards, sent from Lirna by the late Empress, on the inside of the palace in close proximity to the governess and Li'ren.

Jack had gotten quite the shock of his life on the first evening after her duties began. He'd been in the room that they shared, getting ready for bed, when a completely black-furred Ailian female had walked in without knocking. For a few minutes, Jack was terrified, but then he saw those familiar yellow-gold eyes looking at him, and he realized it was Aria. She had told him this was coming, after all; the Royal Guards, all of them, wore their fur black to present a uniform image. The first thing that she did when she came to him that night was gush apologies for the way she looked. She'd actually been afraid that he wouldn't find her attractive anymore with her fur a different color, but he'd demonstrated how wrong she'd been most vigorously and effectively in the hours that followed.

Even though her duties took up a lot of her time, Aria still did her best to set aside time to spend with Jack. Now that she was certain that her family was a viable target for her mother, and most of all Jack, she had taken to trying to teach him Ailian self-defense again. She'd already attempted it before, when they were on Lirna, but had called it off because it had proved too intense for him. Now she was at it again, but she held herself back to account for his smaller size. Jack found the workouts fairly interesting. He'd had his share of hand-to-hand combat training when he was in the military, but Ailian self-defense was a little different. Instead of the joint locks and throws that human martial arts relied on, the Ailian style focused on ground combat and punishing body and face strikes. Aria went easy on

Jack, but he still left each little training session with a few bruises and claw scratches. He managed to give Aria a few bruises of her own, though, and every time he landed a hard blow on her, he'd see a grin of pride on her face and a glint in her eye. He got the feeling that it actually turned her on.

Aria's family was growing more used to being on Arbaros, even though they still missed their familiar home on Lirna. When the news about the loss of the planet had arrived, they'd taken it with a certain amount of sadness, knowing it meant that their home might be gone forever. But the governess' residence was spacious, and the wing that they had been provided with was quite comfortable. Even Aria's father, who had been the most against their move, had to eventually admit that it wasn't as bad as it could be. Though a sizable portion of his business had been cut off due to the rebel takeover, he was still able to manage the remaining portions from Arbaros. Sami was enjoying herself as well. After the first day, she had taken it upon herself to keep Li'ren in as high spirits as possible considering the circumstances. The two of them were fast developing a friendship, and Aria's sister spent an increasing amount of time with the noblewoman, listening to stories about the Empress and living in the palace.

All in all, living on Arbaros wasn't the worst thing ever. Jack actually started to feel like that if this was life from now on, it wouldn't be so bad. Of course, life was about to get a lot more interesting, as usual.

-Everyone, thank you for being able to meet here,- Governess Amani said. She looked around the room at all of the assembled people. -It has now been five days since the homeworld was taken, and now that all our forces are gathering we need to decide how to proceed.-

Jack looked about the meeting room as well. He felt very out of place in the room, and not just for the normal reasons. As usual, he was the only human in the room, but for once, there were more than Ailians present. Governess Amani was sitting at the head of the long table, leading the meeting, as befitted her station. The space was set up like a real war room, with monitors on the wall and a communications unit placed in the center of the table. Seated to the governess' left, recently arrived on one of the last ships retreating from Lirna, was Chief Admiral Jin Te'rou. Also present, on her right, was something that Jack had never seen before. Shorter than the typical Ailian but still tall compared to a human, with white hair and green-and-blue skin, the curious alien was something called a Nuretan, a species he had heard very little about. They had been little more than a rumor when Jack was in the military, and he'd been out of the loop for so long that he didn't know much about them at all. The Nuretan seated near the head of the table was a woman, and Aria had told him that she was called General Kalma Soumaren, an important figure in her species' military. They were apparently an aquatic species, something Jack probably would have figured out on his own just based on her appearance.

Several other Nuretans, some in military uniform and some in regular clothes, sat at the table, and there were other Ailians as well, both military and diplomats. Aria, of course, was present, with several of the Royal Guards posted at the doors leading into the room. Li'ren was there as well, looking much better, in Jack's opinion. She was seated with Jack and Aria, halfway down the table. As she had in the past, she was graciously translating for Jack what everyone else was saying.

It was only by both Aria's and Li'ren's insistence that Jack was even in the room for this meeting. Aria wanted him there because she was tired of having to feel guilty about him being left in the dark about what was going on, and Li'ren wanted him there because she felt he could provide some insight. A sizable portion of the rebellion's forces were human, after all, and she was hoping Jack would be willing to provide some advice. He wasn't so sure about that, but he definitely wasn't going to pass up the chance to listen in.

The governess looked to Admiral Te'rou. -First, what can you tell us about our losses in the battle at Lirna?- she asked.

Admiral Te'rou was looking decidedly disheveled. He'd barely had time to disembark from his ship before this meeting had been called. His fur was a mess, and he looked like he hadn't slept in a day at least. -They were severe,- he growled, squeezing his hands into tight fists. -We barely had any notice before the enemy fleets were on us. They came straight in, didn't bother with probing ships or scouts, and they hit hard. We lost ten percent of our ships in the initial attack.- He smacked the table, still clearly frustrated by his failure. -By the time we were able to regroup, they were already dropping troop ships on the planet, and more ships jumped into the system. We were outnumbered, and after a few hours our forces were down to fifty percent strength. When we heard the palace was lost, I decided we needed to cut our losses, so I ordered the retreat. They didn't pursue.-

Taking a deep breath, Miri let it out slowly. -Worse than I had assumed. So, where does that leave us as far as combat strength?- She looked up and down the table at the military officers seated at the table.

One of them, another admiral, leaned forward and spoke up. -The First Fleet, of course, has been nearly wiped out, at less than thirty percent strength. The Fourth Fleet, which was sent to Lirna to bolster defenses before the attack, fared better.-

Admiral Te'rou nodded. -That's correct. The Second, Fifth, and Sixth Fleets are nearly untouched; they haven't seen much combat yet. The Third, Eighth, and Eleventh Fleets are each at around seventy percent strength. The Ninth Fleet is completely gone, destroyed in the rebel campaign in the Inner Colonies, and the Tenth Fleet is occupied defending our lines with human space. I can't pull them off to assist without compromising our defenses even more.- He gritted his teeth. -Overall, we're

looking at sixty, maybe sixty-five percent of our former fighting strength. Of course, our losses are made up for somewhat by the reinforcements we're getting from the Nuretan Empire.-

-Speaking of the humans,- said General Soumaren, the Nuretan commander, -what news do we have? The last I heard, the Empress had ordered the diplomatic corps to make overtures for a ceasefire to their United Nations on Cerelis.- She looked towards Li'ren and the rest of the diplomats at the table, as did everyone else.

Li'ren folded her hands on the tabletop. -When Her Majesty dispatched the ambassadors, we had a much stronger footing than we do now,- she informed the gathering. -Now that the homeworld is lost, and the...- She paused, and turned her eyes down to the tabletop, gathering herself. -...And now that Her Majesty is gone, the humans see an opportunity. The United Nations has rejected any offer of a ceasefire. They see us as being at a time of weakness. They will exploit the division in the Ascendancy and turn it to their advantage.-

-Can we not send another envoy?- one of the Ailian admirals asked. -We must try again. If the war with the humans continues, and the rebellion is not stopped, we will have nothing left.-

-I am afraid that will not work,- Li'ren replied, shaking her head. -You must understand, we started this war. The humans see us as the aggressors, and they do not, or will not, see our perspective. As their expression goes, we have made our bed and now we must lie in it.- She looked down the table at General Soumaren. -We must hope that our forces and those of our allies will be enough.-

Out of the blue, Jack raised a hand. "Um...Can I say something?" He turned a bit red as every single head turned to look at him, and he swallowed, but after all he *was* sitting at this table. Jack glanced over at Aria. She kept an impassive look on her face, but he saw her give a fractional nod. "It's just...haven't you been going about this all wrong?"

-How do you mean?- This question came from Governess Amani, at the head of the table, as she frowned at him. The rest of the Ailians at the table, apart from Li'ren and a few of the diplomats, looked derisively at him, incensed that a human would dare to speak. General Soumaren, however, and the other Nuretans, leaned forward in interest.

After looking back at Aria, Jack pressed on. "I mean, you just went to the United Nations, right?" He waved a hand at Li'ren and the rest of the diplomats, and Li'ren nodded for all of them. "Well, you have to understand that the United Nations isn't the final word on humanity. It might not matter what their decision was."

-But they're the ruling council for humanity,- Admiral Te'rou objected.

Jack shook his head. "You're thinking too much in Ailian terms," he said. "In the Ascendancy, the Empress makes a decision, and that's the law. There's little means for appeal. Humans don't work

that way. We rule by consensus through the United Nations, but the various nations retain a lot of their autonomy. For a lot of what the UN decides, nations can choose to follow or ignore based on their own beliefs or interests.”

-And that doesn't lead to chaos?- Governess Amani asked.

“Sometimes it does,” Jack acknowledged. “But the advantage is that if the UN makes a decision you don't agree with, you can gather enough friendly nations to render their decision pointless.”

-It is not dissimilar from how the Empire functions,- General Soumaren observed, stroking her cheek with one finger, her neon eyes blinking thoughtfully.

“So what are you telling us, Jack?” Li'ren asked. She leaned back in her seat, folding her hands in her lap. Her ears were pricked forward; switching from English to Ailian and back again over and over was requiring all of her concentration.

“Isn't it obvious?” Jack looked around at all of the Ailians seated around him. For being the most powerful race in the galaxy, he couldn't believe that they weren't getting it. “If the UN won't listen to you, go to the individual nations themselves and appeal to them directly.”

His suggestion was met with silence around the meeting table. From the looks on their faces, Jack could tell that the thought had honestly never occurred to any of them. -Would that even work?- Admiral Te'rou asked.

“It's worth trying,” Jack said. “Look, there are plenty of humans out there who are sick of the war, and some of them lead nations. Now a lot of nations will march in lockstep with the UN, but some of them will be willing to listen to what you're offering. And I think enough of them will see that it's a lot better in the long run than the alternative.”

For a few long minutes, Li'ren and the other diplomats looked taken aback, but then the former consort leaned forward. “That makes a lot of sense,” she said. “Perhaps you are right...”

-But that still leaves us with another crisis,- Governess Amani said ruefully. She glanced down the table at her daughter. -With the Empress dead, we have a power vacuum. There is already struggle within the Ascendancy to fill the void. Without a clear leader, we will not last long.- The Ailian governess stood up from her chair, pacing back and forth at the front of the room. -The laws of ascension state that the closest living female relative gains the throne.-

Aria's ears lowered slightly. -But all of Her Majesty's family are in the Outer Colonies, aren't they? They're allied with my mother. You can't be suggesting that one of them will become the Empress.-

The governess shook her head firmly. -That is not an option. But Empress Solan had no children. We are short on alternatives.- She swept her eyes over the assembly. -I must admit that I am at

a loss. If we do not come up with a solution soon...-

The meeting room fell silent. Everyone was looking at everyone else, as though they were waiting to see who would be the first to make a suggestion. The mood seemed absolutely hopeless, and Jack could see things pretty clearly from their perspective. The Ascendancy was in danger of combusting from the inside at the same time it was being crushed from the outside, and they were all staring their doom in the face. Nobody in the room looked more miserable than Li'ren, with her personal grief being compounded by the grief brought on by the imminent defeat of her people. And then, while looking at her, he had an idea.

“What about Li'ren?”

Li'ren jerked her head up, her eyes widening as she stared at Jack. Everyone else stared at him, too. Those of them that could understand English had their mouths open, while the rest had understood Li'ren's name and little else. He felt his stomach wrench with anxiety, seeing all the attention turned his way yet again. Even now, he still couldn't quite get over his ingrained apprehension at having that many Ailian eyes on him at once.

“What you say?” Aria asked, putting a hand on Jack's leg under the table.

“You just said that the closest female relative ascends to the throne,” Jack said. He stood up, placing his hands on the table and leaning forward. “The Empress doesn't have any eligible *blood* relatives, but what about Li'ren? She was the Empress' mate. How much closer can you get?”

They all looked to Li'ren, whose eyes were huge by now. “It...Well...It would be unprecedented...,” she stammered, staring at Jack. “No Empress in the history of the Ascendancy has ever taken a female mate, not before Kri'a. I...I couldn't...”

-Why not?- Governess Amani was sitting back in her chair again, her expression very thoughtful and intrigued, almost excited. -It would be an elegant solution. Our leadership problem would be solved, and the Ascendancy, I believe, would be in capable hands.- Heads began nodding around the table, even from some of the military officers.

-I...I don't know about capable,- Li'ren said, sounding panicky. She was breathing very rapidly, the fur on her neck standing on end. -And what about the people? What will they think?-

Her mother stood up once more, walking around the table and standing Li'ren. -Child, you are much more capable than you realize. Nobody anticipated that this would happen, but you were made for this. You have been training for this for your whole life, without knowing it. You were closer to Her Majesty than anyone for a decade. You know what an Empress is, you know how an Empress must act, and you know what an Empress must do.- She placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders. -You have admirers among the subjects of the Ascendancy. Many of them do not know you as the Empress' mate,

but they do know you as an important figure in the government. Once they see you acting as an Empress should, they will accept you. And that is the most important part. The Empress is a symbol just as much as she is a leader.-

-But...,- Li'ren said, continuing to protest. She stopped as the communication unit in the center of the table began to chirp. It was the first sound that had come through it since the meeting began. A light was blinking on the unit as well, indicating an incoming call.

The governess was mildly annoyed by the interruption. -Captain Me'lia, I thought I gave instructions that we were not to be disturbed. Was that order not passed along?-

-I passed that order along, m'lady,- Aria confirmed. She glanced over the display on the device, reading the notations scrolling along the small diagnostic screen. Jack saw her frown, her eyes narrowing. -It is noted as an emergency message, but I don't recognize the frequency. There isn't any return identifier attached to it. I can't tell who it is, but it's full sound and picture.-

Admiral Te'rou gestured to the device. -Answer it. It could be important. There may still be a few stragglers from other theaters of combat, and their comm identifier could be damaged.-

-Very well, Admiral.- Aria reached for the communicator and switched it on. The flashing light changed from red to green, and a projector activated on the top of the unit. After a short warm up period, the display flickered and a hologram projected above the surface of the table. As soon as she saw it, Aria shot up from her chair, baring her teeth as she snarled at the image.

-Manners, now,- the projection of Ara'lana Me'lia said placidly, looking at her daughter with a cool air about her. The white-furred Ailian was visible from the waist up, dressed in her crimson version of an admiral's uniform. -The proper thing to do when someone calls is to say 'hello'.- She looked at the Ailian before her in some confusion, and then recognition presented itself. -Is that you, Aria? Goodness me, aren't you a bit old for dress-up? That black fur really isn't very becoming on you.- Her eyes landed on Jack, sitting next to Aria. -Ah, and your pet human. How nice. Is he an admiral now? That would certainly explain the ease with which I was able to seize Lirna.-

-What do *you* want?- Li'ren growled. Her hands were balled into fists on the top of the table, her ears laid low as her muzzle wrinkled in a furious sneer. Jack thought that if Ara'lana had physically been there, the former consort would have leapt up and strangled her.

Ara'lana clucked her tongue. -How rude, Li'ren. No interest in pleasantries? Well, no matter...- She placed her arms behind her back. -I was calling upon you all to offer my terms for your surrender. You must understand that you have lost the war. Your fleets are in disarray, and you are losing territory daily.- Her picture swiveled around to look at everyone at the table, especially General Soumaren. -Even the help of the Nuretan Empire will not be enough. My Pteryd allies will cut them down.-

-Surrender? - Admiral Te'rou asked. He clenched his jaw. -I'd rather die than surrender to you.-

-Be careful, Jin. You may get what you ask for.- The rebel leader smiled at them all. -You can save yourselves by joining me. There is little alternative for you. The homeworld is mine, and your Empress is dead.-

Li'ren's eyes flared. -Don't you dare speak of her! You're not worthy to even mention her!- The blue-furred female stood, pointing a finger at Ara'lana. -You will send Kri'a's body to Arbaros at once. I have the right to bury my mate!-

Ara'lana blinked, seemingly taken aback by the request. -I am afraid that is impossible. Her body is no longer on Lirna. I sent her body back to her family, in the Outer Colonies. She will be buried on her mother's home planet.-

As soon as she heard that, Li'ren deflated, sinking back into her chair. -You did what? Oh, gods...- She hung her head, her shoulders beginning to shake with renewed sorrow. Governess Amani squeezed her daughter's shoulder, and she glared at Ara'lana's image with unshielded hatred. The rest of the Ailians in the room looked just as shocked by Ara'lana's news.

"That's pretty bad...," Jack mumbled to Aria, who had just told him what her mother had said to Li'ren. She looked devastated, just as crushed as she had when the news of her mate's death had been received.

-That was a cruel thing to do, mother,- Aria said, her voice eerily quiet. -Unnecessarily so. You had no right to do that.-

Ara'lana's holographic face darkened as she stared down her daughter. -Take care, Aria. I can do as I wish; I am the one in power, now. And I will not legitimize that little deviant's relationship with the late Empress.- She raised her chin slightly. -If she wishes to pay respects to Kri'a, she may visit her family's home planet, if her family will allow it.- The hologram looked around the table once more. -If you surrender now, you may live. Your prison sentences will be lengthy, but that is to be expected for traitors to the new regime. Your soldiers will go unpunished. They were only doing their jobs.- Ara'lana glanced at Jack and Aria, then she reached one hand out of the view of the picture. -You have my request, but I will not wait long for an answer.-

The image of Ara'lana switched off, and the comm unit went dark again. The meeting room fell as silent as a graveyard, with everyone looking around at each other as they tried to deal with what had just happened. Having a reminder of the direness of their situation seemed to have taken most of the energy out of them. Jack looked at Li'ren. She had grown still, and if she had been crying before she didn't seem to be any longer. This was a far cry from the proud, emotionless, and ruthless people that Jack had always been taught Ailians were. He looked at Aria, who was still staring at the deactivated

communicator, her teeth clenched together hard enough that he could hear them grinding against each other. He put a hand out and laid it on her thigh, making her jump. After she gazed at him for a second, she clutched his arm in return.

Jack even felt bad for everyone else in the room, so thorough was their hopelessness, but he couldn't help feeling a little bit justified either. The Ascendancy was starting to feel the same way that humans had been feeling for the past five years. For the last half decade, the entirety of humanity had been expecting to be wiped out. Jack's homeworld, Earth, was lost, and now the Ailian homeworld was taken over as well. But then he remembered what he'd spoken of earlier, and it gave him a little bit of hope. Maybe that commonality was something that could help win one war and end another.

-I'll do it.-

They all turned their heads to see that Li'ren was standing now. Her head was held high, and though tears streaked her face she had a look of purpose. As Jack watched, she drew herself up to full height, still shorter than most of the other Ailians in the room. She brushed one hand down the front of her robes, smoothing out the wrinkles. Clasping her hands in front of her, her tail curled calmly around her legs, she nodded slowly.

-I will lead our people,- Li'ren proclaimed, softly but clearly. -We will not surrender, and we will not be defeated. I will take whatever steps necessary to assure our victory, and to insure that the sovereignty of the Ascendancy will not be broken.- She looked at Jack, and then she gestured to her diplomats. -You will send out the ambassadors again. I believe that Jack Squier's suggestion is a good one. It may require some time, but we will appeal to all human nations.- Next, she looked at Admiral Te'rou. -Admiral, you will prepare the fleets. Repair your ships, and gather your soldiers. Retaking the homeworld must be our highest priority. Lirna is the strategic key to the entire Ascendancy.-

Slowly, Admiral Te'rou smiled. -Of course, Empress Amani. It will be done, as you say.-

Jack could see the pain in Li'ren's eyes as she heard the word "Empress", but it was pain tempered with new resolution. -It will not be an easy fight, but we are Ailians,- Li'ren said. She growled slightly, looking around at everyone seated before her. -If war is the remedy our enemy chooses, than we will give them all they want. I will make them pay for what they have done.-