

-Transmission Lost-
Chapter Five: The Spark
by Havoc

A week had passed since Jack Squier and Aria Me'lia had left their camp at the riverside. Considering the rough time they'd had since they first set out, the last seven days had been spent in relative peace. Peace, of course, being a *very* relative term on this planet they found themselves stranded on. The unlikely pair had covered a lot of ground in that week, moving from the river-fed grasslands to a strange combination of rocky ground and towering trees. If there was one thing to be said for this planet, it was that it didn't lack for trees.

As they had continued walking, Aria expressed a fervent hope that they wouldn't reach the mountains before they found the crash site for her ship. On the fifth day, Jack privately began to think that this hope was a foolish one. The mountains continued to loom closer, and there was still no sign of anything that might foreshadow a starship crash. Jack noticed that Aria was getting more and more nervous as the ground started to slope up. She would look around more and more, as though trying to find a way out of their current path, and her fur bristled with what Jack was beginning to recognize as an Ailian nonverbal cue for fear.

On the seventh day, it became apparent that either they were going to have to go around the mountains or over them.

“Mountains...Did not want to be at mountains...”

Jack turned his attention away from his meal. The firelight illuminated Aria's face, and he could see her staring at her food, which seemed largely untouched. The fur on her neck was bristling, and her ears were laid flat.

“Well, it was always a possibility,” Jack pointed out. He took another bite. “I mean, you said you didn't know how far we'd have to go, only that you had an idea of what direction we needed to go.” He shrugged. “If it's that big of a deal, we can go around them, can't we?”

For a moment Aria looked as though she wanted to agree, but then she reluctantly shook her head. “No. Not go around. Lose sense of direction, get lost...Not good. Need to climb over. Stay on track.”

“Then I guess that's what we'll have to do,” Jack said with no real enthusiasm. “I don't want to climb, but it's not a big deal. It'll be tiring, but I'm sure I'll be able to do it as long as I've got you with me.”

Aria growled. "Is true, I suppose..."

Jack stared at her. "I don't get it, what's the big deal?" He looked at her, trying to figure out why she'd be so against the idea. After running through a series of possibilities, something occurred to him. It seemed kind of ridiculous, but... "You're scared of heights, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" Aria roared at him, her eyes blazing as she glared at him with a look of pure rage.

"That's it, isn't it?" Jack pressed her, a grin starting to spread across his face. "You're scared of heights!" He laughed, amused by the idea. "Who would have thought that the big, strong warrior would be scared of a little thing like-"

Aria stood up to her full height, clenching her fists, staring down at Jack and shaking with anger. "I said shut up!" Her old personality seemed to have returned in full force, and she had an expression very close to murderous wrath on her face. It was enough to make Jack feel some of the familiar fear return to him.

He held his hands up. "Okay, okay...", he said, in as soothing a voice as he could manage. "I get it. I won't say anything more about it."

Aria sat back down slowly. She took a few deep breaths, closing her eyes. "If I need to, I will do it. I do not like, but I will do." She stabbed her fork into her food furiously, taking a bite. She frowned, chewing thoughtfully. "Do not have ropes. Will be problematic."

"Yeah...", Jack agreed. He looked through the trees, trying to see if he could get a glimpse of the mountains in the moonlight, but either it was too dark or the trees where they camped were too thick. "Still, there'll probably be some handholds for us to use. And I've been rock climbing before. Heck, I think it's fun. This'll probably be like a vacation compared to hiking!"

"I wish I have your enthusiasm..."

They got their start early the next morning. Although Aria was no more enthused about what they had to do, she seemed to have resigned herself to their fate. Jack tried to cheer her up as they hiked through the trees, but it didn't seem to have any effect on her. She looked just as upset about the idea of climbing over the mountains.

When finally they broke through the woods, Jack was surprised by how tall the mountain range was. He tilted his head all the way back, trying to see the top, but it was covered by a layer of low-flying, thick white clouds. The mountains were not bare rock like one might expect to see, but they were covered with the greens and purples of plant life. As far as Jack could see, it didn't look like trees, but more like high shrubs and grasses.

Aria was relieved to see that they wouldn't have to climb sheer walls, at least not at first. The

bottoms of the mountains were grass and rock slopes; they were steep, but they appeared to be manageable. Her fur smoothed a little as her anxiety lessened.

“Right, Jack,” Aria said. She adjusted the sling on her heavy rifle, strapping it over her shoulder and securing it to her pack with a clip to leave her hands free. “We begin, yes? You first.”

The human mimicked Aria, strapping his rifle out of the way in the same fashion. “Me first? Why me?”

Aria waved her hand at him. “Smaller. Find paths easier. Also. I able to catch you if you fall. You not be able to catch me. You fall, we safe. I fall, we both fall. Make sense, yes?”

Jack stroked his chin. “I guess that makes sense.” He shrugged. “Alright, we’ll do it your way.” Jack faced the cliff, considering. Slightly to their left, he saw a natural path carved between two rocks, lined with grass poking up between coarse gravel. He pointed to that. “Let’s start off that way. Looks like it’ll have decent traction, so long as we watch our footing.”

The Ailian nodded, taking a deep breath to steel herself. Jack led the way, starting the climb. The morning was still cool, and for the first few minutes of climbing he didn’t sweat. The slope was gradual, though not quite what one would call easy. They found themselves not talking very much, conserving their breath for the climbing.

When they were perhaps five hundred meters or so above where they had begun, Jack started to notice the wildlife waking up from overnight. He looked around, seeing a variety of birds flying around the mountain. All of them were very colorful, decorated in feathers of bright reds, blues, and greens. They seemed similar to parrots, except with long, straight beaks instead of the short curved ones of those more familiar birds. The birds flew about on two pairs of wings, filling the air with shrill caws and trills. Jack thought they looked to be the size of just regular birds, but as he watched them one flew closer and closer, and he suddenly realized that they were nearly as big as he was.

“Damn...,” Jack said, stopping his climb to watch in fascination. “Aria, are you seeing this? You ever seen birds this huge before?”

Aria took her eyes away from their path to look. Her eyes widened in surprise. “No. Is amazing...” She watched the bird fly very close past them, the fur on her head rustling in the wash from its wings. The bird glanced at them as it went by, but seemed to pay them little mind. “Lucky it not seem hungry right now...” Jack watched in some amusement as Aria licked her lips. “But...Hmm...I wonder what it taste like...”

“Maybe we can try bringing one down when we get to a resting place,” Jack suggested. He waved to her. “Come on. Looks like the serious climbing is about to begin.”

Following the direction Jack indicated, Aria’s ears flattened to her head as she saw what was

before them. They had about another three hundred or so meters of sloping ground, and then the mountain took a sharp jump upwards. While not exactly a sheer cliff, it was very steep. Grey rock, crisscrossed with thick mottled purple vines, went up for at least three kilometers.

“Not looking forward to this...,” Aria growled, her tail bushing out.

“I’ll find the path,” Jack reminded her. “I’ll try not to lead us on a bad one. We have to do this, remember?” Turning away from her he continued climbing, going up.

Before long they reached the rock wall. At Aria's insistence, Jack spent some time seeing if he could pick a way around, but after trying several promising paths that ended up dead ends, he reported that they would have to climb.

“Very well...” Aria shivered a little, and Jack could see the shadows of fear on her face. “If we must, we must...”

Nodding, Jack took the first step. As much as Aria he wasn't looking forward to making the climb without ropes, or even chalk to dust his hands with, but there was nothing for it. He surveyed the rock in front of him, and a few feet above his head he saw a suitable handhold. Reaching for it, he grabbed it and pulled himself up. His foot found a hold as well, and he started climbing. Looking down, he saw Aria hesitate for a few moments and then follow him. She had an advantage over him: Her tough claws served as makeshift crampons, giving her something she could fall back on should she not be able to find a good hand- or foothold right away.

Jack was definitely starting to sweat, now. The sun was higher in the sky, and he was exerting himself far more than before. He had to frequently wipe his hands on his fatigue jacket to keep them from getting too slick. He reflected that as annoying as the sweat was, at least it helped to keep him cool. With a random thought, Jack wondered how Aria was feeling. She was covered in fur, and if the Ailian body worked anything like Earth felines, she probably didn't sweat. Casually, Jack glanced down, looking at Aria.

Surprised, he saw that it looked like she did sweat, at least a little bit. Her orange fur was slightly matted where it showed. Jack stifled a childish giggle as he saw that she was also panting, kind of like how a dog would. She noticed him staring and growled, then looked down behind her and squeaked in terror, quickly looking back up with her eyes wide.

“Come on, Aria,” Jack called. “I think I see a ledge a few meters above us. Just a few more minutes of climbing and then we can take a rest.”

“A-Alright.”

Jack continued his climb, his arms and legs aching from the effort. He was starting to see the benefit of Aria's pushiness. In just over two weeks of almost nonstop traveling across the planet, he was

already feeling as though he was in better shape. He was sure that if he'd had to do this from the beginning, he wouldn't have been able to climb this high.

With one final reach, Jack's hand found the ledge he'd been aiming for. Hauling himself up, he rolled onto the relatively flat ground, breathing hard. A minute or so later Aria's hand appeared, scrabbling around for purchase on the ledge, and she climbed up beside him. As soon as she was up, she scrambled as far away from the edge as she could, pressing her back tight against the mountainside. Jack moved to sit next to her, and he took a long drink from his canteen.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" Jack lightly elbowed Aria in the side.

The taller female looked down at him, gritting her teeth. "Shut...up....," she gasped out between pants. "Is not funny. Not like climbing."

"You're doing okay. Besides..." Jack crawled to the edge, gazing over. "Look at how high we've climbed already. I bet we're halfway up this mountain already." Indeed, Jack was surprised how high they'd gone. From where they'd begun ascending the rock wall it looked as though they'd covered slightly over a kilometer. The trees down below, as tall as they appeared from the ground, looked like little more than fuzzy toothpicks.

At his suggestion that she look, Aria shook her head emphatically. "Not look. If I look, I be sick." She rested her head back against the rock, laying a hand across her face. "Not want to climb anymore..."

"Well, we can't go back down," Jack pointed out. "That's suicide without ropes. All we can do is keep going up." He left unsaid the uncomfortable thought that they would still have to go down the other side of the mountain. Jack would rather not think about that right now. He crawled back over to Aria. "Come on. Let's eat something, rest for an hour or so, and then we'll get back to it."

"Alright," Aria agreed, giving a sigh.

"Besides, whenever you get back home and make a report about all this, do you really want to have to tell your superiors that you couldn't do the same thing as a weak, puny human?"

At least this time Aria managed a weak smile, and even a small laugh. "Is true, I not want to have to say that," she said. "Though this human not that weak or puny."

"Wow, that might be the nicest thing you've said to me."

When they were both ready, they continued the climb. Jack could still feel a little soreness, but the rest they'd taken had allowed him to recover significantly. The vines were also starting to grow more numerous, giving them additional handholds. Both of them were astounded at how strong the vines were; they were able to support even Aria's weight with no problems. Experimentally, Jack

borrowed Aria's knife and tried to cut through one of them. He got barely a quarter of the way through the vine before he had to give up, lest the knife grow too dull to be of any use. That was a shame. Jack had been thinking of trying to cut a few lengths to take along with them for use as ropes.

After almost an hour of climbing, Aria felt as though she couldn't take anymore. "Is...Is almost the top, yes?"

Trying to keep his handholds, Jack blinked sweat out of his eyes. "I'm not sure...I think I see something that looks like a ledge, but..." He paused, listening, his ears straining. "I think I hear running water."

"Water? Good..." Aria's hand slipped, and she swiped her claws out, hurriedly clutching at a vine to steady herself. "Will need a bath...after all this..."

"Come on...I think we're almost to the top..."

It took nearly twenty minutes more, but they finally came to the top. As Jack and Aria pulled themselves up and stood on flat ground, they found themselves surprised once more at what the uncharted planet had in store for them. Instead of just a simple rock ledge, they were standing on what appeared to be a wide, expansive mesa. In front of them, stretching as far as they could see, was a thick jungle of tall green shrubs, high purple ferns, and short feathery grasses of numerous colors. To their left, the mountain continued climbing up, forming a wall border for the jungle. To their right, perhaps five kilometers away, a second peak rose up, creating a valley in between the two.

"So many plants, so high up..." Aria murmured, her breathing still heavy from the climb. "This planet...is strange..."

"Yeah..." Jack agreed. "Full of surprises."

Aria's ears perked up, her tail swishing back and forth eagerly. She could hear the sound of running water that Jack had heard earlier. "Come. I want to find the water." She shook her canteen, which was nearly empty. "Thirsty after climb."

Jack agreed wholeheartedly with this. Too, he was extremely tired and felt like they'd want to set up camp soon. There was still plenty of daylight left, but this day had been their most trying one yet, physically. With Aria leading the way now, Jack followed. As they walked, the sound of water grew louder and louder. Before too long, the shrubs and ferns gave way to a clearing, and Aria gave a loud "Ooooh!" of delight.

Cascading down the rock wall very near to their left was a wide, rushing waterfall, feeding down into a large, shallow pool. The water was relatively clear, although there were white swirls throughout that Jack assumed were clouds of minerals carried down from the mountaintop. Sunlight illuminated the entire clearing, giving a shimmery, diamond-like appearance to the surface of the pond.

Floating here and there on the water's surface were large, iridescent blue flowers with broad green leaf pads underneath, similar to water lilies. Jack thought he could see small fish swimming here and there in the water, but he wasn't sure.

"Thank gods...", Aria sighed. She stretched her arms, gazing at the water with true desire on her face. "Have not had a bath in...since crashing. And I want these bandages off."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Jack said. "Let's set up camp first, alright?"

Aria reluctantly agreed, and they got to work pitching their tent near the edge of the water. Jack dug a pit for a fire, though he wasn't sure he'd be able to find much wood. Trees had been few and far between so far at this high altitude, with the vast majority of plant life being vines and leafy shrubs. Then again, the vines up here were very thick, durable, and fallen ones seemed to be plentiful. Perhaps they'd do in a pinch.

Once the campsite was established, Aria clapped her hands loudly. "Good enough, yes?" She turned her head in the direction of the water, looking at it longingly. Her tail and ears were twitching in anticipation.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Good enough, I guess. Go ahead and take a bath if you want." He picked up his rifle, checking it over and jacking a round into the chamber. "In the meantime, I'm going to go have a look around and see if I can gather some fuel for the fire. And what you said earlier got me thinking about dinner. We're getting low on preserved food, so I figured I'd see if I could hunt down some meat. Maybe one of those birds we saw earlier in the day. We should take every chance we have to stretch out our supplies."

Aria nodded her head approvingly. "Good. You thinking more like soldier every day." She stretched her arms again, joints popping. "And good soldiers keep clean. So..." She turned around and headed for the water's edge.

"Enjoy yourself. I'll be back before long." Jack turned as well, trekking off into the mountaintop jungle.

Once Jack was out of sight, Aria removed her belt and unzipped her flight suit, peeling it down her body and stepping out of it. She wrinkled her nose at the musty smell that wafted up. "*Kas'ne a reil...*" Her flight suit was fairly soaked with sweat and caked with dirt on the outside from the climbing. She shivered as she remembered having to scale that rock wall. She really was scared of heights, just as Jack had said.

Going to the water, she knelt down and dunked her clothes in it. After a few minutes of hard scrubbing, the garment was reasonably clean. Shaking it out, Aria carried it to a large, flat rock that was

sitting in sunlight and laid it out flat to dry. Going back to the water's edge, Aria just stood there for a few minutes, breathing deep and letting the breeze blow over her bare fur. Unsheathing a claw from one finger, she started tearing through her bandages, unwrapping them from the parts of her body where she'd been wounded. All of her wounds seemed to have healed, leaving no scars. She balled them up and pitched them into the fire pit, where they could be burned up later. Looking down at her body, Aria idly traced a finger along the lengthy scar down her front. A faint echo of the pain from that wound echoed through her. It had been nearly two years ago that she'd gotten that injury, in her first battle...She'd been younger and inexperienced then.

Wasting no more time, Aria stepped down into the water. Instantly she sighed in pleased surprise. The water was heated by some natural trick. The Ailian walked deeper into the hot spring until she got to the deepest point, where the water came about to her waist. She waved her tail around in the water, sending ripples through the pool. With another long, purring sigh, she lowered herself, kneeling in the water so that it came up to her neck.

"Ah...Rek la a'lash ke ran....," Aria purred.

Her bath would have been much more effective if she'd had soap or something else to wash with, but the warm water was doing wonders for her mental health. Submerged in the water, she started scrubbing her hands all over her body, unknotting her fur as the heat worked on her sore muscles. All the while she was washing, small brightly colored fish flitted about underneath the water, seemingly undisturbed by this intruder in their home.

After perhaps an hour of enjoying the warm water, Aria was feeling totally relaxed, recovered from the long day. Standing back up, little rivulets of water dripping down her fur, she waded through the the pool to the waterfall. Standing by it, she stretched an arm out and put her hand into the deluge. The water falling down was slightly chilled, not warm like the pool itself. Taking a deep breath, Aria stepped into the waterfall, arching her back with her hands behind her head and letting the cool water refresh her.

When Jack came back to the camp, it was with a feeling of great success. Not only had he managed to gather a sizable bundle of fallen vines, but he'd also downed one of the flying creatures they'd seen. While not as big as the one that had flown close to them at the rock wall, it was still fat and would probably make a good meal, assuming it was edible. He hoped it would be, as he was getting tired of the preserved rations they'd been eating.

Walking into the clearing, Jack dumped his load of thick vines and set down the dead bird. He was about to set to work plucking and cleaning the animal when a splash from the water caught his

attention. Looking over, he felt his heart thud in his chest as a tingle shot up his spine.

Aria was standing in the waterfall, her face turned up to the cascade as she let the water flow over her. She was turned towards Jack, slightly to one side, but she hadn't seemed to notice him. Inadvertently she was giving him quite the eyeful. Jack had already seen her nude a few times before, of course, when he was tending her wounds and in the tent, but that had been in close quarters and he hadn't been bold enough to look for more than a few seconds.

Even though he knew he shouldn't stare, for some reason Jack couldn't help it. Aria's tall form, covered in her pale shade of orange fur with black stripes, was strangely alluring. He'd never thought of Ailians in this way before he'd met her. She had a muscular body, though not beefy like a bodybuilder. As he watched, she rubbed her hands down her shoulders, down over her large breasts. Her cream-colored belly fur, like the rest of her, was slicked wet with water, plastering it to her, leaving absolutely nothing of her curvy form to his imagination. The only thing that marred her body was the long scar that snaked down from her collarbone, between her breasts, to her navel. And even that scar only seemed to accentuate the rest of her looks.

For the first time, Jack found himself realizing that he found her quite attractive, and that thought disturbed him. While he had come to sort of like Aria, it didn't seem right to be thinking of her in that way. She was of a different species, and there was quite the long history of that sort of thing being frowned upon in human society to say the least.

Aria turned away from him, leaning over a little to wash the back of her neck in the waterfall. Jack was treated to the sight of a firm, toned rear, tail waving serenely in the foamy spray of the turbulence created by the falling liquid. The cream fur of her front appeared to continue between her legs, creating a vague heart shape on her rump around her tail. Jack's face warmed as he stared, and the unbidden thought rose to the front of his mind: *If only that tail would move just an inch or so to one side...*

Suddenly, Aria's ears twitched, and she straightened up, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes locked with Jack's, and they just gazed at each other for a few moments. After about a minute, Aria stepped out of the waterfall, brushing droplets from her brow, striding through the pool towards Jack. He was rooted to the spot, unable to look away as the tall feline got closer.

"You staring," Aria said simply when she got to the water's edge.

"Uh...", Jack stammered, finally looking away from her naked body. His mind was confused, and he tried to think of something to say. All he could manage was a mumbled "Sorry."

"You see something you like?" she asked, matter-of-factly. Jack said nothing in reply, and Aria was quiet for a while, water dripping from her fur and rippling the water. Then, without saying a word,

Aria shrugged and stepped up out of the water, walking over to where she'd laid her flight suit. By now it was completely dry. Setting the garment carefully flat on the ground, Aria stretched out on the rock in its place to dry herself.

Relieved that Aria hadn't blown up in his face, Jack sighed, shaking his head to banish his blush. Studiously avoiding looking her sunning on the rock, he set himself to the task of preparing his kill for their dinner.

There was no mention of the afternoon's encounter as Jack and Aria ate their meal. As luck would have it, the large bird creatures of this planet were *very* edible, and several hours of roasting over the fire had rendered the meat tender and delicious. There was plenty to eat, though Aria ate about three times as much as Jack did. When dinner was over and had been cleared away, Aria excused herself into the tent.

Jack wasn't quite ready for bed, though by now it was dark. He had been thinking about the pool during the meal, and he had to admit to himself that he could also use a bath. After making sure that Aria had zipped up the tent entrance, he took his clothes off and stepped into the water. Instantly the warmth went to work on his tired body, heating his bare skin and enveloping him in a therapeutic feeling. The minerals in the water gave it an invigorating effect.

Jack stood up in the water, which came up to his chest, and splashed it over himself. The built up sweat and dirt from the day's climb slowly washed away, and he felt a lot better. The night sky twinkled with stars overhead, lending a peaceful atmosphere to his bath as the firelight threw shadows around the rock wall bordering the pool.

The quiet and feeling of seclusion was what made Jack jump twice as high as he turned in the water and saw Aria sitting cross-legged on the bank. Though his waist was already below the water level, Jack sank lower, his face turning bright red.

"Aria?" he gasped. "Wh-What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting even," she said simply, her tail wagging behind her. The Ailian seemed almost playful with the tone of her voice. "You stare at me while I bathe, so I do same. Is fair, yes?"

Jack couldn't think of a protest for that one. He certainly had been ogling her earlier, no doubt about that. He stayed hunkered down anyway, not intending to give her the eyeful she had given him. "You snuck up on me."

"I did." Aria tilted her head to one side. "Why you embarrassed? You just taking bath, yes? Is nothing to be ashamed of."

"It's not...That's not the...," Jack stuttered. He rose slightly in the water, eying her carefully. "I

just don't like the idea of being watched.”

“Then you should not watch me,” the Ailian pointed out. She leaned forward, placing her elbows on the ground in front of her and propping her head on her hands. A grin spread slowly across her muzzle. “Humans strange. No fur at all. How you stay warm?”

“Can I finish my bath, or are you just going to gawk at me?”

Aria waved a hand. “Finish.” But she made no move to return to the tent, or to look away. Jack waited for several minutes, and then, resigned, he stood back up. He turned away from her, pretending that she wasn't watching him, and finished washing himself. But he knew that Aria had been teaching him a lesson, in her own way.

Keep your eyes to yourself.

She was gone when he turned back around to walk out of the pool.

When Jack finally got into the tent, Aria was lying with her back to the entrance, in her usual state of bedtime undress. She appeared to be asleep, and he moved quietly so as not to wake her, lying down next to her. He closed his eyes, trying not to think about all that had happened that day, and willed sleep to come. Just as he was nodding off, Aria spoke.

“Jack? Sleep yet?”

“Mmmno...,” he mumbled groggily, coming back to full wakefulness. His eyes opened, and he saw that Aria had rolled over so that she was facing him. Her yellow cat's eyes were unblinking, though he could see tiredness in them. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing wrong,” she said. She half sat up, peering down at Jack. Just as he was wondering why she'd spoken in the first place, her hands came to either side of his face, cupping his cheeks. She moved her face close to his, looking into his eyes with a curious expression.

Then, before Jack had a chance to register what was happening, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his. For a long moment she kissed him, the soft fur on her muzzle tickling his face slightly, while Jack's mind raced and his heart hammered against his chest. Her lips were very soft and warm, and had a peculiar flavor quite different from a human girl's, one which he could find no words to describe.

Breaking the kiss, Aria leaned back, looking thoughtful. She let him go, and rested herself back on her bedroll, just looking at Jack as he tried to process what she'd just done. Smiling a little, Aria rolled back over, curling her tail around herself.

“Sleep well, Jack,” she said. And then she was quiet again. Blinking, the human stared at her back. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but then he closed it again. As tired as he was, he just couldn't come up with anything.

I...I don't understand her one bit...

As they walked through the jungle the next day, Jack felt a sense of apprehension, and he didn't quite know why. Nothing seemed to have changed in their surroundings. He checked around frequently for predators that might be sneaking up on him and Aria, but he never found any. He began to think that he was growing paranoid, but something nagged at him. He had the feeling that something was ahead of them, but whether close or far ahead he couldn't be sure.

The sound of rushing water didn't fade when they left the clearing where they'd spent the night behind. If anything, it got even louder. The source of the noise became clear as they broke through the thick jungle, coming out into another clear area. A wide, raging river of white rapids lay in front of them, full of rocks jutting out from the water. The river was fed by another waterfall crashing down from the mountain to their left, though this one was many times larger than the one at the heated pond. There was a clear line of sight down the river, and they could see that it ended in another waterfall, presumably going to the bottom of the mesa. Across the river, Jack was surprised to see, not the sheer drop of a rock wall similar to the one they had climbed the day before, but a long, gentle slope covered in amber-colored grass. It was as though they were on top of a trapezoid which had been sliced in half down the middle, and they were coming to the angled half.

The current situation, of course, left them with a choice to make.

"Well, Aria," Jack said, rubbing his chin. "What now?" He examined the river. It looked about a hundred or so meters wide. Not massive as rivers went, but not something you could just hop over, either. "We can try crossing the river, and then it'll be an easy walk to the foot of the mountain. Or..." He turned his head, looking down the river's path. "We could try climbing down the cliff next to that waterfall down there. It would be a difficult climb, but we might be able to cross the river in a more gentle place."

Aria nibbled on her lip. "Not want to climb again...Especially not down." She fingered her rifle nervously. "I would say cross river here, easy walk down."

Jack wasn't so sure. "I, uh...I dunno about that, Aria. The rocks are close enough to step to, but...I'm worried about losing my footing."

"*Pah...*," Aria hissed, clucking her tongue. "Not look that hard."

"It might not *look* hard, but..."

"I climb mountain yesterday," Aria reminded him. She walked to the river's edge, finding and stepping out onto a rock large enough to hold her. Standing on it, she turned to look at Jack. "I do it even though I afraid. You say you not do this?"

Still worried, but not wanting to sacrifice the respect he'd worked hard to earn from the Ailian, Jack nodded. "Alright...I'll give it a shot, Aria."

Slowly, gradually, the pair of them made their way across the river. Jack tried not to look down at the water rushing all around him, though it sprayed his face every second as he picked his way across the rocks behind Aria. She was moving quickly, sure of herself. This was not something she was afraid of, apparently, and she barely took notice of the fast-moving water. Before Jack was even halfway across the river she was stepping down onto the opposite bank. She turned around, whipping her tail behind herself as she called out to him.

"Hurry! Not want to wait long!"

"I'm going, I'm going..." Jack said. He wobbled a little, and windmilled his arms. For one panicked moment he thought he was going to fall into the water, but he managed to stabilize himself. Letting out a sigh of relief, Jack hopped over to the next rock.

As his right foot landed, he felt it slide out from under him on a wet, slippery patch. Shouting in terror, Jack pitched to one side, helpless as he fell into the rapidly moving river. He went under, his body twirling this way and that as the current grabbed hold of him.

"Jack!" Aria yelled, looking on in alarm as he was carried away at a fast pace, heading right for the next waterfall.